

A man and a woman in formal attire, framed by a decorative border. The man is wearing a dark blue tuxedo with a white shirt and a dark bow tie. The woman is wearing a white dress. They are both looking towards the camera. The background is a warm, golden-brown color, possibly a stage or a restaurant setting. The entire image is framed by a decorative, pinkish-red border with a scalloped edge.

# A Better Man

# Book One

# Chapter 1.01

The *For the World* mask slipped at the sudden and unexpected encounter with the journalist. Momentarily *True Man* was revealed, but quickly the mask was recovered.

A few minutes in, before responding to another question from the reporter the man takes an almost imperceptible step backwards. His manner is one of benign intolerance: the world weary Business Titan suffering pleb's asinine questions. Oh darling, what a fucking wanker Father can be at times! "Mr. Butcher, will you excuse me. I came here to play a round of golf and relax after an hectic week. The last thing I want is to be bothered by another hack journalist." As he's talking – his voice flat, neither raising it, nor changing its pitch or tone - Father takes a powerful swing with the club, completely missed the ball, and smashes the three wood into Butcher's shin. He collapses onto the ground, howling in agony. With Butcher in shorts, blood gushing extravagantly from a deep wound is visible at some distance.

Until Father's "missed shot" the two had appeared a quite typical golfing pair. Read: boring old farts that from a gaggle of randy Convent Girls would excite even less interest than mincing old ME. At this, this most exclusive of locations. Putt, putting away on the 18<sup>th</sup> tee of the most expensive golf course in Sydney. Every square metre of its turf worth its weight in gold. The two are in fact protagonists well known to each other. Steve Butcher, renown investigative journalist. Dr Carl Weiss (aka my father), CEO and figurehead of Gargon Industries, one of the largest and most aggressive pharmaceutical companies in the freeless world. Unlike his grey suited peers he savors the limelight and likes to cultivate a flamboyant image. In this case by wearing what I believe are called plus fours. Cut, it appears to me, from an old horse blanket. Frankly, darling, whoever thought up large yellow check should be shot on sight!

A more observant eye might have noticed that the two men stand awkwardly. Tense, but as yet not combative. She might also have discerned that the golf club in Father's hand was rather brandished. More weapon than une accoutrement for that ignoble sport. Who's sole purpose, it seems to me, is to permit to call themselves *Sportsmen* those so chronically invalid it's only just within their physical competence to swing a thin metal stick at a little white object (a ball, don't they call it darling?) and then totter down the fairway after the thing at a pace even a snail might find irritating. And for some of course even that defines exercise beyond their capability. Really darling, what is the point? Then

again, I've never understood the purpose of any sport that required one to leave one's bed, hehe.

We first joined them after Butcher bounded out from behind a long bank of pink wisteria, thrust a microphone in Father's face, and demanded to know: "On what grounds, Doctor Weiss, is your company *Gargon Industries* challenging *BPOD Technology's* right to continue their research and development into an artificial human body? I understand they are confident of a successful transplant within the next few weeks. And to date they've had no unexplained fatalities during their research. Meanwhile there is extensive evidence that your own company's prototype robotic body has resulted in fourteen wholly avoidable deaths. And would have caused considerably more had not the authorities closed down your research establishment. We understand they've encouraged victims' families to commence legal proceedings against Gargon." Father, uncharacteristically, appears to have no interest in lending his opinion to the conversation. Instead makes a show of judging the difficulties of the next shot, then waving his canary yellow backside whilst taking a few practice swings with the metal stick. What do you call them again darling?

Butcher turns up the heat. "More disturbingly, however, only yesterday it was reported that the case against Gargon has been postponed due to the disappearance of two key witnesses that were to appear this week in support of the Crown's case. Would you care to respond to the rumors that Gargon is responsible for their disappearance, and presumed dead?" Darling, I actually feel a little sorry for Father. Which, as you know, is not a common emotion for me. He's been completely set up. However I can claim no glory; my usually smutty hand is on this occasion clean, hehe.

Father had no inkling of the impending sting. He'd been told to expect an interview for a conventional business piece. Of course, he's done a million of these and as a youngster I was allowed to sit unobtrusively whilst he took pleasure in tearing strips off the smartest and most talented hacks the media could throw at him. You know, darling, I really admired him then. To me he was a hero in every sense. Handsome, debonair; a quick, cutting wit. It is perhaps the saddest thing to realise your hero is a charlatan and worse. Far, far worse in fact. That he is a man without conscience, and in terms of character, an empty shell. Worst of all in my book, he's a complete, crashing bore. The kind of person who's solely driven by the wank me need for power and wealth. Hmmh. I give you: Father.

Uncharacteristically, Father's notoriously sensitive nose for an undercurrent had been offgarded (truly a rare instance darling) by Steve's plausible story, and

his reputation for honesty. I'm sure you'll agree darling, how rare that commodity is amongst his peers. The deceptions Steve would have felt he'd bent himself to get the interview was probably warning enough for father to be on his guard. Though he might have been unprepared he's no fool, in a gut instinct, animal way. He reacts quickly, without emotion. That said, the situation's serious enough to drive a little jolt of fear up Father's tightass ass. One of Steve's camera boys, hidden in a nearby thicket, catches the flicker of it in a nice close up. I'm watching the footage now darling. It's part of a doco that was broadcast last night. A few weeks now since their little joust, which Father was stupid enough to think he'd won. That was until he saw the doco, hehe. I know, I know, you don't need to tell me darling! Yes, I can be quite the bitch, but only when I feel they REALLY deserve it. And my father, darling, deserves EVERYTHING.

I presume you've at least heard of Steve Butcher, dear? He's one of the best known investigative reporters in this country, having developed quite the InterNAtional reputation, following some quite genuinely impressive scoops. I should know darling, he's caught me out so many times. Sufficient to make me look a complete twat. To the point that Father refuses to allow me to represent the company anymore. It became a bit like shooting a blind rabbit at point blank range with a blunderbuss – the outcome predictable and hardly entertaining for an audience. That said, or perhaps it's because of it, Steve is someone I can readily admire. He's all a journalist should be. Or at least how I pictured myself when it was the latest craze of what I wanted to be. Oh dear, how many of those have there been? I've lost count. Rather like the boys I suppose, hehe. Anyway, he has the knack for regularly digging out stories that no one else had even sniffed the panties of. You might remember his most recent, an expose of *ESOTORE*, a worldwide terrorist group. Their goal simple: the eradication of all multinational conglomerates. Though their methods are quite novel. I have a soft spot for them, I confess. Punish me, I deserve it, hehe.

Their funding is circuitously linked to the dissemination of billions of dollars of fake money, whose production can be attributed to an elusive, and by now ageing, Spanish anarchist. Salvatore they called him in the film. He possesses an unmatched artistry for forgery, dangerously combined with the organizational flair of a five star general. The little man's penchant is for blackmail. Not of individuals, but the global corporations themselves. He achieves his bullseyes using those aforementioned talents to create a massive wad of forged currencies. Deposited in bank accounts around the world, the funds are used to buy up his target's products. Yes, quite Old School but devastatingly effective. We're talking in the

hundreds of millions darling. Sufficient that when the fake is eventually discovered Bean Counter realises that a sizeable chunk of the previous half year revenue is worthless. They are left with no alternative than to buy him off. Such beautiful art the money is my dear. I've seen some of his work. To my untrained eye they're identical, and apparently equally indistinguishable to the experts wheeled in each time he's carried out one of his stings.

Salvatore also takes delight in telling anyone that will listen, as he did in the doco, laughing considerably as he did so: "Yes, I can be bought off. Yes, we'll stop flooding their market. But it's a contract and contracts can be terminated if they misbehave again." So the threat is always there, like the guillotine waiting to fall if they put a foot wrong. You know I've always thought terrorists so blunt and uninspired. Salvatore is their very antithesis. And what was most heartening for me was to see so clearly in his eyes, unconcealed, the love. It's that which drew him to me: after all he's seen and endured, he still brims with it. It's something the rest of them lack. Just bish bosh violence. No thought, no real care, beyond the thrill. Just *so rough*, you know what I mean darling? What chance have they of achieving anything worthwhile? No finesse darling, and when deprived of that anyone is bound to cause more harm than good. Give me something passive darling, a heavy immovable mass that They, The Establishment, will use up all their energy on clearing. Only to find the blob has moved and they have to start all over again. Gandhi wasn't it, my love? Showed that with the right strategy - which he evidenced was so crucial to success - even the mightiest empire can be so disrupted that, feared of being brought to a grinding halt, they'll give in to all demands. Imagine the whole world, the bottom half I mean darling, sitting down and just saying, No! Or doing something they're not supposed to and saying, *Well, what are you going to do about it?* Love it, darling! Even just the thought, since I suppose it could never actually happen, could it?

The old anarchist Salvatore would get that, my dear. When his victims squeal, remember that they're Multi's that screw everyone without a blink. So no tears for them, darling! He says that only when they really squirm - a smile spreads over his face as he says it, eyes twinkling: "That's when we've done our job. We curb their excesses more effectively by putting a hand in their money pocket than by squeezing their balls. It's where their miserable hearts lie. But you've got to have the strong arm too, just so they know you're serious."

In Steve Butcher's film, from time to time you'll see a look of sadness on Salvatore's face. There's been a price on Salvatore's head for years and he can never stay in a place for longer than a few days. But to him it's a fair trade, and

he's a fatalist – to him it's just the card he's been dealt. Don't bitch about it, take the shit, and make the most of it. And so, no, the look is not in self pity, but for the people that suffer because of Them. The little man was very proud that all of *ESO's* activities are completely funded by his team's money laundering and blackmail activities. As a result, their efforts can be fully directed at their enemy. No need to resort to the usual risks involved in acquiring moolah - extortion, robbery and all the other riskier crimes which form the staple funding strategy of most terrorist organisations. At one point though his normally benign expression changed suddenly and with a look of absolute fury he spat out, "No! It's never over. The ones I really want - the most evil, guilty of crimes against all humanity - I will never reach. Because of their money - so much of it - they are untouchable." And then just as suddenly he smiles. A rather sinister one actually darling. Sent tingles up my back. "But we get most of them." Then the look of sadness, and compassion. "But I am driven, yes, until my last breath, because there will always be someone that needs our help. Their life will be unfair because some shit of a human being is stealing their share." What do you think of this darling: I'm thinking of asking all father's cronies, "To get your unfair pile, did you suck or did you fuck?" Rather apt don't you think, darling?

Darling, it was a fascinating film to watch, (yes darling, tears, blubbing, you know me) and no doubt quite disconcerting for many viewers because they're left in no uncertainty that Steve considered Salvatore a hero. Of course there would have been some Big Mouth Reactionary screaming for his head, but I never count those bum up their arse fools. After all, darling, I've seen too many of them up close to know what they're really like. The most primitive of our species, darling. Steve admitted on camera thinking himself lucky to get out of *ESO's* headquarters alive - even though the interviews were at *ESO's* instigation. That kind of place I suppose. Still, the film ends with Steve in closeup, smiling, eyes sparkling, "You know, the sense of being alive, because we felt so close to death much of the time, was overwhelming. I've never felt such wired energy as when I was with them. Especially when talking to Salvatore. Life since meeting him seems mundane; less purposeful. And I imagine I'll always carry that feeling with me now." Apparently the motivation for Salvatore agreeing to being interviewed by Butcher was to promote their until then anonymous presence, in that already crowded marketplace of global terrorist groups. The reasons for this shift in strategy were never made clear. Until the interview, *ESO's* existence was unknown even to most government agencies. This since the blackmailed conglomerates would always fall over themselves to sign confidentiality agreements. Even when

they included a string of onerous retaliatory clauses if they returned to their old nefarious ways. Neat.

Back on the golf course. Steve Butcher, with a shock of unruly black hair, is a huge bear of a man. To see him felled is quite something, darling. I want to yell, "Timbah!" each time they do the replay. There's an audible thud as he connects with the ground and one rather imagines it shuddering beneath one's feet. After that the camera cuts to Father's face. Cold, clear blue eyes. A wry smile, quite absorbed watching Steve writhing at his feet. His expression settles into one of satisfaction: a job well done. Not hard to imagine him in the Nazi uniform his father was supposed to have donned in his most private moments - purportedly as some sort of psychological reaction to his own father's murder at their hands. Or was that just the story his lawyers peddled? So fucking, fucking uninteresting darling. All of them. Why wallow in shit when you can fly? Butcher is at his mercy, and I'm wondering what Father will do? In his expression one can read of possibilities quite broad. Thankfully, at that moment one of his crew interrupts the fun by running out to rescue Butcher, while someone else can be heard calling emergency services. As the film crew render to Steve, the camera catches a sadistic smirk spreading across Father's face. Cold sarcasm dripping, he looks down and says, "Mr. Butcher, I'm so sorry. You really must watch where you're standing. Have you never played golf before?"

The film fades to black and then there's a close up of Father's jowly face staring arrogantly into the camera and, quite unashamedly admitting, "Yes it's true I've instructed the guards at the front gates not to allow any unauthorised entry into the club. And that included your ambulance. Well, get him out! We have some very senior foreign diplomats on the course today and their security is our paramount concern." Father holds up his hand to interrupt an off camera question, "Please. Please. After all, Mr Butcher did enter the grounds quite illegally."

Cut to the Gargon boardroom. Where the senior members of my family are gathered to discuss our response to the events just depicted on the screen. I, of course, am mere Fly on Wall. With Father looking sheepish and unusually quiet my oldest brother Rhodes reacts predictably. First smashing his fist on the polished red hardwood table, he then picks up a heavy glass paperweight and hurls it rather ineptly at the viewing screen. The while yelling - as if the man were actually present in the room - "Fuck you, Butcher. And don't ever worry about that, you're

in our fucking sights now. And there's only one way off them." He does in fact manage to hit the intended target and the screen explodes impressively in a shower of sparks. You can imagine me laughing myself silly inside darling. Not least because, though the screen's blank, Father's voice keeps looping, echoing eerily around our warehouse sized boardroom.

I don't know why but at that moment for the first time I notice that once again the place has been redecorated. Something of a revolving door occurrence darling. On this occasion going for Minimalist style. What, is he trying to get in with the proles? Ha, ha! I can't imagine any of them ever wanting to do that. *What wolf ever cared what the sheep were thinking?:* Father's (or was it Rhodes'?) favorite saying for a while back. Grrrr! All that testosterone! What a waste, darling: I can think of far better uses for it, hehe. Apparently it's also the first time Father has seen the makeover, and he too is not overly impressed by the changes. The film momentarily forgotten he yells at an underling who happens to drift in at that moment, "What's the meaning of this fucking abortion? I don't recall saying I wanted this boardroom decorated like the home of a peasant that's run out of credit. I'd hardly need a fucking Interior Designer that charges like a fucking Mayfair Whore to come up with this. Change it!" I'm quite sure the fellow had nothing to do with the job. And there appeared no need for his presence in the boardroom at the time either. Another example darling confirming my conviction that some of Father's flunkys are only there to be shouted at. Have no actual job other than to be Human Punchbag.

My brother Rhodes' tantrum has still not exhausted itself. It has now reached the stage of him comically struggling, but then managing, to rip the media screen off its hinges. He then throws the thing into an outer office, where it continues its disconcerting looping of Father's voice and Steve Butcher's muffled cries for help. At the sight of Rhodes, red faced, stomping back into the boardroom and plonking himself down in the nearest chair, still huffing and puffing, I can barely contain myself. He yells for a drink, "Something fucking strong. And don't scrimp on it like you usually fucking do, cunt." On its rapid appearance he downs the tumbler in a single gulp, which appears to mollify the ape sufficiently to allow the meeting to resume. But it seems the volcano has not quite completed its eruption, "What the fuck was Father doing hitting that fucking reporter? He could have killed the cunt. Which would have been fine except the footage was being streamed live online to an audience of twenty fucking million!" Glancing at Marcus I notice a momentary raising of the eyebrows before the utterly blank expression crossfades back into place. You know, if one saw the

world through Rhodes' eyes I suppose his reaction to the film should hardly surprise. But thank fuck darling I don't, and god help me I am determined I never will. However much an outcast they make me feel, and treat me, I do not whimper. And if only for the sake of mother's memory I will not change. I will never, ever, ever, be like them.

In the Gargon scheme of things Rhodes is currently Operations Director for the entire global business. Father is still its CEO. But even silly me can see that Marcus has a plan, and I have a feeling it's coming close to pop time. The outcome clear, its detail Machiavellian to the point, I've no doubt, my brain would explode trying to follow the steps of it. Do they though? Not see it I mean? Mistaking caution for weakness. As he always does Marcus, no matter what outrage Rhodes allows himself to indulge, has sat impassively at the table throughout. It's impossible to tell what he's thinking. One might describe it as one of Marcus' dominant characteristics that no one ever has the faintest clue. Perhaps he was an inscrutable Chinaman in a previous life darling, hehe. I can't imagine what it would be like in bed with him, darling. The thought quite unnerves me. I've been there, you see. No, not with Marcus, ha ha! But the type, you know. I don't mean one has to talk, talk non stop. In fact I'd want to put a bung in someone's mouth if they did that. But some gesture or look, you know? To give an indication of thought; feeling. Can melt a man's heart darling, and you've done it for me often enough. Sometimes when you're least aware my dear. A hand held, a caress, they speak mountains at the right moment. But the Marcus type, all of those direct and more subtle means of expression are stifled. Of course, they're hiding something. And in Marcus' case it's guaranteed to be something so monstrous I don't want to know. They're one of the few species I will actually be found to walk away from. Well, most of the time. You know, darling, I do sometimes want to peek. To see if there is a boundary to my weakness. But then I'll turn away. Rather not know, darling: avoids a lot of fruitless introspection.

While we're at the introductions, let me take an instant to introduce you to my oldest sibling, darling. Someone thankfully you've never had to meet. Mmm, where to start? Rhodes can only be described as physically grotesque. A sodden body sustained by the richest cuisine prepared by the same chef, and personally delivered by him to wherever Rhodes' foul bulk happens to be slumped when its Rabelaisian urges are aroused. He rarely exercises, except to explore the dark caverns of his sexual appetite. These are only ever fully satisfied when inflicting an excess of pain on his, usually unwitting, bed mate. Be they either, both or severally, male or female. Until I came to fully appreciate the depths of his evil, I

did not imagine a human being could be so ugly and irredeemable as my brother. He has however been a useful lesson to me. You know darling, I hope you never do meet him: I think he would want to use you. And I wouldn't wish that on my very worst enemy. Darling, I think I'd have to kill myself if they should do anything to you.

Unsurprisingly, Rhodes' own family refuses to live with him any more. I've known his wife fly to another country to avoid the possibility. So, when in Sydney, he occupies a large - and despite all efforts - a resolutely cold, soulless penthouse in the Gargon Building. It is an apt reflection of his warped, In *What Way Can I Use You* personality. He has been known to stay in his bedroom for a multitude of days on end. The only sign of life will be of bellowed orders to servants. Abusing them to an unimaginable degree if they fail in the slightest way to satisfy his outrageous, oft revolting, demands. This is usually limited to something physical, but when bored he will take calculated delight in mentally torturing them. I was present at one such episode, which unusually became something of public knowledge. For the life of me I can't remember why I was there, though I recall being terrified that once he'd finished with the poor man that I'd be next. It started quite innocuously. Though even by then (this is going back to my late teens darling, when I was still quite wet) I knew that with Rhodes anything was possible. That no restraint should be anticipated. The slightest thing could set him off, or even without any provocation, which was really the case on this occasion. But once launched, whatever the cause, the blast can be guaranteed to do untold damage, and there will be copious victims strewn. Yes, stepping through a minefield blindfolded would be an apt analogy, darling.

A plumber knocks politely, and is invited in. At this stage there's no warning of what is about to transpire in less than two minutes. Escorted through Rhodes' bedroom into his gold plated bathroom, the young man innocently asks, "And what has caused the blockage?" The ushering servant is about to answer this not unreasonable question when there's an explosion from the bedroom. This is swiftly followed by a sound resembling a herd of stampeding elephants, caused by Rhodes leaping off the bed and storming into the bathroom. He is naked except for a large and very soiled nappy draped loosely about his midriff. Attracted by this commotion - and by then an adept fly, so that no one takes notice of my arrival - I'm just in time for the beginning of Act One, Scene Two. The servant, a relative veteran, wilily attempts to escape, but Rhodes has already anticipated this and blocks the doorway with his grotesque bulk. The pair are forced backwards into the far corner of the bathroom as he advances like a bear unleashed. Spit

showering everyone, he bawls, "What the fuck business is it of yours what's in the fucking toilet? You don't need to fucking know. Your job is just to get whatever is in it, the fuck out." Almost upon them now, into the plumbers face he sprays, "Understand cunt?"

Rhodes then turns his attention to the servant, who is seeking strategic cover behind the plumber, who's attempting the same strategy. Others involved it might have been comic, but I've seen enough to know something truly awful is about to happen. And unfortunately Rhodes does not disappoint. His voice lowered, but now dripping with oily sarcasm, he tells the servant, "The plumber wants to know what's in the toilet, Benedict. Let us oblige him. Put his head in it, that should give him a good view, what!" Benedict doesn't move. Rhodes screams at him, "Didn't you fucking hear me? Put his fucking head in the fucking toilet, man!" Attention, mine at least, briefly shifts to the said receptacle, which I notice for the first time is brimming over with a repellent looking black liquid that appears to have pools of blood floating like oil on its surface. It is emitting the most nauseating stench imaginable. In the normal course of events I've trained myself to become immune, and rarely notice any of the rainbow of foul odors that inhabit Rhodes' vicinity. This is so unspeakably repulsive I can't ignore it.

Once again he orders Benedict, who seems planted to the spot, "Jump to it, man!" Rhodes then makes as if to advance, which causes the pair to cower, "Or do you want to go first?" From the look on his face, it's obvious the servant knows this is no idle threat. Benedict, a large man, has no difficulty in lifting the plumber bodily, who naturally enough is now screaming blue murder. "Please! No! I only meant..." The pleas are cut off by his head being, as demanded, shoved down into the fetid pool, which of course gushes over the floor, causing the servant to slip as the man struggles to free himself. At this point I consider it advised to leave. The last I hear is Rhodes roaring at Benedict to get the plumber's head back down the bowl again. Of course the plumber is never seen again, but more unexpectedly, Benedict also never reappears. My cautious inquiries are met with nothing more revealing than nervous glances from the other servants and strong advice from Hughes, the head butler, not to ask further.

You see darling, Rhodes' servants learn very quickly to play dumb and blind. One might say it is a prerequisite of their employment. Darling at his LEAST alarming they will, following a debauch, find him semi comatose lying in profuse quantities of his own vomit / excrement / semen. Most frequently it is considerably worse. I cannot think of a limit to what he is capable of. Give me a week and darling I still wouldn't. Hardly surprising that Rhodes only human

contact is of a purely business nature – and in that I’m including his sexual gratification. And yet, darling, I still pity him. Surely, I feel, he must have been pure once. As an infant? Though I’ve heard stories - darling they abound - and so many of them I know to be true. Perhaps then as an innocent little sperm swimming against the tide? Hehe. What was it changed him? When was it that he became so boringly, predictably and so despicably evil?

As another illustration, while Benedict positively marathoned - lasting four months before his ghostly disappearance - his servants are normally unable to endure the horror that is Rhodes for more than a few weeks, or less still. The record, I am reliably informed, is held by one Maria. A religiously devout innocent - you know darling even I with my proclivities could appreciate the young woman’s beauty. Tall, long dark hair, blue eyes, full natural blush red lips, and the most perfectly curved figure you’ve ever seen. One could only describe her as an icon, of a classic Roman vintage. Perhaps Rhodes had been watching an old Italian movie and a lust had developed for the type. God knows what drives his deviant urges darling. Whatever it was she’d been specifically ordered, which would mean she was required to provide the flesh for the elaboration of one of his perverse fantasies.

I was suddenly aroused - from a particularly severe bout of ennui as I recall - by the young woman’s hysterical screams. On entering Rhodes lair I find her being restrained by one of the servants. Yes Benedict I think, so this must have taken place before the plumber incident. As I walked into the room and took in the scene my first reaction was that the hysteria appeared something of an overreaction. But perhaps that is more a reflection of my own state of mind at that time. Be that as it may, just inside the door, as I said, Benedict is restraining the girl, who has the look of having completely lost her mind. Gesticulating madly, her eyes are bulging and from her pretty mouth is emitting a scream quite worthy of a jet engine I assure you darling. Piercing enough to wake the dead. In the centre of the room there’s the hideous spectacle of Rhodes slumped in an unconscious state - possibly in the final stages of suffocation - being throttled by a thick leather strap wrapped taut around his neck. Like some grotesque animal his tongue lolls out, and he gurgles revoltingly. To complete the Scene from Hell, his shit smeared frame is suspended off the ground by several more of the same straps, and directly beneath him is an expanding pool of piss.

I have to say darling, though it may surprise you, this was not THAT unusual a spectacle. But no, bad though this might be, what is on the bed is considerably, considerably worse: the blood of what looks like twenty corpses thrown liberally

over the bed. And in the middle of that is something barely recognizable as human form. Their eyes have been gouged out and what looks like a long strip of flesh (which turns out to have been the victim's hacked off tongue) has been thrust sufficiently far down their throat to cause them to suffocate. There are also objects, including a baseball bat as I recall, embedded deep enough into their person to have caused considerable internal injury. I shudder to think how the poor thing actually died. And why is never a question worth asking darling, since the answer is simply that that's what Rhodes does.

With everyone distracted by this god awful spectacle, the young woman suddenly manages to extricate herself from Benedict. I believe she kneed him in the balls (good girl! Ha, ha!), since at that moment he lets out a low groan and slumps to the floor clutching himself. Unfortunately for Maria at this precise moment another of the principal players in the grotesque cast that makes up my family - though this one is not legitimate blood - makes an appearance. Eluding Benedict's feeble grasp, Maria runs straight into the arms of our most senior butler, Hughes. For a moment she becomes subdued, allowing herself to sink into his broad chest, sobbing. But on looking up into his face she must have seen something even more awful than I've already described because the screams are suddenly renewed at an even higher pitch, and she becomes a positive animal in her attempts to escape. Biting, kicking, gouging - it was quite impressive darling. But Hughes has dealt with bigger and stronger, and more terrified, and all her efforts are for naught. For some reason though he suddenly lets her go, smiling evilly as he does so. According to the front door concierge, who laughingly recounted it later, "She was still screaming as she tore out of the building. Like she'd seen a ghost boss!" I wonder, darling, if he'd have still found it funny had he known the cause of her terror.

I do wonder (though I have to admit, less frequently as the toll rises) what happens to these expendables. But as I think I've previously alluded, it's ill advised to be too inquisitive. What's perhaps most surprising is that it's rare for any of these horrific episodes to make it into the grimy paws of the media. The aforementioned Hughes - The Man that's Seen it All - it is he that's responsible for keeping Rhodes incognito. A function for which he's lucratively rewarded. His rise is an interesting snapshot of the world I inhabit. You see my darling, it's not only my brothers and my father that are putridly evil. The whole fucking dungeon is full of their ilk. I've never been able to conclude positively one way or the other whether this has occurred out of necessity or by natural gravity, though I suppose the reason is immaterial. Hughes, before he became head butler, in fact at a time

when his future was rather parlous, this disloyal servant discretely revealed into the appropriate ears that "I hold in my possession - securely vaulted in a Swiss Bank Account you understand - Insurance."

When asked what he means by this, he responds, "Security footage of a particularly brutal example of your son's dangerous temperament." When encouraged to elaborate, he explains to Father that the video starts with Rhodes violently sodomising him, "All of which I agreed to sir, in return for certain compensations. But as yet I've received nothing." He pauses at this juncture and coughs politely. For all the world as if the topic in question is almost suitable, though perhaps a little risqué, for a Matinee Dance. Certainly not - as it in fact is - the revelation of a criminal act worthy of ten years hard. With a rather pained expression the man goes on, "However, Dr Weiss, the film does not stop there." A remarkable understatement darling, for which he has since developed something of a reputation. The film contains extensive footage of Hughes being viciously attacked by the previous head butler and a well trained team of thugs, presumably for nothing more than their entertainment. It concludes with him lying senseless in a spreading pool of blood, apparently left for dead. Hughes makes a point of establishing, "This, Dr Weiss, was certainly not something I agreed to." A fact in the normal world one would hardly think needed clarifying but, as he correctly surmised, in ours it was an important point for everyone to be quite clear about.

One of the upshots of this neatly executed blackmail - which occurred the day following Hughes' release from hospital and approximately a month after the attack - was the disappearance of the old head butler. Where he went is a question I did not ask, nor in fact in his case had any curiosity in discovering. However before being allowed to depart Rhodes service (or was it this mortal coil?) a signed confession was extracted from him by Hughes, which detailed a history of the worst of Rhodes' excesses. Hardly a shock to me (the nature of the particular beast darling), I later discovered the whole thing was a sting engineered by Marcus. And so you see, my darling, it's not only my siblings that wallow in the blood of innocents. They surround themselves with those of minds like in their depravity. Or let's call it for what it is: stark, ranking insanity. Yes, darling, my father and brothers are complete psychopaths of the worst possible breed. Oh, I forgot to mention: before the week's out Hughes is catapulted into the coveted position of El Supremo, without dissent or contest.

You know, despite the considerable evidence available to him, it still somewhat amazes Rhodes (he will frequently tell me, accompanied by a loud guffaw and a rubbing of his hands) how little most people demand for their

silence, or their souls. Come to think of it, it amazes me too, but I understand so little of human nature. My dear, how often am I surprised even by *my own reactions*. There are times, in complacency, when I think I know myself quite well. So let me add delusion to my many faults, hehe. One step forward, two steps back. Is *this* life's cornerstone? Rhodes, on the other hand, came to understand - and I think accepted without struggling much against it - that he's utterly deranged. When this became evident to him I'm not sure, but I have a feeling it was at quite an early age. Unlike Marcus - who seems to perpetually squirm at himself and is forever wrestling with demons - even as a youth Rhodes appeared quite at ease with his outrageous behavior. Without access to other victims this invariably entailed taking a psychotic delight in my abuse. And despite my loud remonstrations - whenever I thought Father or Marcus were within earshot - he'd just roar and go at me harder. Ah, still then the innocent. Still thoroughly wet behind the ears, and so very conveniently available. An unconstrained and untamed beast: he'd laugh as he bugged or beat me senseless. Of everything, of all the frightening things about the man, it's that lack of restraint that I find most alarming. Actually darling, and this has never crossed my mind before, but you know I think Rhodes, I think he actually **LIKES** himself. Likes being the mad, murdering, torturing, awful, cuntful person he is. My god, that's a terrible thought, but it **WOULD** explain a lot.

You know darling, there are always reasons why we become who we grow up to be, however they do not have to become **EXCUSES**. We do not have to become victims of our evil. Our Shadow Side. We can overcome it. And it is never definitively over until the heart stops beating. And then, not even then, if we've grasped the bigger pictures. I'm a firm believer in that, darling. Sometimes it's the only thing that keeps me sane. Life can be such a test, can't it? And sometimes it seems nothing but. What do you think, for whom it always has the appearance of running so smoothly?

In fact, in his early teens Rhodes did attempt to conceal his bestial urges, but something happened which freed him, and made him realise that he could do anything without repercussion. It began with a middle aged uncle sexually abusing him. Rather ironic I suppose since already by then Rhodes was a veteran in demanding favor from people within his power. Initially, I understand he acquiesced, but apparently at some point a rage overtook him and he bludgeoned the slight and rather pathetically innocuous man to within an inch of his life. The story quickly became common knowledge, since the squadron required to conceal Rhodes' infamy had not yet been called to arms. Complacent at first, since self

preservation appeared an obvious and watertight defence, Father became apoplectic when the family lawyer demurred. Not unreasonably - when it was discovered that following the beating Rhodes had kept Uncle Winders locked in a room and recorded the precise details, in high definition close-ups, of his drawn out and excruciating death. He managed to keep the man alive for over twenty four hours whilst almost continuously subjecting him to the most unbelievably imaginative abuse.

It should have been a warning of what was to come. Moreover, from the camera work it was obvious someone else was involved, but Rhodes always refused to reveal his partner in crime. For which he was initially thrashed within an inch of his life by Father, and then roundly applauded. I, however, do know who it was that, on pain of death themselves, was forced to bear witness to that nightmare. Apart from Rhodes, Father and the then Majordomo (who found the footage which sparked the cover-up) were supposed to be the only people aware of the true sequence of events. I wish that were the case. The poor man's pleas for help, or at least to be put out of his misery, still awaken me sweating in the middle of the night darling. Even after all these years. The rest of the family were fed a vague version of events which contrived to paint an almost heroic picture of Rhodes. Something along the lines of: young teenager defends himself from clutches of evil pervert satisfying his sickening desires without concern for the life damaging consequences on impressionable youth. These were words (almost verbatim darling) hauntingly echoed several years later by the father of one of Rhodes' own victims. Recounting that infamy in The Smoking Room at the family pile to a group of his cronies, I recall Rhodes scoffing, "What a fucking idiot, I offered the cunt a million, but he tore the fucking cheque up in my face." They of course dutifully hyena like the pack of moronic sycophants they all are. His eyes narrow and an edge comes into his voice, "And told me to watch out." A mistake, darling, though an understandable one: the distraught parent was shortly after killed in a conveniently contrived accident.

Regarding Rhodes' murder of our pathetic old uncle Winders. With the emergence of his diabolic nature, I never spoke to anyone that swallowed the version pedalled by Father. It did though provide clear signal to the family that his extremes of behavior would be tolerated. It took some little time to awaken the teenage Rhodes to the fact now obvious to everyone living within his close orbit. That, as far as Father was concerned, Rhodes could indulge his depravities to their full extent with impunity. Once alerted though, the boy pushed the boundaries to the full. As I can attest darling. Dragged unwillingly into several of his astrays.

Deeper and deeper were the pits he and I plumbed, two Soul Divers, reaching into the lowest reaches of the sewer of the human psyche. I can't say for *certain* that we reached the bottom, darling, but I'm pretty sure we came close to it. Let me make it clear, and on this rare occasion, hehe, I do not exaggerate: Rhodes is incapable of good or anything remotely approaching it. I fail to recall any action by him that could be defined in such terms. You know, darling, it frightens me that humans like he exist. And shocks me too that they're given such broad licence to wreak. After all, darling, they shoot rabid animals, don't they?

More generally this episode had the effect of shifting the familial moral axis. One might say that it swept away completely all consideration of decency. How my poor mother must turn in her grave. You know, my darling, I sometimes feel we are a different species. Humankind I mean - not just my family. I don't know, but it's as if we can look at the exact same situation, and I am flummoxed by their thinking and action in relation to it. Humans are such a primitive species, darling. Really, I feel another civilisation would think us so. Would observe our pitiful exploits and ridicule our wayward ineptitude. In a lighter mood I picture them killing themselves laughing.

# Chapter 1.02

Marcus, in contrast to my oldest brother, has always led an austere, almost monkish existence. His wife Evelyn suffers. She, a trophy wife foisted upon him by Father, isn't a particularly bad example of the breed. Just conventional and rather unimaginative, and therefore unintentionally destructive and self serving. I've no doubt she'd describe herself a good person. The unimportant (in her eyes) people she steps on to get what she wants would no doubt describe her differently. I give example master, hah soh. Shortly after their marriage Evelyn oversaw the construction of a pile she judged appropriate for an executive at one of the world's largest and oldest multinationals. She made the lives of the builders an absolute living hell for the nine months of its construction, and then took - still in fact takes - childish delight in showing the place off to her equally vapid friends. The latest work of art or a redecorated room: whatever. She takes very personally any deliberate or unintended criticism of The Pile, since, she says, she considers this monstrosity the most accurate and meaningful reflection of herself. I fully concur, darling, hehe. Marcus stays at the home as infrequently as possible. In contrast to Evelyn's excesses - sinking under the weight of some of the world's greatest works of art - Marcus occupies a ten room wing. It is wholly functional - part office, part lodging. The office brims with technology, as he has a passion for the very latest gizmo. In the grounds of the estate an international standard aerodrome has been built to satisfy his only other indulgence. He has a selection of private jets which he pilots himself. But he'll also be one of the first with the latest in aeronautics. Last time it was some kind of jetpack. I was lying in bed, indolently masturbating, when he shot past the window, a rather alarmed expression on his face. I'd hoped the bugger had killed himself! Can't a boy even get a wank in peace!

My brothers appear quite different. Scratch the surface though and in fact there's little to separate them. Only the means vary. At around the same time Rhodes was casually abandoning (with Father's tacit acceptance) the norms of human behavior, Marcus made a blood oath to dedicate himself to an ambition which wed him to Father's business. This might be something most parents would laud in their offspring, but not so Father. In his formative years he despised Marcus and made no attempt to conceal the fact. Despite a later reversal of this attitude, I've always believed this to be the source of Marcus' copious and dedicated loathing for Father. A Monk of Satan, hehe. With something of a reluctance to forgive. Another dominant trait in Marcus is a prodigious, filing

cabinet of a memory. As I have found to my cost on too many occasions to remember. There was a time when I tried to conceal things from him. But really darling, it's easier to just give up. Sin openly: in the end they seem to tire of pinning you to the wall, particularly as I show no penitence for my actions. That is perhaps the only thing I learned from Rhodes. Though in his case, given the flavor of his predilections, the impulse to unrestrained flight seems frighteningly fraught. Anyway, now I'm merely held up as an example of failure: by everyone I think, hehe. Oh dear, so much hatred amongst the three of them; no wonder I turned out such a weak kneed pansy. Surprisingly though - despite having foisted on me the short strawed role of perennial outsider - even since early youth I've never questioned my rejection of all they stand for. Never doubted I was right to do so. This trait is one of the few aspects of my nature of which I'm proud. To reject them - my father and two older brothers - seemed the only logical reaction. After all darling, what possible point is there in anything they do?

You know darling, it makes me cry sometimes. Not for myself: god, I'd never stop, ha ha! No, I pity their victims: they must fill a stadium. Probably a small fucking country when you really think about it darling. And even for them I shed a tear or two darling. After all, they didn't choose to be so fucking horrible, and when you think like that, it's possible to drain all hatred, you know, darling? Recriminations, what's the point? What to do? To neutralise. To change them. More constructive don't you think, darling? Though I usually come up with a blank, hehe. Such a knuckle head darling; no use to anyone, am I? Don't answer that!!

As I mentioned, darling, when Marcus was around fifteen, Father suddenly found himself a shadow. There was a time I used to trail him too, but once I lost respect for Father I kept to myself, and later sought pastures further afield of a different hue. Still, when forced to remain at The Pile (it means Pile of Shit for me, but Father rather liked the old Lord of The Manor term, the clown!) I'd occasionally hear Father bawling Marcus out for some perceived failure. A spotty teenager still, he cultivated the image of the devoted son. But you could see it was more Edmund to the father Gloucester: a well played act, with sinister undertones. But there is no great pity in this beating breast, darling. Father is fully responsible for everything that's happened to him. Not least by how he's regarded by his sons. I don't know what made him think we would love him by treating us the way he did. Perhaps that wasn't his intention? But he's always dreamed of a dynasty, so he kept telling us. Fucking hell, he never seemed to stop, darling: a heavy burden for a five year old still in shorts and long socks, hehe. And later, us

all teenagers then, he used to deliver what he believed to be these Get Up Young Man motivational speeches - that left the three of us rather less than enthused. Actually, I'd switch to Never, Never Land within five seconds of him starting. It got so I could recognise the expression when he was in the mood to deliver one, and would bolt to my secret room. But sometimes I was too slow. "If we've got to suffer the fucking cunt, then you will too, you good for nothing fucking pansy," Rhodes would bellow - having grabbed me round the neck with one of his gorilla fists before I could make off. Then dragged me (I making myself as much a sack of potatoes as I was capable) into Father's study. What a pompous ass! I really do not understand Father. Or the other two for that matter. But then, I have no ambition, or any of the other motivations that drive them all so powerfully and myopically. How could I ever be expected to understand them? Or they me. I am my mother's child, and they absolute clones of him.

In those days it seemed that wherever Father went the Spotty Shadow would follow. Marcus would pick Father's brains and occasionally for a time - I never fathomed why - he'd share these golden nuggets of wisdom with me. I didn't have a clue what he was talking about - to be honest darling, I still barely understand anything he tells me. While I would be wasting the days away toying with myself and dreaming impossible love, he'd spend hours unravelling the complex structure of Father's empire, Gargon Industries. An enterprise which was started by a virtually illiterate small goods trader several generations ago. In fact it became quite the project for Marcus. To streamline; to make more efficient; to cut out the unnecessary. To create, I suppose, a kind of perfection. An ugly, concrete block of perfection. It remains an obsession with him - in every sphere of life in fact. I'm sure if he'd had his way I'd have been carted off to the dumpster long ago. Definitely fat not meat, darling, hehe. Another thing, though he came across as rather shy and awkward, even then it was clear to me that he considered himself, and not Rhodes, to be the natural heir. That he should one day be at the helm of this already vast and still rapidly expanding enterprise. Mm, his absolute self confidence and dogged, silent determination is quite extraordinary.

Gargon's history - which as I said Marcus spent copious days documenting and eventually published - recalls the fluctuating fortunes and ventures of an organisation which for one generation would follow a wise and predictable path, accruing healthy if not spectacular profits. Only with another forebear at the helm for it to suddenly veer off onto reefs and the coffers be laid almost bare. Of all our forebears that captained the Gargon ship, Marcus's favorite was James Weiss. Fuck, he'd drone on and on about him darling, until I would positively want to

shoot him. He would force me to listen under threat of blackmail - most commonly of telling father of some pathetic love quest gone wrong, hehe. Whenever he spoke of James, Marcus would have this messianic zeal in his eye. I suppose there is something about the fellow, something of the flamboyant tyrant. Hehe, how often have I been drawn mothlike to such a flame. Not particularly intelligent, but James was driven by a vision (allowing nothing standing in his way) to turn Gargon into a Pharmaceutical Multinational. Yes daring I often wonder, IS there anything possibly more dull? Marcus would gush, "Do you know, Piers, that during his short, extravagant lifetime James managed to achieve his aim, which was nothing short of impossible in most people's eyes. In the space of a single lifetime he transformed a large chain of chemist shops in Western Sydney with a reputation for traditional values and conservatism, into the essence of the global market leader it is today!" YAWN.

These history lessons were guaranteed to make my eyelids feel they had a tonne weight dragging on them. Though I confess at the mention of James my ears would prick up minutely. Gossip generally has that effect on me darling, hehe. You see, such expansion would have required considerable funding, well beyond what the banks - *Those shrivel dicks that couldn't fill a fucking five year old's cunt* (I quote Rhodes darling) - would have been willing to spill. So, where did it come from? Marcus one day whispered to me conspiratorially, "It's rumored to be in some way linked to James' death, you know." His eyes glazing over for a second he'd recount, "He was actually found bound, gagged and partially dismembered in a notorious brothel which was reputed to be the headquarters of an international crime gang. As you know he was still CEO of what he'd by now built up into a multinational enterprise." Which of course I didn't, but Marcus never seemed to pick up on my blank stares of sincere disinterest. Even when I exaggerated them so he couldn't possibly miss me looking like Complete Brainless. It made no difference. Still in hushed tones he'd go on, "Despite his untimely death, the business continued to prosper under the more conventional management of his son. He was backed by substantial capital held in Swiss bank accounts, which in fact continued to grow through the addition of regular, anonymous contributions. The source of this very generous injection of capital was never discovered, but exactly one hundred." He'd repeat this as if there was something fucking mystical about it darling, "Exactly one hundred years after James' death the anonymous payments ceased. But by then of course the dynasty was secure, if not yet untouchable."

Despite idolizing him, Marcus (great great something grandson) is James' antithesis. Perhaps in there lies the reason for the devotion. But though a man of utterly nondescript appearance, who one would easily pass by without notice, he is actually especial. He is possessed of an uncommon ability. Admittedly it is a gift which for most people would offer little advantage, in fact most likely would only result in a deal of heartache. But for Marcus, as heir apparent to a multinational conglomerate, it was to prove an invaluable trait, the driver to his mercurial rise to prominence within the empire. You see, darling, my brother possesses the grand chess master talent to picture how a situation will play out. And to the finest accurate detail. It doesn't matter the scenario. However complex it is, nor how long the timeframe. Doesn't for that matter have to be related to business even. So uncannily accurate are his predictions some people came to believe - I recall Rhodes admitting it to me on one drunken stupor occasion – that Marcus can see into the future.

I first became aware of this unusual ability with situations quite mundane. In his early teens it was confined to nothing more than predicting the potential of someone's budding love interest. By nature a pessimist (particularly where it concerned his own fumbling, furtive attempts to find love), however much he wished it not his gloomy predictions would inevitably transpire. I'm not saying my reckless cliff dives should be encouraged darling, but without some hope, what is the point? Come on, darling! At first Marcus thought he might be wishing the outcome upon himself. He tearfully admitted this to me. These were the few occasions when I could fully pity him without reserve: a feeling of warmth, which it's rare for me to link with my older brother. And of course impossible with Father and Rhodes. I do think, really I do darling, that in different circumstances he would have been a more decent person. He is after all the possessor of a few drops of mama's blood. But it's been so diluted by the awful environment we've been brought up in since she died. He experienced the same sad inevitability when anticipating the outcome of other people's relationships. Relationships which - at the time and to the people in it - had all the appearances of stability and Bed of Roses promise. Such insights were almost too painful for him when it involved our poor sister Isobelle. Her likeness to mama – both in personality and appearance – was uncanny. We all adored her, since in her we had a constant, living reminder of our much loved saint of a mother.

Ha! An inveterate serial romantic, Isobelle also possessed a gift - though hers unfortunately (and there's no doubt about this darling!) was an utterly undesirable one. However, it is an ability possessed by many women and one I must also claim

to be afflicted by. Need I tell you? Among a crowd of thousands Isobelle could, like a missile, home in on the biggest cad, the worst sponge, the most inviolate rake. Yes, exactly as you've seen me do! Meanwhile, of course, spurning the honest advances of the man who had the potential of making her life that little cottage with roses round the front door she so longed for. As we all did, Marcus attempted time and again to direct her attention towards this type of fellow. In vain. Now, Isobelle had in fact a quite detailed list of what she looked for in a man. Where it derived I've no idea. But having perused it, I'm certain if she'd hitched to such a one she'd have found all she sought. But at the sight of Cad the list would be torn up and made confetti floating down on all the D'Arcys as her Wickham guided her to his lair. Of course she could never see it. Never learned from the awful pain she endured again and again. Why do we do it, darling? In the end Marcus would say nothing, but I've seen him, wringing his hands, staring with imploring eyes at Isobelle as she blithely sauntered off on a date: a picture of unadulterated happiness. Until the inevitable end Marcus would skulk, a canvas of desperate grief, his skin come out in an impressive rash, so concerned for her was he. How he must have loved and cared for Isobelle. Yes, I think I'm right darling, there was once more than a grain of goodness in him.

After the conclusion of a particularly sour episode - involving degrees of shame only a woman will endure for the man she thinks her soul mate - Isobelle rounded on Marcus. She put the blame for the relationship's failure entirely on him, while completely absolving the bastard that had virtually destroyed her sanity. Isobelle never recovered from that experience, and worse for both of them it led to a temporary schism in their relationship. I don't think I'm being overly dramatic - though I'm hardly the person to be the judge of that darling hehe - if we can say that the tragedy that became her life stemmed from the breakdown in their close relationship. You see, despite her ignoring them on a conscious level, Marcus' warnings must have put some kind of a brake on her most reckless leaps into love's lake. Subconsciously her eyes opened a little to the true natures of these bastards she pined for. Which let her escape a little less scathed than she might otherwise have been. I don't need to give an example do I darling? After all, you've seen me demean myself enough times to a man that should have been roundly hung and drawn. Anyway, without Marcus' gloomy observations, on the next occasion she was fully blind to Rake's awfulness, and suffered abominably. How immeasurably darling I was the sole witness. Over him - and the others that followed - it was my inept shoulder she'd choose to cry her tears out on.

What use am I after all darling? Invariably being just as smitten by them as she was. Oh Andrew, how I despise you for destroying my sister's beautiful, sensitive heart, and turning her into such a cold hearted tyrant. The Ice Queen. I suppose, to be strictly accurate, The Ice Princess. Replete with snow white mountain Schloss - having married to one of those fake European aristocrats. Of course I tried to explain what a cunt you were being to her. You Andrew, all those times ringing her in the early morning, to moan about your new girlfriend, and how you wished you and Isobelle had never split up. Of course you didn't mean it. Yet after each one of your fucking calls she'd stare at me with a desperate hope, in eyes that for two years brimmed with the tears of a broken trust. And again she'd tell me, "But he's everything I ever imagined in a man. I'll never meet another like him. That could draw my heart as he did. Made it skip so many beats. No, what chance is there of there being two of him?" I fucking hoped none, darling, but I kept that to myself. I'd remind her of others she'd toyed with, but the look would still be there, "But they only offer something. He was everything!" She'd wail, and throw herself on the bed, burying her face in the covers. I tried everything, "Darling, could you really imagine having babies with him?" I immediately regretted that remark, which I'd thought would steel some sense into her. Surely she could at least see he was totally unfit for any kind of commitment? A strangled, "Yes!" several sobs, then "He promised we'd have three, a girl and two boys." Sobs increase markedly as she can hardly get the words out, "They'd have been just like him." *Thank fuck not then*, I let slip out, and then had to contend with a weekend of Niagara tears and recriminations. As I said, darling, I'm sure you could describe episodes of my own uncannily similar to this one. And the fact that I was sucking him off and just as desperately offering myself to him for the entire duration of my sister's relationship with Andrew is neither here nor there. Is it?

I believe I may have digressed.

Fortunately, Marcus was later able to turn his Super Power to more positive advantage. As mentioned earlier, his attention became blinkedly fixed on Father's business. It began quite innocuously enough with Marcus using his visionary skills to predict the outcome of the business strategies at that time being deployed by the various strands of the Gargon web. One morning Marcus, by now almost leaving his teens, plucked up the courage to give his opinion on one of them to Father. The old bastard nodded sagely and invited Marcus to join him at the Boardroom meeting taking place that afternoon. Told him to make a presentation of his research to the executive directors. Other business concluded he

summoned a nervous Marcus, Adam's apple bobbling like mad, to take the floor. His expression still serious, Father told them, "Marcus is going to give us his analysis of the expansion proposal you've been working on for the last twelve months. Marcus please give us the fruits of your labor." A few surprised looks but generally, given Father's queue, they're attentive. But then, before Marcus has got half into it, Father begins to chuckle - almost inaudibly at first - but before long is roaring with laughter, completely drowning out the boy. Whatever they might have thought of Marcus' comments the directors sheep to Father, joining in the ridicule with unrestrained enthusiasm. One of them barks out, "What the fuck do you know? You're disputing the advice of a team of twenty of our best economists and legal brains?" Marcus tries to counter, but the laughter makes it impossible, and he's left with no option but to give up. Similar comments kick him up the backside as he drags himself out, tail well betwixt legs.

But the young man, give him credit, is not put off. Only a few days later we find him entering Father's study at The Pile, and timidly calling out for him. The nervous voice, barely audible over the blaring music, is an intrusion on Father's thoughts. Which centre at that moment around the most recent crises facing Gargon. Which, given the scale of operation, can be sure to be of considerable magnitude. And so, when Marcus appears around the corner of a marbled pillar, hesitant and awkwardly wringing his hands, Father heaps all his pent up frustration upon the boy's undeserving shoulders. At first, swiveling slowly around on his white calf hide leather chair, Father makes a show of not noticing the youth. Lets his gaze drift over the paintings on the wall behind Marcus, and then studiously regards the floor to ceiling shelves of his personal library, which includes books dating back a thousand years. There are a number, I'm told, which are considered priceless. You know, darling, I've never quite understood why age should confer value: I think the evidence is there that the two bear no correlation. Of course the extent of sexual repression in the gorgeously sticky writings of those monks from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries do cause a *certain* amusement. One can almost imagine them coming over the pages of the books as they write, hehe. Father certainly has some excellent examples, and yes I confess I have 'inspected' them. But that's not to say I would pay millions for the thing, darling. Frankly, you can find more disgustingly naughty pornography by the comeload in any number of those bookshops I frequent in Taylor Square for the purpose of entertainment and liaison.

I digress again, I know, I know! Having dragged it out for as long as is awkwardly possible, eventually Father deigns to notice his son. He allows himself a

withering stare before, full of arctic derision, bellowing at him, “Get out of my fucking sight boy. Can't you see I'm busy trying to sort out this latest debacle from the European Division.” The boy squirms but doesn't move which is, to say the least, unusual. Father, predictably, explodes. “Christ knows why I fucking bother anyway! If you and your lunatic brother are going to inherit this fucking business I might as well give up now. Wasting my time! Between the pair of you, you're guaranteed to have it fucked before I'm cold in the fucking ground.” You will have noticed there is no mention of me in this tirade: I do not exist. Anyway, it's all a crock of shit, darling. What else is he unless defined by his empire? What else would he do if not devote himself, as he's done for the best part of his adult life, on making plans for the growth and domination of Gargon? *He* in fact no longer exists without Gargon. I'm quite convinced Father would kill himself if he woke up to the prospect of life without the power the business affords him. Though Marcus quails under this onslaught, his conviction doesn't falter. By now he's well used to Father's verbal flailings and long ago learned, as the rest of us have done, to disassociate himself. He barely hears the words any more. But he becomes fully alert when, for the first time, Father gives him an insight into his plans for the business. Whilst for Father it's simply part of the tirade, for the boy it's electric. At the top of his voice, Father yells at him, “Don't you understand, boy, that if BPOD Tech is not destroyed our pharma sales will continue to slide. Their lobbying is more effective than ours because they have a fucking parliament full of ministers and civil service mandarins in their pockets. Why haven't we been able to do this? Why is it that we can't be the company governments automatically turn to when they want a crisis resolved.” Father must have suddenly recalled himself, for he suddenly trails off, “Oh why am I bothering with you, you halfwit fucking tortoise?” A hand flashes out and catches the boy across the head. This behavior is something all of us are used to. Father has always been quite free with his fists on us. The blow sends Marcus spinning into the wall, though it's not actually quite as bad as it looks. Experience has taught him, so he goes with the blow, feinting imperceptibly at the moment of impact.

Now, this was near a decade back but already the field had cleared into a two horse race between BPOD Tech and Gargon to develop an artificial body to allow humans to live indefinitely. To Marcus: Enemy #1. At least the two of them are agreed on that. Father has advised us on untold occasions that he will stop at nothing to surmount them, and expects the same from us. Actually he mistakenly encompassed me on one occasion. On catching my pop eyed expression of surprise and uncertainty, as I rummaged through the very limited possibilities of

what I could do on this Mission Impossible, his expression first softened and then he guffawed and threw something at me. I think at least SOME reaction was preferred to my normally blank indifference, which infuriates him to a sometimes unhealthy degree. I must confess to taking some delight in stimulating him, and have developed a marking system based on the degree of arm flapping and the exact shade of his red puffed out cheeks. I award myself additional points if his eyes appear about to eject from his head. My pleasures are, as you have often commented, surprisingly simple, darling.

For Marcus BPOD Tech exerts an emotional fist of a grip on his heart. Quite why I'm not exactly sure, darling, as in his normal business and private dealings he is, as I think I mentioned before, an emotional dead fish. But BPOD Tech ignites a passion in him, in some kind of channeled obsession of all his feelings. I've been an unwilling - chained by another blackmail - audience to more than one of his exhortations attempting to light in me a reciprocal passion of hatred. But on each occasion I made no attempt to hide my disinterest, even in the face of threats taken to Everestian heights. In fact, feeling particularly bold (I don't recall why) I might on one occasion have even given him an indication of how ridiculous he appeared. This caused him to huff a bit, before the normal blank mask dropped back into place: a heavy portcullis on his feelings. Some years later (yes darling it was YEARS), I noticed a twisted expression appear as the revenge was executed. It was so rigid, so unnatural, it really looked like he had on one of those cheap plastic masks children wear at birthday parties. I've seen it since, directed at others, and even then it still sends shivers down my back.

His hatred of BPOD Tech is most evidenced by the obsessive, encyclopedic knowledge he's amassed about them. He's studied all there is to read about the company - in order to identify the weak spots in their impressive armor. I'm certain he is far better informed on them than Father. Rather foolish of him, when you think that they offer the greatest threat to the empire. Marcus on the other hand keeps himself absolutely abreast of current events relating to them. Pores over any articles with their slightest mention. Like a fucking computer darling, he can recall any fact, however minute or of no apparent significance. Marcus is well aware that Father harbors an unhealthy fear of Gargon's demise. Unhealthy because Father is not mobilized into decisive action by this fear, rather he's stricken into *Rabbit in the Spotlights* immobility. While I like to tease Father about it - for the infantile pleasure of getting a rise out of him - Marcus gets that twisted expression whenever he sees Father succumbing to his debilitating fear. I rather pity Father then. Out of his depth. It so obviously just a matter of Tick Tock before

Marcus makes a move on him. I picture Father as a shell, insides scooped out and empty, if Gargon were to cease to exist for him. Of course it's not unusual - how many Suits have you seen just the same, darling? Psychopaths every one of them. Terrified cowards. But still frightening in their fear. It dares one, you know? To get a little too close to the fire, to see how much one can stand. Hehe, yes darling I do bear the burn marks in several places from friends of Father that like to dabble.

Back to the study, and Father tearing strips of Marcus. To most it would probably appear a somewhat mundane pastiche - domineering father taking out a frustration on their weak willed offspring. However to Marcus, despite the earlier boardroom dressing down, this is the opportunity he's been waiting for. And he's timed his approach to Father propitiously. Gargon is in the middle of a particularly bad run against the great corporate rival. For the first time they've created a discernable gap between our respective researches into a robot body. And Father is feeling something of Toothless Lion. No clue how to reverse his / Gargon's fortunes against them. So instead of kicking Marcus out he settles back in his chair, stares out of the window over the city (the scene of his failure!), and in a somewhat listless tone tells Marcus, "Proceed boy. You've five minutes, so make it fucking snappy." I'm sure he was expecting to find mild entertainment in ridiculing the boy at the end of it. Instead, manner increasingly confident, Marcus methodically educates Father about BPOD Tech. In the process he conclusively demonstrates - with a plethora of evidence to support his assertions - that every major setback that Gargon has faced in the last decade from them can be traced back to a decision by Father. Big, fat giant huffs and puffs (I've seen him darling, they're pathetic), "You are blaming me!" Face red, eyes popping out. Hehe, easily picture it darling. Quite envious actually - 10/10 Marcus! For the first time wished I'd listened to his ramblings so I too could have stuck it to Father. Without emotion - assertive, as if argument were futile - he lays the proof before Father that he's singlehandedly brought an empire built over five generations to its knees. His manner haughty and contemptuous Father attempts to belittle - "You don't know what you're talking about, you're just a child. What the fuck do you know? Go to your room and play with yourself. It's all the lot of you are good for." Even to his own ears it sounds crass. It doesn't matter anyway, the boy would not be put off. This surprises and, despite himself, impresses the old bastard. I could use worse language to describe my father, but the whole thing might degenerate darling. A slippery slope down which we don't want to slide. This is the voice of experience talking darling - it's fucking hard to climb back up.

In a now diffident, apologetic tone Marcus responds, “Let me tell you what needs to be done father.” Gangly, slightly stooped (from already too much time head buried in computers), Marcus looks up at Father, cautious but undaunted. The expression Father adopts at this juncture is one he frequently falls back on when cornered. Restrained yet hinting of a volcano about to explode. It has broken the nerve of several ex Gargon executives. But the boy/man is immune. A budding self confidence - founded on a quite long understood realization of his critical importance to Gargon’s future - has thickened his skin considerably over the previous twelve or so months. Actually all three of us were over Father. We’d all come to realize it was mostly a Big Front. My father, I’m ashamed to say, is not a courageous man. A fighter yes, but only when he’s got an army behind him, and is assured of victory. I’ve never seen him take on a war he knew he’d lose. You know darling, that one in which we keep going because we have to – where the outcome is immaterial. Actually darling, I think I approach any confrontation like that. Really, so inept, who would be the fool to offer odds on me winning anything? I have qualities I am well aware of and am proud of, a little. But fisticuffs? I was born to be the punchbag. Frankly, darling, I can’t rustle up the interest anyway. One must, I presume, want to hurt someone to win. Not me, darling. A taker. Underneath, where I belong, and where I want to be. Having it done to. Never the doer.

Marcus, during those early years of his ascendancy, has his moments of Heroic Underdog. This first is definitely one of his finest. All very character building, I’m sure darling, hehe. And so he presses on, in the face of the blasted heat of Father’s ego punctured anger. He explains in economic and organizational detail what Father needs to do, and the consequences of these actions. As well as painting a vivid picture of the domino collapse of the empire if no action is taken. If not immediately (Father notes the boy is not prone to unnecessary drama), at least within the year’s out. Father does not give in immediately, instead roundly and universally dismissing Marcus’ analysis. “You’re talking complete shit, boy, what the fuck do you know. Stop wasting my time. Get the fuck out of my sight!” And with that he swivels around in his chair, and looks pointedly out of the window. Unlike the last time in the boardroom, when a rather self satisfied grin had spread across his face at Marcus’ dismay, this time Father is left scowling and for half an hour fidgets at his desk, unable to find any peace. He’s eventually forced by his mind’s discomfort to go to his computer and investigate the most dire of Marcus’ claims. Over the following few weeks the predictions concerning two of Father’s ill judged decisions prove uncannily accurate. Does he praise his

son? Of course the cunt doesn't darling. Quite the reverse in fact. Consider darling: no one, least of all an egotistical tyrant, likes to be shown up by anyone they consider beneath them. Which must by definition include the mass of humanity in general and closer to home, the sum of us.

Across the myriad streams of The River Gargon, over the ensuing months Marcus continues to supply uncannily, freakishly accurate, assessments. And so, driven by nothing more than hard nosed financial reality Father is forced to act. In the face of increasingly angry, self defensive attacks from his Executive, he acts upon the advice of this son of his that until then he'd considered an awkward embarrassment. Though without Marcus his Empire would have collapsed, given the man – the colossal, fragile ego – it's hardly a shock that with each success Father's hatred mounts. To something almost uncontainable. It doesn't help that, irrespective of the audience, Marcus never once attempts to sugar coat his increasingly dismissive opinion of Father's business acumen. There are also reasons more personal, I think. Because whenever he sees Marcus Father is forced to acknowledge those elements of himself he considers weaknesses. Those which he believes will hinder his gain of greater power. His sensitivity, for instance. There is in him an instinctive kindness towards those weaker than himself. I've seen him hiding this natural humanity. Though fortunately he doesn't always succeed, and so I am able to call up warming examples of his compassion. Surreptitiously performed: in such terror of exposure it's comic. That is until one contemplates the consequences of such reserve. I once saw Father rescue a small animal, and another time reward a timid child. From the look on his face one would imagine he'd committed a heinous crime. Darling, I make no effort to try to understand this behavior, merely thank god I don't share it.

Now, around this time, the Executive was recommending a new round of debt finance, which would have left Gargon somewhat vulnerable to takeover. But by ordering a U-turn on several decisions which Marcus had calculated would generate little net profit, Father was able to avoid this need. Following evasion of this and several other icebergs, Father begins to see a steady improvement in Gargon's performance - the coffers filling and profitability in business streams long in the red. The timing of this is fortuitous because it enables Gargon to ratchet up development of their own artificial body. In other words - really for the first time, and pleasantly reflected in a closing of the gap in their share values – become a true rival to BPOD Tech, who until then were in reality the only horse in the race. As a consequence, and much to the chagrin of Gargon's money grubbing Executive - "who fail to possess a single entrepreneurial molecule between them" (actually

that's from me. I just felt like adding the quote marks. They seem to give it a little more punch, hehe) - after a bare six months of being allowed access to Gargon's inner workings Marcus, aged twenty two, is promoted to Chief Strategic Planner.

Memos fly, instructing the Executive that all their decisions must be approved by Marcus. At first no one takes seriously Marcus' spiderlike, barely decipherable scrawl. Decrying rampant nepotism, they either look for ways around Marcus' revisions or simply ignore them. All of this changes after a deal goes through – one in which Gargon and BPOD Tech had been vying to take over a small R&D firm. The buyout goes in Gargon's favor, after a bidding war which neither side was willing to back down from. This leads to Gargon having to pay a significantly higher price than expected for what is essentially the company's only asset: a patent for a single technology, albeit one essential for Gargon's robot body. Following its acquisition, to the obvious question from the media Father retorts, "Without it our development would have been delayed by several years." Laughing, "What's the point in having the money, gentlemen, if you don't fucking use it?" Then, adopting the manner of Visionary Futurist to Mud Clodden Pleb, Father adds (hehe, how many times he's been taunted over it) – "NOT a high price at all. Our investment will be recovered a hundred fold. You may not understand, but Prism's technology is a game changer for the race to develop the first human automaton. Acquiring it will put Gargon at the forefront of man's greatest challenge, and years ahead of our competitors. As shapers of man's future, to win one must take the kind of risks - calculated risks mind you - that others wouldn't dare." I don't think I need to add my opinion of this twatness, do I darling? Looking above the heads of the throng of journalists, I presume imagining some Utopian future in which Gargon rules the galaxy, Father concludes, "We see the BIGGER picture. In fact we at Gargon are always looking at the biggest picture."

The Board are still patting themselves on the back, and Father has wasted no time in belittling Marcus - since he'd recommended against the purchase of Prism Inc - when it's discovered the newly acquired company had hidden an impending litigation concerning patent violation. Darling, I don't think the ink is even dry on the takeover contract when a Cease and Desist notice is delivered in person to Father. Issued by none other than BPOD Tech themselves. It relates to a patent of theirs which is core to Prism's device - something as I understood it equivalent to, a replacement for, the human nervous system. After a particularly heated and blood letting board meeting I found a few of the torn up scraps of the notice letter. The remainder Rhodes had rammed down the throat of Gargon's lead negotiator on the deal. My favorite line - quite unlawyer like but very much capturing the

thrust of the thing - read, “....Should Gargon ignore this instruction, the Third Party will be in receipt of a claim for damages we estimate will place Gargon with a debt the size of a small nation's GDP.....”

Now, in relation to the deal Marcus had made only one recommendation – to make a thorough investigation of the target company's patent history. Yes darling, there were legal avenues. But bottom line, apart from the considerable cost of Gargon's shiny Pink Lemming, the debacle once again put Gargon streets behind BPOD Tech. On the upside, hehe, it left Gargon's Executive with several plate loads of egg on their faces. Following the inevitable purge of The Presidium, the survivors are forced to present themselves at a meeting to examine the entrails of the disaster. Led by Marcus, he informs them in the flat, reedy monotone they have quickly come to loath, “There is now considerable focus on our business: we do not welcome this.” Rhodes interrupts before Marcus can respond to a nervous query from a Suit, “Why!! Because, you fucking buffoon, the gaps in Gargon's R+D are now spread like a whore's fucking legs all over the fucking media. Marcus says we can expect the share price for Gargon Robotics to drop a fucking 25%.” Which of course it duly did, while the reverse reflected BPOD Tech's soaring star. In the scale of things, darling, nothing fatal, but a serious punch in the face all round, and for Father an unpleasant bruising of the gargantuan ego. At the end of Marcus' speech the fucking fraud actually stands up and claps loudly, “Well done, my boy,” forcing the rest of the hung out to dry Executive to mea culpa and follow dutiful suit. A boardroom table of hung heads, darling, and to watch the puncturing of so many primped egos in one sitting. Very satisfying darling. AWFULLY hard to keep a straight face when you think of their usual up themselves attitude, hehe. After stepping forward and slapping Marcus manfully on the back, Father then turns on the Execs and rips into them, “Flabby and lazy is how you're being described in the media! And they're right! Our business is founded on thorough and accurate research, not flashy shortcuts!” He then unleashes Rhodes on them. By the end of the day the entire remainder of the executive board has been sacked. Two of the disgraced mandarins commit suicide. In fact I was still in the building when one of them went flying past the window: silent, eyes wide open, a slightly pained expression on his face. The silence perturbed me. It smacked of self recrimination. Surely by then the time for regret is over, darling. It should be done with a defiant roar. Ha, ha! I could admire someone that went out like that. All debts cleared.

After this of course everyone takes Marcus exceedingly seriously. Through hard work and his natural gifts Marcus' influence radiates rapidly. With his

freakishly accurate predictions he successfully plans and executes over the next few years strategies which take chunks out of our competitors, and of course, in the process yield immeasurable profit to the already overloaded Gargon coffers. He even manages to recover some of the distance between Gargon and BPOD Tech, by several astute acquisitions which, for me darling, only stamp further indication of Father's ineptitude. I get the sense that the scale of the business is now beyond him. And yet, apart from that brief nod of approval at the board meeting - which was only ever about veneering over his buck stopping guilt for the Prism takeover - Father has never, the cunt, never once acknowledged the extraordinary contribution the boy-turned-man has made to Empire. All the glory instead is shovelled ingloriously upon the least deserving shoulders of our oldest brother Rhodes. The spoilt *Enfant Terrible* of the family. Whose sole contribution to the Prism fiasco, I discovered later, was to smash the window of his office and then hurl out the poor mandarin I'd seen prove man's inability for natural flight.

Marcus is caused great distress by this lack of recognition of his contribution to Gargon's success. However, as I think you now realise darling, his is that dangerous combination of a long memored and vengeful character. I've never had any doubt that he will, at the most decisive moment, and no doubt when Father has long forgotten, exact a calculated revenge. Goodness darling, in spite of my awful meandering we have somehow managed to approach the present day in my narrative: are you still with me, reading this? In fact, as his position has strengthened Marcus makes less than a pretence of listening to Father, and more recently still, little effort to conceal his contempt. But humans are complex beings darling and even until recently some part of him still sought Father's approval, and its absence continued to cut. When it was too much, it was to me that he came. To swamp me with all Father's real and imagined sleights. I suppose I am their surrogate mother at times. "I am going to run Gargon Industries. They might think it's for the power, and I don't deny that I want that. But imagine Gargon headed up by Rhodes: we'd be bankrupted in a decade." He must have recognised the look of flagging interest, for Marcus' voice sharpens, "And then you'd be in deep shit Piers. You'd have to get out there and do a real job." He laughs maliciously, his opinion of me in no doubt. And why should I bother to challenge it? After all, darling, there are far more advantages, under the present circumstances, to remaining under the radar. You know, I've been told I'm a good listener. In his moments even Rhodes has sought to unburden himself, and appeared to find some solace in doing so. Actually darling, apathy can be an asset, if one can make

a fist of a pretence at interest. It's easy not to interrupt with too many questions – since one has no shred of interest in their answer.

Despite his shooting star reputation in business circles, and increasing disdain for others' opinions, Marcus was at this time surprisingly sensitive to his personal standing. Now, in order to tell this story properly I must now go back a few years, darling. Whilst esteem might be rising within the Gargon empire, Marcus will always struggle to blot out a stain on his personal reputation. It is a blemish which Father, when it suits his calculation, had no hesitation in rubbing in his face. You see darling, about fifteen years ago (Marcus then in his early teens) the family used its influence to hush up the rape - and sometimes a little more than that - of some local girls. There was something peculiarly technical about the abuse, which rather disturbed the examining psychiatrists, who told Father, "It almost lacks sexuality, as if he's more interested in them as an experiment on what the human form can endure. Also - and this concerns me more - as a means to map for himself the scope of his urges. There is a powerfully sexual being there, but for some reason he is determined to suppress it. And of course at times he finds himself incapable of doing so." Father showed little interest so she didn't pursue it. I of course had a million questions, and had to literally bite my tongue to stop myself blurting them out. There are dungeons involved in Marcus' sexuality darling. Positive dungeons. Despite his disinterest - more out of spite than anything I believe - Marcus was forced by Father to confront the mirror of himself, enduring countless hours of sessions with a battalion of psychologists. Eventually, Marcus confided to me, they did help him gain some mastery over these previously uncontrollable urges, which had led him at times (I use his own words) "*To the very gates of Hell.*" Eek!

On discovering the nature of his debasements I felt an unfamiliar flush. An expansive, pristine whiteness about myself, hehe. Let me put it this way, darling. Faust, in his depiction of Hell, failed to even partially capture its real depths and flavor. If only he'd had the opportunity to talk to my brothers. After listening to Marcus describe the things he thinks about doing to other human beings and animals (and, startlingly, to himself as well) I can only say that the famous writer's reputation for imagination is overrated. In his representation he barely scuffed the surface. Actually darling, to hear it is bad enough. Were I to put to paper some of what Marcus told me I believe it would sear my brain and I'd never sleep again. Because despite his assertions to the contrary he's no better at all. Suppression - the monk like existence Marcus has adopted - is no solution. Never is, of course. It merely contains, and the volcano must at some instant blow. A serious danger to

anything in a skirt. And things that go quack and bleat for that matter. I pity him for this. Nothing else. But this – yes, wholeheartedly. After all, we have no choice when it comes to our sexual proclivities. It's my belief darling that the male, when he fully allows his sexuality free rein, is completely overtaken by the primitive animal that lies within us all. He is as The Original. Hehe, far too much for genteel society's comfort. And I think most women know it. Are afraid of it. Some shield themselves by emasculating their men. There is, after all, nothing polite in it. And in my view, there should not be. And if ever it has that appearance it's a sham, darling. We would be better as a civilized society to acknowledge that. Though of course the extremes of depravity - such as those displayed by Marcus and Rhodes - we should never condone. Nothing wrong with using your sexual partner. In the right mood darling there's nothing to beat it, hehe. But with them there's no desire to contribute to the other's pleasure, which of course makes it not allright.

Hehe, perhaps when robots become mainstream in human society we will be able to safely explore the extent of man's uncommon urges. No doubt there will be surprised faces, darling. Ha, ha! But in the sheer volume I hope they will see that whatever is presently regarded as taboo and extremis is in fact one of our many norms. And therefore not something to be crushed. Rather something to be understood – as an outlier of behavior, as an illness. Certainly never as a crime. Something to treat if necessary. Manage in a way that lets them live with it. So that all of us can be complete. Can love ourselves. Hmmm, I never thought of this. Having a means to release ourselves without harming a living being, that would be a wonderful outcome of automation. A great leap forward for our little civilisation that so barely understands itself. Because it is so pathetically afraid of what it will find if it lifts up the carpet. We are the greatest unknown. For where are the fearless explorers of the mind? I see no Eriksen, no Marco Polo, no Ibn Battuta. Regarding my own family, I'm convinced we're all sexually deviant, in our own particular ways. One might say that Father has a lot to answer for. Mother? Is it possible? How do such warped urges manifest in a woman? I cannot picture it with her, but I have an open mind. Open everything hehe. But seriously, it's impossible to connect it with her, my dear. Though of course she must have been a sexual being, in her own way. Mm, never thought of that darling: an interesting idea to ponder.

You might ask why the family didn't try the same approach with Rhodes as with Marcus. Of course they did! Complete failure. Dread to think the effect he had on the shrinks, who as we all know are already barking. Well, at least the extended leash approach has worked to a certain degree. Rhodes, for all his faults,

is free. Unhinged yes, but unhindered also. Hehe, really the only answer for him is a kindly lodged bullet. But Marcus would have none of it, instead twisting on the skewer of his shame and guilt. Contorts himself into someone he feels he should be. He is unhappy. And when he breaks from his cell from time to time, as he must, the extreme of his deviant behavior is actually more extensive than Rhodes. Think of all he's done, darling: the scale of it, I mean. Better I think would have been: little by little. And then his predilections might merely have raised eyebrows, not necessitated confinement, as I am now convinced is the only proper remedy for him. Marcus is a very grave danger. Through his position he has the capacity to harm a great number of people. Animals are known to escape their cages. And clever ones can do it without any one realizing. You know it's frightening, darling, when unleashed there's something about him of the unstoppable. As you would be darling. I know that's what you want, and I admire you so for that. However futile it might appear to be, or perhaps it's because of that. And your optimism, I admire that too, darling. Buckets, while I couldn't fill a teaspoon. Hehe, how the mind can wander, darling.

And we come at last to Piers. The third and youngest son. An ineffectual young man with a penchant for ineffectual young men. His role in Gargon Industries is insignificant, and he appears to have little ambition associated with the company or, for that matter, very much else. Oh, darling, I recognize him! I think that sums me up, and the entirety of my contribution to mankind's progress. Or lack of it. Rather neatly actually. I couldn't have put it more succinctly if I'd tried – which obviously I didn't. Try I mean. Survival instincts intact, but little else.

# Chapter 1.03

“Has a tall black man found his way into your bedroom yet?”

Not looking up from her work Vikki grins, immediately recognising the warm and deep – sometimes almost manly - voice. It’s something she looks forward to hearing, as it’s always a signal of the brightening of her day. Behind the functional reception desk at BPOD Tech’s main research facility Vikki quickly finishes what she’s doing then looks up at the small, middle aged woman. Smiling warmly she says, “You know you’ve got a voice like chocolate don’t you, Joan?” The other woman returns the smile, then raises her eyebrows with an expression that says, “Well?”

It’s a standing joke between them. Ever since Vikki once confided to Joan that she’d an enduring fantasy to have a threesome with two black basketball players. Using her hands, she’d gestured, “I want their cocks to be massive, this long at least. When I look at their cocks I want to think, fuck this is going to split me in two! Like, I’m never going to be able to walk the same again.” Vikki’s response gives the answer - dropping her head in mock despondency - and the two of them burst out laughing. It quickly turns into schoolgirl giggles when an officious looking Suit walks past with a *What do you think you’re doing?* expression. With his back to them Vikki flicks a V and sticks her tongue out, causing Joan’s hand to fly to her mouth, and let out a gasp of surprise. Suit spins round but Vikki is already the look of innocence. He scowls at her, then turns sharply on his heels and struts off down the surgically white corridor.

Joan Dark - a patient at BPOD’s Research Facility where the work to develop their artificial body is conducted - is alone. As she usually is. Petite, with grey, expensively styled hair, she is still a very attractive woman. A vivacious, compassionate personality, she’s someone people are quickly and easily drawn to. Her husband, Garry, is a sometimes violent bully. Which I think darling can fairly be judged a cause for two of their three children leading dysfunctional lives. Fulfilling only a fraction of their potential. Garry and Joan met overseas somewhere. She told me where but I forget, more interested as I was in what she went on to say: “I was attracted by his manly confidence, it was so different to the run of effete young men I’d mostly been surrounded by in my youth.” Yes, exactly darling, the sort of men I am attracted to, hehe. “He was brash and direct, and I found that exciting. I was in my early twenties. Bored, unmarried, and incessantly reminded of it by my mother - who’d give me less than subtle hints that the clock was starting to tick loudly.” She smiles, with genuine happiness at the recollection

of their early days, but then a little sadly, “He swept me off my feet, completely, and in defiance of my family we ran off and got married. All very Mills and Boon, you would have loved it Piers. I can picture you in it if we’d known each other then, the conspiratorial Best Man.” Again a look of sadness, a little more fixed this time. “Actually it was quite serious, you see I’d never done anything like that before. At first they were just shocked and shouted at me to come home. But when I refused my mother took it as a betrayal and soon after that they refused to have anything to do with me. My father wrote to me for a while, but after a few years even he stopped.” She looks up, and we gaze into each others eyes. I can look into her eyes by the hour. Have done so. Whatever the circumstances we always find an extent of peace in each other’s company that I rarely find in human beings. Her eyes are the deepest wells, that contain extents of pain that can either drive a person to cruelty and an absence of compassion and empathy. Or the reverse: enabling them to understand others pain as if their own, and though not tolerate evil, at least understand it’s not a choice. That someone is cursed, and that we were fortunate not to be tainted by it, when it might just as easily have been us that was. And we should therefore be supremely grateful, and limitlessly understanding. I wonder what she sees in mine darling? I shudder to think. Or perhaps nothing, hehe.

Her family, conservative, considered Garry to be from the wrong side of the tracks, or is that just my version? Ha, ha! Sometimes, darling, you know I find reality and supposition seem to fuse and it’s very hard to tell them apart. My versions. So boring sometimes, you know, darling: reality. Often I have to really force myself when I’ve need of a concrete grip on it. Anyway, whatever the real story, it turned out not in the way Joan had imagined. The parents were right, and life was not the fairytale Joan imagined it would be. Garry was never an easy man to live with and he became quite unbearable after he lost control of the company he’d founded. Her children, however much she loves them, remain a disappointment and rather a burden. I think it’s because of this, or rather due to the way she copes with adversity, that Joan is now suffering from an incurable cancer, which is what led to her being accepted onto the BPOD programme.

We’ve always been very open with each other, and one of our earliest conversations was quite typical. She told me quite matter of fact, “I thought about suicide lots of times, but then I heard about BPOD’s research and decided I’d nothing to lose. After all, what did it matter when I died? At least it would have a solid purpose, progressing the research a little. Eventually enabling people to live for a very long time. Imagine that!” She smiled then, a huge smile, brimming over

with love. Gripping my arm she looked up at me wide eyed, “That would be something, wouldn’t it darling?” That’s the sort of woman she is. It wasn’t about her at all. “You know Piers, I don’t expect my life to be prolonged, in fact I don’t really have any desire to live. What’s the point when you feel there’s nothing more to be learned?”

“You’re not saying you know everything?” She laughed, shaking her head, and then furrowed her brow in concentration. “Less and less, Piers. No, just that it doesn’t seem as if I’ll learn anything new here, on this planet, in this existence. Circumstances and me, it seems the train will soon come into the station.”

As soon as she sees the Suit definitely gone, Vikki comes from around the reception desk and gives Joan a big bear hug. The two women - one tall enough to be a basketball player herself (“What would I want to do that for? I don’t want to be throwing balls around; I want to be sucking what’s on the end of them!”) - and the much smaller woman, appear an incongruous pair. But over a very short period they’ve become genuine, if unlikely, friends. In fact it was through Joan that I meet Vikki. Though she frightens me, we’re firm friends and I do enjoy listening to the banter of the two women, batted across innuendo’s wide net. This particular game has few losers, given the net has been set rather low, and there’s never malice in it. Joan still manages to surprise me, the lewdness of her remarks, unexpected in one who looks so proper. I like that in people darling - the unexpected.

I first met Joan through BPOD’s research programme. You see, while *Gargon* and *BPOD Technology* may be arch rivals - given they’re the leading contenders for the development of the first artificial body - because of the scale of work involved we’ve been forced by the government to pool aspects of our R&D. There were rumblings in the corridors that neither of us were making progress fast enough, but actually I think they were more concerned about the concentration of power that an exclusive ownership of the technology would guarantee. A carefully managed programme of leaks ensured public opinion was driven in the direction the Government wanted it, which left both organisations with no option but to collaborate. It is my role to act as Gargon’s Liaison Director. I picture my BPOD Tech doppelgänger - whom I’ve never actually met - a twin similarly skulking around Gargon’s research labs. They must exist, and sometimes I feel a little curious: mirror gaze, you know darling.

I enjoy Joan’s confidences. Quite a privilege darling, I can tell you. I’ve watched her with people; you can tell they haven’t a clue what she’s thinking. Such

a *consistently* private person, darling. Though by now she's a resident in the clinic, early on she was an outpatient, and at that time she was having a lot of trouble with her husband. We were out one night at a café with Vikki, who quickly became unsettled and preoccupied when Joan started talking about her husband. "When Garry gets violent I just ring Vikki now, and spend a few nights at her place. It's such a relief, you know - before I had nowhere to go." Despite the lightness in her voice you can see the pain in her eyes. But then, suddenly laughing, her hand in front of her mouth, she goes on, "You know, Garry has only met Vikki once, and he's fucking terrified of her. Though I hate to be disloyal, Garry is such a coward. When I left him the first time, and went to Vikki's, he didn't know her and had no idea where I'd gone. It drove him insane. That was a big shift in the dynamic of things between us. When I went home a few days later I saw that immediately: that it had unnerved him. Mmm. Furtive almost he was."

"That must have been a good thing, darling, you standing up to him."

Joan shakes her head, "Well, no actually, it increased the frequency of the abuse. And more aggressive he was. But Vikki made me strong. Made me see it was the only thing to do. But after that whenever I left he'd follow me." She laughs, and colors a little, "Darling, he was terrible, hardly the super sleuth. And so easy to give the slip. Like a child really. But one day I must have been complacent and he caught me out. That night, two in the morning, and there he was banging on Vikki's front door." She pauses to recall the details of that night, gazing upward, a look of confusion most prominent, though there are also several other strong emotions present too. Then a look of defiance comes into her eyes, and that makes me smile. A little overawed she says, "Vikki told me to call the police, but I didn't want that, so I opened the door. He was drunk, and making all sorts of threats if I didn't come home with him immediately. I said nothing. To be honest I was quite lost for words. This seemed to infuriate him even more. Suddenly his expression changed. Lips drawn back, snarling like an animal he was darling, and then he lunged at me. Instinctively I stepped back and, trying to grab me, he stumbled into the apartment. Vikki was standing in the doorway to the living room. At that point he ignored her. In his fuddled state I think he really only saw me. He grabbed me, and pushed me hard up against the wall. After that everything happened very quickly. Vikki was suddenly down the hall and let fly a kick that caught him clean in the groin. He went down like a felled tree - letting out first a yelp of surprise and then a repetition of low moans." Joan's hand goes up to her mouth, covering a smile. Taking Vikki's hand she continues, "While he was still lying there completely helpless, groaning and holding himself, she

grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and dragged him like a sack out of the apartment. She's on the ground floor, and the entrance to the building is at the end of the corridor so it wasn't far to get him outside. By now he was on his feet but she had his arm up his back and frog marching him down the length of the corridor. Before throwing him out of the main door, where he sprawled, rather helpless looking, on the top step. There she pulled him to his feet and, still without a word, threw him down onto the sidewalk. I thought that would be the end of it, but he must have been in such a rage that he jumped to his feet and ran up the steps, hollering all sorts of abuse at Vikki."

She glances momentarily across at Vikki with something like veneration. "She waited until the last moment, when he was almost on her, before smashing the door in his face. She must have caught him one because he screamed in agony. After a minute he was cursing her again. You can imagine darling, and by then there were quite a crowd in the corridor, nosing to see what all the noise was about." Joan glances momentarily at Vikki, "You told them it was over and to go inside. I thought he'd have had enough by then but no, he was still not finished. Really darling he must have been half out of his mind. Screaming and banging on the main door. Vikki, who'd waited just the other side of it, didn't hesitate. She whipped open the door and let fly with a punch which must have found its mark because there was instant silence, and then the sound of someone tumbling down the steps. Next thing there was a roar of an engine and Garry's car speeding off."

The look of wonderment again from Joan. But Vikki's expression is set – tight, lips a thin line, looking away. Joan, laughing ruefully, doesn't seem to notice, "I remember letting out a deep sigh, and then looking around, and it was only then I noticed there were a few disapproving looks. But mostly it was cheers of, *Good on you, girl*, and so on. So proud of you I was darling. Walking back up the corridor, your face grim. As you came up to me you took my arm and it was only then I saw your hands shaking. It must have been horrible for you darling. I tried to say something but no words would come out. And as soon as we were inside and the door shut of course we both burst into tears." I notice a sparkle in Joan's eyes as she concludes. "Piers, really I've never been in a situation like that before in my life."

I ask her, "Did he ever follow you after that?" Joan glances at Vikki and sniggers, "No, I don't think so! Lots of name calling, but though I was quite openly telling him where I was going, no he never came round to Vikki's again. Actually, apart from when he gets very drunk, which is rare, he's never abusive now." It's still quite early in the evening at the café, and it's about a month after Garry had

gone round to Vikki's apartment. Joan looks at Vikki, but she still seems unwilling to catch her eye. "Actually he hardly touches me these days. Gosh, I know he shouldn't do it at all, but with the business he's been so unlucky, it's almost as if we're jinxed, and he worked so hard to make it a success. I don't understand half of it. And I should you know - we're a team after all. Through thick and thin. It's got to be something quite major for him to get violent these days, they're much less frequent now."

*How fucking decent of him!* I thought. I notice Vikki had stiffened at that, and she's about to say something, but stops herself. She looks angry, and sad, at the same time. Joan sees it, and tries to explain, but I get the feeling she's only digging a deeper hole. "But at least now there's no tears or pleading from me like before. If his tantrums start, I'll just turn on my heels, and walk out of the house. Not a backward glance, and not a word said." She looks to Vikki for some kind of approval, "And, you know what, he's actually nice to me sometimes." She sounds so pleased, as at an unexpected but pleasant surprise. She still doesn't understand why Vikki - usually so rocklike - at that moment starts to cry, then rants loud and long enough that everyone turns to stare, before storming out of the cafe.

I understand. Though she is in most things a very wise woman, with this she's a blind spot, and bastards like Garry can sniff it out. Apparently since Vikki saw him off, Garry spends a lot of time crying. Which is what I always suspected of them, darling - a child. Not a man, despite the physical appearances. Though I may not be one, and no one would dispute that I think darling, this I have learned: to be a man takes something quite distinct. A Rubicon must be crossed. It's what draws me to you all. I can see the attraction, the skin deep beauty of women, but a man is something quite apart. For a boy to become a man he must first be broken, in some traditions they call it on the sacred manhood stone. But whatever name you give it, darling, the meaning is stark, nothing less than staring death in the face and not flinching from it. Until then they remain, psychologically, a child - like Garry. And if they never confront they die as a child, as I'm sure Garry will. It sets you all apart. There's something godlike and immortal in a man who's made a pact with death. Why I love you, darling. I know a lion when I see one. With Garry, like so many modern men, it's too late. After all, who is there to hold his hand and guide him along the manhood path? By who, I mean, which man? For this is secret men's business. Only another man can conduct the initiation. Few men have the wisdom, courage and determination to take the path alone, though I have personally known a man that did. They are rare men, they run on an altogether different plane.

Still at the café, a little while after Vikki has left, Joan tells me about the first time Garry cried. "I didn't know what to do. This was not the person I thought I knew. But after all I'd promised Vikki, I wouldn't back down. As I walked away down the hall, I heard Garry running up behind me. I couldn't believe myself but I just said, barely missing a beat, "Touch me and I'll tell Vikki." After that, the only sound was his heavy breathing and then it was like listening to a child as he started swearing at me. You know, Piers, some of the language he used I'd never heard in my life before. Though the meaning was obvious. But I didn't take any notice – never looking back, I kept walking." She giggles and puts her hand to her mouth, "Mind you, my legs were wobbling so much I could hardly move. The front door seemed to stretch further away but eventually I was through it and outside into the sunlight. I let out a huge sigh: the whole time I suppose I'd been holding my breath, expecting something to happen. That was a big day for me: I grew, and he shrank before my eyes. It was almost something physical actually Piers." The sparkle in her eye is there again, and I wish Vikki had been there to see that. But then her head drops and a pained expression flits across her face and she looks perplexed. "Of course Vikki's right. I really don't understand my behavior. Staying, and allowing beating me to become a norm."

A few days after our night out at the café a new phase of the BPOD project commences so things between her and Garry go on hold. It's necessary for Joan to spend most of her time at the clinic - what with the endless tests and preparations for a transplant of her brain into a robotic body. Between Garry and her nothing tacit is ever said, but there's now a space between them, a shred of light visible where once they were joined. Always a good thing darling, but it upset Joan the way things were left unfinished, in a kind of limbo. "It seemed like we might have found some peace - it felt we were heading in that direction." I have my doubts. Leopard / spots - you know the go darling.

Vikki holds Joan at arms length. With an expression of deep concern on her face she tells her, "Just sit here love, I'll make you something hot and then get someone to take you through to one of the doctors." Over the past weeks Joan has had several bad scares with her condition suddenly deteriorating. Though she always recovers, overall there's been a steady decline in her condition. She's due for another examination this morning. Vikki is worried, as we all are, that Joan will become too sick to be allowed to continue on the programme. Just then some visitors arrive at the clinic, and while Vikki's dealing with them we take a seat and Joan continues on from something we'd been talking about just before we came

in, "You know, I've been here two weeks now, and every day I'm even more sure I'm doing the right thing, however much my family try to persuade me to stop. In fact my conviction has got stronger since meeting the other patients here." Joan looks a little puzzled as she continues, "We understand each other immediately. But with Garry and the children it's as if we're talking two different languages. They refuse point blank to accept what I'm doing. Why is it so hard to understand that I want to look beyond myself and help other people? I can't believe they've never had the feeling of joy and peace which I've only ever felt when caring about someone else and forgetting about myself." She laughs, "There's nothing like it: I find it too addictive to resist."

Pausing, looking inward for a moment, she then concludes, "Coming back to your question though - no, I don't expect to be saved. But it wasn't why I signed up. You believe me when I say that, don't you?" From her appealing expression it seems important to her that I do, though why so much so I wasn't sure. Apart from having survived much longer than the other volunteer participants in the BPOD programme, Joan is also unusual in this regard. All the others I've spoken to - young or old, however unlikely it might be - they've all hoped to be The One. All hope to be the first surviving recipient of a robotic body. The doctors try to make them realise how remote the chances of that are. Elana Umani, one of the project directors, a very blunt woman darling, puts it like this to every new patient: "From testing, only some of you will be selected for a BPOD trial. Even if you get through to the next stage, there are still many flaws in the BPOD prototype, so you should assume you will not survive. Eventually one of you will. And then others will follow. But that first one, yes you will be the first human being to experience immortality. Those not selected, and for those that do not survive the operation you are heroes. We can never express enough our gratitude for your courage and sacrifice." Darling the reality is that stark - they are mere stepping stones. But there is that faintest chance. And with death pressing so close... who wouldn't gamble their life for the possibility of being that First? But there is something else. The thing is, darling, it's a poisoned chalice they all drink from. If they are the one selected for a transplant, whether they survive or not, they were at least given that sniff of the boodle. But by being chosen, they've taken the place of all the other patients in their cohort that weren't. For each transplant attempt there's nine equally deserving guaranteed to be dead from whatever terminal illness they're suffering. Some of the patients find it easier to discuss this Lottery openly. The majority prefer to carry it as a private, guilty burden. Desperate to be saved,

but shamefully aware of the implications of that desire. And yet of course they still wish it. Fuck everyone else: pretty much it, isn't it darling?

I find in fact that it's the children that are the most accepting of their card. So terribly sick, and though terrified of the imminence of their death, they are so very firmly planted in the present. You know, darling, even their dreams are of the now. I have that sense, on the rare occasions I've plucked up the courage to visit their ward: life is This Minute. After all, they have little past to recall, and the future is a word with no meaning for them. My dear, I wish I had greater courage: I've learned more in the few hours I've spent with them than at any other time in my life. Such an intense experience darling - one feels at one's most alive. Is that so strange? You would not believe the joy and love I find there amongst those small, brave beings. A little Utopia darling. However fucked that might sound, yes, so much love, and absence of ego. I come away so invigorated. *Believing in us*. The only time I ever do, I must confess. Then, of course, someone will trample on all that goodness, and I'm back in cynical detachment, and an overwhelming distaste for all humanity.

# Chapter 1.04

Having to attend another meeting, I'm forced to leave Joan at the reception still waiting to see the doctor. So it's several hours before I'm able to make my escape from the crushing, pointless fucking boredom of that - was there ever a meeting that wasn't? - and go in search of her. In search of some love and sanity. Wanting to hear her news. Good I hope - but expecting bad. One of the nurses tells me she's in the children's ward. After steeling myself (a few shots of something very strong and trippy), I make my way up to the top floor of the hospital. The uninterrupted outlook is one of the best in the city, but does nothing except remind me that it's this that will be the last sight many will have of this world. And so of course I hate it. Many of them ask to be taken to the rooftop garden when they feel the end approaching. Seeing one of them up there - knowing, you know - I flee: have to. God, I shudder to imagine the embarrassment I would cause myself. Yes, darling, I know I should, but there are situations when the truth is too much. When it's so clear cut, and there's no opportunity for me to paint roses around the edges of the picture.

I pass along the brightly painted ward, covered with rainbows and scenes from fairy stories. Even the floors are painted, with those funny murals that make you think you're going to fall into a pit or something. The first time I was talking to someone and didn't notice it until the last second. I nearly shit myself, darling! Made a complete prat of myself. And my shriek and lunge back as I grabbed onto someone's arm - it had the kids falling about. I was quite the hit after that darling, I can tell you. Of course, I do rather ham it up when I go in there now, since they do seem to find it still rather funny. Not in a horrible way darling, really: laughing with, not at. But as always, one has to pass the beds. Which you can be almost guaranteed will be surrounded by distraught parents, frantically hugging their child, so hard as if love alone could cure them. Crying at the slightest thing. Hands wrung; eyes deep black holes after so many guilty sleepless nights. Guilty of what? I never understood, but darling it's written plainly across their faces, with a big black marker. Their siblings look more stoic: it might after all have been them. These parents will sit there for endless hours, day through night and round again. A picture of exhaustion. On the ward there's always the sense that every single minute is precious. Of an inexorable countdown. It's something palpable darling, which is echoed by that awful, fucking clock above the entrance. Darling, it sounds so hard; so thoughtless. Every time I go in there I want to rip the damn thing off the wall. Hehe, I did once. The nurses made an awful fuss, though I believe one or

two understood. As I'm walking between the beds I try to close my ears, but I hear it all the same, and it's always identical. One parent trying ineffectually (poor dears, what do they know of death?) to provide comfort, while another tries to give an explanation (when of course, darling, there is none). Attempting vainly to simultaneously contend with their own inner turmoil, whilst at the same time trying to support their distraught partner. Darling so many times the dying child, in the eye of the storm, is the most collected of them all.

Voluntary euthanasia is offered to both adult patients and to the children - for those who have seen, heard, or felt, enough. They say that in life we're driven by the constant chasing after the tail of immortality, and that only by abandoning self and putting others before us can we avoid being skewered by the impossible torment of its want. But this close to death, as I look at these children, I see only acceptance and a desire for understanding. Immortality is the last thing on their minds. Actually, while the Out of suicide was taken up frequently in the past, it rarely is now. Because of course now most of the adults are True Believers (if not actually believing) in the possibility of their survival. Knowing the breakthrough is imminent: the *almost* certainty that one of them will be it. Consequently the atmosphere, where surprisingly it never was before, has become tense over the last few weeks. Still, for many the bony hand hovers very close over them. To be frank darling, many of them are hopeless cases: look like they had that unwelcome tap on the shoulder some time ago.

Unfortunately, as I'd anticipated and dreaded (yes daring, Pathetic does rather sum me up I know) Joan is with one of two young girls she's become particularly attached to. She doesn't see me and I indicate to Celia not to say anything. I lean against the wall and listen, feeling as ever Wall Fly. It's a comfortable, familiar feeling - hardly surprising given my entire presence at The Firm has been in that costume. "Don't worry darling, it won't hurt." Joan knows there's no point lying to Celia. It would seem a betrayal of trust, or just plain patronising. This isn't a young child, however she might appear: she cannot be defined by her age. This is a girl who's held, and then dropped, death's hand so many times we've all lost count. I try to imagine what she's thinking and feeling but really it's not something you can without going through it yourself. You've been there, and if I join you then I will know. Til then, we are separated by that experience. Joan lies on the young girl's bed - propped up, holding the small child easily in her arms. So fragile looking darling, like a puff of wind would knock her over. Not far from the witching hour now, they're alone together since Celia's

parents have been unable to reach the clinic in time. As she draws the child to her, so Joan notices me and smiles, an unhurried expression that warms me.

Joan first met the two girls only a few days ago but they struck up a bond very quickly. Celia's accepted that her death's imminent, but she - with her life's remain now counted in a few handfuls of minutes - has just admitted to Joan that she still doesn't really know what death means. Her parents are devout Christians and their explanations of heaven and life ever after has been far too esoteric for Celia to grasp any help from. To Joan she confides that their explanations are at best, "a nice fairy story but if I take it as fact, like they want me to, well it just sounds like a complete load of rubbish." She looks quickly up at Joan with big brown eyes, "Though of course I didn't say that to them." The look in her eyes, such an effusion of love and concern, makes my heart lurch: it takes everything not to burst out in tears. "They've been through so much, I didn't want to hurt their feelings, so I didn't say anything, and they didn't seem to mind. Should I have lied?" Joan, smiles down at her, and squeezes her hand, "No lies here darling. In the end they only hurt. Silence isn't lying, we're just not adding to the confusion."

Joan told me a few days ago, "I have no strong religious beliefs myself, but yes, I've thought about death a lot as this illness has advanced." And, as she's holding Celia, she elaborates her feelings, "Darling, just think of it like a journey. Do you remember you told me you went on holiday with your grandma once, when your parents had to stay behind for work?" The child nods and smiles, recalling both the holiday and her cranky old grandma with fondness. "Well think of it like that, but this time everyone you know will be staying behind. You'll be making this journey on your own. After all, you're getting older now, darling, and we all have to start doing things on our own." Of course by now, darling, I can barely see. And I notice a steady stream of tears splashing on the little girl's face as she lies tucked in the crook of Joan's arm, her head on Joan's chest. "Do you remember what fun you had, even though you missed your parents? Well, no one really knows what happens after you die. Everyone always thinks the worst but no one knows. Wouldn't you feel such a ninny if it's really a wonderful place to be? Not worth all that fear and sadness at all! Though you can spare a thought for me missing you whilst you're having fun, because, of course, I'll be thinking of you every day."

Celia appears a little comforted, but then, lips pursing for a moment, she admits, "I'm still scared. And, sad. Really sad. I don't want to never see my mum and dad again. And my toys, and my brother." Joan smiles at the mention of the toys and the afterthought of her brother, but then looks troubled, "Sorry my

darling, I didn't mean to pretend it's going to be easy. None of us want it, but I know you're brave. Actually, I'm quite sure you're the very bravest person I've ever met. I really mean it. You know I've never made anything up with you, have I? And, my dear, this is when it will really count." She smiles down at Celia, "You're certainly much braver than me. Though I'm sure I'll get through it, with a few wobbles on the way. And there's nothing wrong with that. Just got to hop up and keep going. And maybe you can come back and tell me all about it. Do you promise to do that if you can?"

A puzzled expression appears on Celia's small face. The dark brown eyes have turned almost black, which they do whenever she's thinking something deep. She captures you with her eyes: draws you in and it's an easy thing to sink into the calm emptiness within her. It's clear the possibility Joan has described is something she's never considered before, and is giving it serious consideration. As she does so, her small hand runs distractedly over Joan's face, tracing outlines. Wiping away the tears - a few times already I've had to turn away, and clamp my hand over my mouth. I don't want to intrude, but I can't leave. This is something big, a life lesson, and you know when you hit one. However much I want to leave (god how darling!) my feet are rooted to the spot. Actually, seeing things through their eyes for a moment - so close to death as Celia is - something coming after doesn't seem so outside the realms of possibility. Who the hell are we to say what does or doesn't happen after we die? The super optimists? That believe in heaven. Or the pessimists - that deny being so, instead claiming (in censorious voice) to simply being a rationalist. And that OF COURSE we just become food for bugs and plants. Couldn't it be something in between? Or just as possibly something completely different that no one's ever thought of? Darling, please laugh your loudest at anyone that's categorical about it. I always do. It's the only rational rejoinder to those buffoons.

You know darling, I've always had an inkling the Buddhists have come closest. Which bloody stands to reason when you think about it. Since some of their brightest have spent an awful lot of time contemplating it, in a state of as close to death as we can be while still breathing. You know what I mean darling? I have my own idea how it might be. You see darling - and I know you might not believe this, but it is GOSPEL - I've experienced my consciousness expanding outside my head. Becoming an all pervading existence, intermingled with every other existence. We are all just a sentience, as an energy. Perhaps that's existence outside this one? That we're present everywhere and so can see anywhere in the

Universe; can communicate with anyone living or gone. Yes, everywhere but present where our being wishes to focus its attention.

Almost formally, as if making a pact, Celia takes in her two small hands one of Joan's. Though whispering, in the late night / early morning darkness, her voice carries easily. "I could I suppose. I don't want to go but I have to, don't I?" Joan and Celia are both now softly crying. Can tears drain the sadness, darling? So there's only the memories of happiness left to contemplate? Blubbing continuously now I have to stuff my fist in my mouth to prevent myself from making a sound. I'd have to leave if I did. I've been given a rare privilege to observe this, but I mustn't allow my presence to be injected. Joan kisses the little girl on the forehead, "Yes darling. A bit like going to school. And everybody here has to die very soon, just like you, and your friend Georgia here."

The other little girl is fast asleep at the end of Celia's bed. I leave – couldn't take any more darling. Joan tells me later what happened. Darling I'm glad I wasn't there. It sounded so sad, and so fucking beautiful and perfect. I'd have only fucked it up by balling my spoilt brat eyes out. Georgia, Celia's best friend on the ward, wakes up as I'm leaving and worms her way up the bed. With Celia still snuggled back against Joan, Georgia faces her and holds her hands while looking into her small round face, which is peering back at her with those black, black penetrating eyes. The nurses are now hovering around but there's nothing anyone can do. The sickness is taking its final hold, and Celia's face is drawn and her lips dry and cracked, and the fear in her eyes is a little stronger now. As Celia begins to slip away the three of them, firm and trusting friends, continue their reminiscences of the brief times they've spent together, laughing at some of the silly things one or other of them had done. And they remind Celia how much she's loved, especially by her parents and family. Joan asks Celia about the best things that have ever happened to her, and she says that some of them have been with Joan and Georgia. They assure her how they won't leave her, even when Celia can't feel them or see them anymore. Promising to tell everyone how much she loves them, and won't forget them. How they'll never, ever forget her.

Joan then reads them a story which had quickly become their favorite. Joan smiles trying to remember how many times in these few short weeks that the two girls have sat cuddling her as she'd read it to them. She's lost count. As they always do, she's barely read more than a few pages before Georgia has fallen asleep. Joan puts her to bed and then goes back to Celia's. As she lies in her arms, Joan tightens her grip on Celia's cooling hand, and makes no effort to wipe the tears from her face. She looks intently at Celia's face, with no purpose than to

reflect upon her short life. She lets each thought come and go - good, bad. Not trying to hold on to anything. She's still sitting up on Celia's bed like this in the morning when the doctors make their first rounds. They put her to bed and only call her later when Celia's parents ask to speak to her, to relive the last moments of their daughter's life.

# Chapter 1.05

For Joan herself the worrying signs of the cancer taking a stronger hold continue. Over the following days death claims all those already there when Joan first came to the clinic. Either their illness gets them. Or for those lucky few selected for a transplant, though they might survive a short time they too die. In fact, one or two have hung on for more than a week before dying, stirring a spurt of hope that the breakthrough has finally come. And there is good news. While every transplant has failed, as a result of these trials the research team have found solutions to every cause of failure, until there remains only one or two minor hurdles to clear.

Through the months she's been involved with the research Joan's emotions have swung wildly from despair to euphoric hope. She'd confided to me, "Darling, sometimes it's beyond endurance; I can't imagine what it's like for people that think they're going to survive." From time to time one of the doctors sits with her. She only ever has one question for them: "What's left to be done? When can we stop seeing these children die, doctor?" The answer is always the same. A practiced hand will take hers and in a voice full of professional concern, they'll tell her, "We're very close, Joan. Imagine it, a world in which almost all disease is eradicated. A few more weeks, days perhaps. Hang in there Joan, it could even be you." At this they smile expectantly, not understanding her motives at all, since for some time now she's stopped trying to explain. For Joan, their answer is no answer at all.

The day after Celia's death Joan is joined at a café set in the expansive, park like grounds of the BPOD Research Centre by one of the clinic's doctors. He looks very concerned. George Furnell is middle aged, with a rotund, jolly face. Unlike most of the doctors there he's not after fame. In fact he has no personal ambition at all. And, whilst some of the other research doctors might treat the patients like so many guinea pigs, or worse like living cadavers, his only concern is for their welfare. A passionate but wholly professional interest in their well being and comfort. In fact throughout his long, though it has to be said rather checkered career, that's all he's ever sought. Because he's driven by a vision of his brother's slow and excruciating death from a debilitating muscle wasting disease. Joan Dark is the only exception George Furnell has ever allowed himself.

You see, darling, Doctor George Furnell has fallen head over in love with Joan. And on this stage, littered as it is with the corpses of so many impossible

dreams, the futility of his love towers majestically above them all. Whilst others might be struck as statues by the gaping chasm of its hopelessness he, like some cartoon hero, skates over all the pitfalls. He achieves the impossible feat by the simple expedient of ignoring their existence. Though barely an arm's length from her, he bellows, "And what of death! We will soon be the gods of our future, and you Joan Dark will be our first Queen!" The man is incapable of dropping his voice below the decibels of a sergeant major's parade ground roar. A few moments before he had his love at Joan's feet like a damp, panting dog. And this had been his bellowed response to her tentatively reminding him of the terribly precarious condition of her health. When I catch up with her later she's still blushes at the recollection, "Piers, I wanted the ground to open and swallow me up whole. The café was bursting and you could hardly hear yourself talk, but the whole place went instantly silent and all eyes swiveled onto us." But still she can't help a smile and twinkle in her eye as she tells me the story, "George of course was oblivious." I can easily picture that. For George Furnell, life is a battleground; a constant round of conflict. And he would have it no other way. His body, though rotund, is compact and solid: a pugilist's. Believe me darling, I wouldn't want to step in the ring with him. But then again, strap a pair of boxing gloves on me and it wouldn't matter who you put me in with, I'd have wet my pants before the first bell sounded.

She describes him waking her up that morning. "George stomps into my room at the clinic, quite out of the blue. I was still half asleep, looking outside, thinking what a beautiful day it was going to be. One looking particularly full of life, which I was pleased about. The clouds were skitting across the sky under sail of a strong breeze. Birds like little jets, soaring and swooping at breakneck speed across the panorama of the window. Just outside, perched on the sill, I notice two of them huddled together, their feathers ruffled by the strong wind. Studying them a little closer, I notice one is younger, still sprouting tufts of down. I thought of Celia." So preoccupied is she with her thoughts, which always turn to the children when she's specially conscious of life and living things, that George's coming in makes her jump, and she gives a little *Oh!* when he plonks himself down in a chair by her bed. A look of conspiratorial glee on his face, he blurts out without any preamble, "Joan, you're going to be the first!"

Without needing an explanation she immediately knows what he means. But instead of the reaction he'd expected, her expression instantly turns to one of extreme anger. She leaps out of her bed and at first George's eyes gleam, as he gets a good look at the lower part of her body. Uncaring of her nudity, in fact

oblivious to it, when he gets to his feet she pushes him hard in the chest, at the same time shouting, “No! No! I never asked for that! You have no right, no right to do that!” Her reaction is so unexpected George falls heavily back in his chair, almost tipping it over backwards. She stands over him glowering, he with the hang dog expression of a bulldog that knows it’s done wrong: eyes looking up hopefully, but finding no reprieve. He looks down, crestfallen when, her voice rising and at the same time wagging an admonishing finger in his face, she orders him, “You go right back out there. And I mean right now!” He nods obediently, jowls quivering, “And you tell them that I want to be treated no different to anyone else.” She pauses for a moment, several thoughts flashing through her mind, “Is this why I haven’t been given a transplant yet? You’ve been holding me back, knowing others would die...”

George tries to interrupt, “None of us really know what’s going to happen, not 100%, if anyone will or not...”

Joan slaps him hard across the face. The sharp crack bounces off the walls in the room’s close confines, which brings her up for a moment. But she’s determined not to let this go, “Don’t bullshit me, George Furnell.” Neither of them speak for a moment, then, softening a little, she continues, “How many times do I have to tell you, I’m not doing this for me. I never expected, nor particularly want, to survive this project. Do you still not get that?” She stops then, and stares at him intently, and a look of comprehension spreads. Her shoulders slump a little, and she puts a hand on George’s arm. Even more the bulldog, you could almost imagine the tail wagging darling, as he grunts and smiles up at her. But then Joan’s expression hardens, and the finger comes out, “George, this is incredibly selfish of you. I didn’t think you were capable of such things. You always told me the patient comes first.” Her voice rises, catching, “And I believed you!” George had had a briefcase full of ready answers. But is entirely felled by Joan’s response, as it goes straight to the heart of everything he stands for. For a second he sits there, mouth hanging open.

Hand concealing a grin, Joan tells me, “Darling, he’s always so comical. But he looked so earnest - you could see in his eyes the dilemma he was wrestling with. It was impressive, and one had to take him seriously. I put my hand on his shoulder, which broke the spell. Plonking down in the chair, shaking his head, with a look of shock, George confessed, *“Really, I didn’t see it as a betrayal. I’m very sorry, of course you’re right.”* His expression is now one of heavy guilt. His hands fall heavily into his lap. His head droops and he mumbles something I don’t catch. I lean over him, and kiss him on the top of his bald head. Ask him what he’d said.

Suddenly he lunges forward and buries his face in my stomach. At first I thought perhaps he'd finally tripped over the edge. I was about to call for help – I'd been warned so many times by the nurses about George's reputation with women. But then he starts to sob into me."

Joan drops to her knees, lifts up his chin, and as if to a child, says, "What is it?" Great tears well in his eyes that make a loud splat as they land on his white coat. It takes a few moments for him to collect himself, and then he tells her, "I forgot about my brother, didn't I? I can't believe I let myself forget about him. We promised!" Joan strokes his head; the bulldog in him relaxes. She consoles him, "It's alright, George. He'll never be forgotten. I know him too now, and I've told people about him. He lives George. You never need to worry about that, dear." When he looks up, though his eyes remain two great pools, he looks a little relieved. Joan then takes him by the arm and gently pulls him to his feet. The short, thickset bear of a man then allows her to lead him to the door. Joan kisses him lightly on the cheek. Unable to speak he just nods dumbly. "We'll meet for lunch, at the café," she tells him, and a look of relief floods his face.

Joan gets to the café first and has already ordered a drink when he arrives, rushing as always, red faced and panting, "looking still so much the English Bulldog. You know Piers, whenever I think of him it's as that!" She covers her mouth and giggles. I say something and she slaps my arm, "Don't! It's terrible, I shouldn't." Immediately she notices George's expression, sheepish and a little guilty, and Joan, suspicious, asks him quickly, "You did tell them didn't you? Remember, you promised me you would."

George allows himself a half smile as he spreads his hands, though, on seeing her expression, his smile loses some of its assurance. He tells her, "Well, Joan dear, it's rather out of our hands now. Let me explain." Delicately (it seemed impossible, for one so ungainly) George takes Joan's small hand in his plump and thick fingered mitt. "You see, with the most recent prototype, parts of the body can now function indefinitely. Some of the patients' families have allowed us to keep their brains or other body parts alive so we can fine tune components not functioning quite as they should. Others, understandably, couldn't bear the thought of seeing their loved one's head or body moving and appearing to function normally, but in the knowledge that their brains were irreparably damaged as a result of a failed transplant."

Joan murmurs softly, "I'm sure I would feel the same if it was someone I loved." But then her voice hardens, "But what has this to do with this morning?" Darling, can't you just imagine the moon eyes at this point? I think it goes without

saying that George is not the best at hiding his feeling but, despite his bovine manner, one has to be moved (yes even I the cynic) by the purity of his devotion. Joan too will chuckle, and sometimes be a little embarrassed when he's too obvious. Subtlety is not his strong suit. But it's easy to see, and sometimes she'll openly acknowledge it - Joan likes being loved by George Furnell.

George goes on doggedly, his thin confidence having now completely evaporated, "Look, I know my feelings and opinions don't count for much around here, and I'm seen as something of a joke by the younger members of the research team." His mouth hardens, "Who cares, they'll have to learn the hard way that if you don't respect your patients then nothing we do matters in the slightest. Our most glorious achievements, whatever they are, will count for nothing.... Anyway, it's like this, Joan...." He pauses, squeezes her hand, and gives a kind of harrumph, "You're actually next on the list. This is all - I promise you - none of my doing. It's just how things turned out. There's a final component, well not even that... It's to do with the nervous system, but quite a minor part of one component. The engineering team are confident of cracking it within days, and then..." George's eyes widen, as if he can't quite believe what he's saying, "Well, with that, they're confident they'll have a fully functioning artificial body, and you know what that means."

George gives a boyish grin, the years falling off his face. But then his expression hardens, "Of course all Rod Chen can talk about is how he's going to break it to the media to maximise his fucking glory." His eyes narrow at the thought of the Project Director. On seeing him tense Joan squeezes his hand and this has an immediate effect. His body momentarily tensed, he relaxes back his chair, and his voice loses its harsh edge. He shakes his head, "Always jumping the gun. Thinking he'll always be a step ahead: smart yes, but not as smart as he thinks." George growls over his coffee, "How many lives have been tossed aside at the expense of that fool's impatience. He thinks because they're going to die anyway that it doesn't matter." To no one in particular, George booms out, "Everyone matters! They might not be important, but all our patients matter. Most of them, their little finger's worth more than these jumped up mechanics that strut around thinking they're playing some kind of game with god!" George is well known in the clinic. So after causing a few people to jump at his outburst, and others to laugh wryly, people soon go back to their conversations. George leans forward. He takes Joan's hands in his. Wearing a conspiratorial expression, he does his best at a whisper - a rasping, grating sound: "So you see, Joan, quite legitimately you will be the first." He squeezes her hands, "If only you can hang on

for a few more days. If not for yourself, then at least for the people that care about you, and love you. People you might not even be aware of.”

You see, darling, since Celia’s death Joan’s condition has taken another turn for the worse - her cell count dropping, and with that an increase in secondary infections. So it really is touch and go with her. George is aware, more than anyone, how thin the thread is by which her life now hangs. “A week at the most, and then you’ll be in the clear. Do it, please, for me? Let me believe in miracles,” he pleads. That’s what he said darling, word for word, I promise. But, ah, you’d have to know the man, darling, to really appreciate the moment. Joan smiles at George, gazing into the troubled eyes focused so intently on hers. “I always sense people’s love, George. It’s not about doing, you just feel it. Or get some signal you’re barely aware of. But somehow you always know. And I do know how fortunate I am to be loved by good and kind people. By you, and others.” Joan twists her hands free and takes one of his in hers. She’s about to say something else when they’re interrupted by a call from one of the nurses, “George! You’re needed in emergency!” The loud, insistent voice, demanding attention, breaks the moment of intense intimacy. The two look at each other, a fond understanding passing between them. It was then he’d made his declaration of love in front of the whole café, before leaning forward and kissing Joan gently on the lips. With everyone in the café still cheering he then got up and, without making any attempt to hurry, waddled off, so much the bulldog at that moment. Meanwhile, Joan leant back against the wall, calculating impossible possibilities. Of all the wide range of outcomes, this is one she’d never for a moment considered. A gentle smile lingers on her lips: George always leaves her feeling uplifted and a little cavalier.

# Chapter 1.06

I remember those few months for so many different reasons - some good, but mostly fucking awful: sorry darling. But then again, doesn't that probably sum up the general drift of my rather despondently mediocre life? Darling I must stop being black, but you did ask me to fill in the blanks, and doing so stirs up so many feelings I wish I could erase. But then I'd be dead wouldn't I, if that were the case?

At the start of this period Rod Chen - the BPOD Tech. Research Director - and I were merely business acquaintances. But with the BPOD project nearing its conclusion he began to confide in me more and more. Did he have anyone else to talk to? You'd think he would but if so, why bother with me? I mean, he's straight. Handsome, debonair, I won't go on, but of course I had so many reasons to want to be close to him. Or at least, within his orbit. Yes, let's get it out in the open - I was and for that matter still am in love with the man. So you'll understand it was quite a surprise the first time he rang me and asked if we could meet to discuss a personal matter. It was before 10am: in other words the crack of fucking dawn. My God, I'd forgotten what that time of day even looked like. But of course as soon as I heard his voice I was wide awake. "Piers, I had to talk to someone, and I thought of you. I hope you don't mind. If you're busy let me know and I'll get out of your hair." How delicious is innuendo, even more so when the person saying it doesn't realize the effect they're having. I had to bite my tongue.... very hard....

"No fine, how can I help you Rod?" Desperately trying to sound casual and businesslike, but feeling quite the opposite.

"You'll have to indulge me here a little. It's a bit of a secret." Now why did he feel he could do that? In my position it was of course impossible to be candid about my feelings for him. But had he somehow guessed? At this moment, in a half haze, I'm imagining him lying there alone on his bed or the sofa. No, the bed: better. Just in shorts - white, contrasting nicely with his natural tan. On his narrow bed - a single man's bed, in a single man's apartment. With Rod there was, never would be, any room for a partner. I think I always realized the impossibility of my devotion, which in some way made it more pure, knowing nothing could ever happen. Though if it did .... Mmm, a rather delicious daydream starts to form itself, but I struggle to give it clarity. Rolling over, still half asleep I look out over the skyline. A low haze clouding the horizon; dull red, the sun just rising through it. Another perfect day in this, the most perfect of cities. But for me it holds no particular allure, nothing to stir me to activity: I am a reactive amoeba at this time of day, darling. I know it'll sound ridiculous but I half hoped for some sign. What,

God's fucking approval, hehe? A thunderous storm perhaps, full of lightening and deafening thunder. Instead just another fucking beautiful day on the coast so golden they named it that. I force myself, and I am rewarded: an image of Rod, smiling, naked and hard, standing over me.... Damn it, now he's talking and he has that serious voice on. The erotic image disappears like a smoke wisp. Forced to stop entertaining myself, I ask him to repeat what he'd said.

His voice insistent, he asks me, "What's the significance of what we're doing, Piers? Not just on a medical level, I mean on a really big scale: you know, future of mankind stuff. We are truly on the brink of the biggest medical breakthrough in history. In fact the biggest evolutionary change of all time. And we, you and me, are at the centre of it. What does that mean? We're talking about the eradication of death, as if it were now merely a disease. Is this how far we've come? As a species."

"?"

I at the centre of things? That would be a fucking first darling. And I didn't even realise, hehe. Let me back up briefly. Oh dear, there I go again, sometimes darling I feel simply incapable of not being disgraceful. Rod and I first met through my role as Gargon's Liaison Director. He's a genius. A brilliant scientist that, within a few months of joining BPOD, had climbed over or around walls previously unscalable. Problems which had limited development for decades were suddenly being resolved in a matter of weeks. Before his arrival Father, overly optimistic, would regularly make claim that BPOD Tech. was on its last legs. Rubbing his hands together, Scrooge like, since this of course would give Gargon a chance on the final straight to run in and collect the spoils. Competitors were by then lagging so far behind in the development of the first robotic body as to be irrelevant. It really had become a two horse race. Marcus, as always, kept his opinion to himself, only allowing himself a look of scathing derision when Father is proved wrong. And has since been forced to completely eat his hat as Rod continues to racks up win after win and BPOD Tech. To the point where BPOD Tech is lengths in front. He brought the whole project back to life so that now everyone that's anyone in Science wants to be a part of it. There's a thrill blowing through the place, and everyone seems to want to follow him - The Pied Piper.

Progress on the BPOD prototype has for the last few years been exponential. The possibility of humans living for hundreds of years suddenly a near reality. From Gargon's perspective this presents several dilemmas, quite apart from leaving us rather in their wake. Far more important darling it requires what I believe is known as work (urgh!) on my part! Until Rod came along our industrial

espionage team (for whom I'm responsible) had had little difficulty in keeping abreast of BPOD Technology's research. As a consequence over time they'd become somewhat lackadaisical. Since Rod's arrival they've had a very busy time of it. To the point that we're now failing at every turn to keep up with our competitor's lightning progress. Marcus has ordered a tripling of the number of industrial spies inserted to snoop around BPOD's Research Facility. Father, ineffectual as ever in such situations, merely frets. I would too darling: I'm the last person I'd give responsibility for anything that REALLY fucking mattered. Only this morning he lambasted me pitilessly, something along the lines of, "Piers, all I ask of you is to drape yourself over a chair and keep your eyes and ears open. Are you even incapable of that?" I felt as if my pants had been pulled down and I'd been given a good thrashing. I only wish! Hehe. Actually, rather unfair I thought darling, because that's exactly what I had been doing. Allright, I'd been daydreaming about Rod, without a thought for the fucking project. But how was anyone to know that?

Anyway, as I said, our team grew somewhat complacent. Yes, darling, I could hardly deny that as a model of dedication to the cause I do fall somewhat short of the mark. Compounding this, our research team has been doing very little original work. Thinking they could simply cherry pick BPOD's work and recycle it. In fact long before Rod came along Marcus - recognising the superiority of BPOD's research team - had been urging Father to increase our surveillance. Father, quite why I don't know, chose to ignore Marcus' advice, "You're beginning to sound like my fucking mother, Marcus. Grow some balls, man!" I don't know how he has the gall in continuing to treat Marcus in this patronising way. After all, by now there's an Everest of evidence that they're barely on the same fucking playing field darling. What is the old fool playing at? I suppose we don't need look further than ego for the answer to that one, do we? Humph. It requires very little from Marcus to diminish Father. His mere tight lipped, atmosphere forming silence, is never something Father has been able to handle well. Somehow in front of Marcus his faults become more transparent and amplified. Shallow and fake. Add selfish and without a shred of decency. The fellow that cleans my apartment has more substance than that fucking old Fraud. Typical of him, when BPOD starts to pull ahead, needing someone to divert the blame onto, Father heaps it on a huffing and puffing Rhodes. It's quite amusing to be the fly for a while, darling. Rhodes is the Baffled Bear. Of course there is a food chain, darling, and as always those lower down it suffer most. Eek!

Really darling, I do wonder sometimes, just how thick is Father? I mean, to half heartedly take on BPOD Tech. who from the start have put everything into

developing a technology which will destroy the industry on which our entire business depends. After all, once the artificial body is adopted en masse there'll be no need for any of the drugs we peddle to prolong for a few years the flimsy carcass humans currently inhabit. Our poor sacks of filth we drag around, dress up, and preen in. Marcus' frustration at Father's indolence was patent, but there seemed nothing he could do to convince Father to take the threat seriously. That was until Rod's arrival - when even he could see we'd have to put some real work in if we wanted to win. Almost too late - but when you're prepared to do anything to snatch the prize, I suppose it's almost never TOO late darling.

Returning to That Conversation. Recall darling, if you will, that this is the first time he's called me on my private number. So when I first hear his voice I'm a little dizzied, not quite at 100% on point, hehe. In fact over the years I'd dropped countless hints to take things to a more personal level: darling, so many that even I felt constrained to tone it down. And you know me, darling, there is no shame I will not put myself through to win my man, so that is saying quite a lot. So of course the call is quite unexpected. However, darling, I am if nothing else quick to adapt: a chameleon. So, as I come to and start to follow what he's on about, I am more than a little surprised at the theme and his rather hushed, in awe, tone. And still wondering why the fuck he chose me! I mean, it being a complex philosophical questions of a metaphysical nature, I'm rock confident I'm the wrong person to be talking to. But more to the point, what the fuck does he care? Rod gives a fuck about no one but himself, darling, so what's with all the deep stuff all of a sudden? But as I listen a little closer the gist becomes clearer. The leopard has not in fact changed his spots, darling. So I bat a few observations back, just so as to keep hearing the sound of his voice while – well, yes I confess - I begin once again to play with myself. Darling! What's wrong with that: I'm entitled to get something out of it, aren't I?

Rod's voice is actually quite deep for an Asian fellow darling: gives me goose bumps when I hear it. I tell him, "Quite. Quite so, Rod. What could one compare to creating immortality? Nothing really comes close, does it? A narrow legacy would have been the best to hope for. Until now. Hard to imagine, actually, immortality for all of mankind." Hmm, how prophetic that was, darling.

He asks, still the disingenuous hushed tone, "And where do we fit in to this picture, do you think Piers? We, the key players. How will we be judged?" Ah, remember leopards darling? I am about to gush a response when he abruptly ends the conversation, citing work commitments, at the same time assuring me

he'll call back. I think of imploring, but manage to restrain myself. Hmmm. Whilst I think I can fairly normally claim to be an impassive observer of events, these are abnormal times, darling. No, I'm not talking about that fucking robot! I didn't, don't, and never will give a fuck about that! No, him! He has become an obsession - to an unhealthy degree I will not dispute. And that is saying something darling, knowing my history. It is a tendency. By that I mean I don't give a fuck what happens, so long as I can be near Him. I am still moping around the apartment when, no more than half an hour later, he rings again. Poor boy, I think, he must be really feeling it. Hardly surprising though darling, we are, after all, getting very close to D-Day. I think even the cleaners are feeling it, hehe. The conversation takes up almost where it left off, him in the same insincere hushed tone. Restraining myself (though looking back I ask myself why the fuck I did), I stand at the window and stare out unseeing, conscious only of what he's saying. "I've only just heard, it's only to be made available to a very rich few. A luxury item. That's got to be wrong, Piers. They've paid for it with their taxes, haven't they? They should have it too." Righteous indignation: with some people you know it's an act darling; the question is, why are they doing it? I adopt the role of Devil's advocate (why I chose that particular role I really don't know, since it hardly sits well on my narrow shoulders, darling), and respond, "Yes, it's also Gargon's intention to market theirs as an exclusive product. Which, yes, will only make the gap between Have and Have Nots immeasurably wider. Who was the fool that said it couldn't get any bigger? But I imagine, as always, the response will be muted. A few riots from the Die Hards, but the masses - blinkered, one foot in front of the other - will get sucked in by the spin. Not quite head in the sand, but looking not much further than an arm's length around them. So does it really matter?"

With the video on this time I can see Rod nodding sagely. Hehe, I swear if he'd had a Confucius beard he'd have been stroking it at that moment darling. "You know, I hate to say it but you're probably right. You know what's ironic, what really brings it home to me? My parents will never afford a BPOD. Will never get the chance to benefit from what I've achieved." Such an egotistical man - as if he'd invented the whole fucking thing single handedly darling. So up himself he probably really does think he did! But I forgive him everything. Still, in the back of my mind I'm starting to wonder exactly where the conversation is going to conclude. But only a tiny bit darling, hehe. The journey. With him it's all about the journey. As with you, darling, as with you. Hehe, actually I find myself mirroring his manner, even stroking my smooth as a baby's bottom chin. You know, darling, I've never actually had to use a razor on my face? Or any other place really, darling.

Except to satisfy someone's preference, hehe. What is the significance, the sexual meaning, of hair darling? I've often wondered.

"But then I ask myself, would my parents want it? They're such traditionalists, would they see it as something unnatural? And superstitious too, so they'd be terrified that the Ancestors would disapprove and disaster hit our family." He nods his head in mock resignation, "Yes, it's hard to admit it, but I'm quite certain they don't approve of my work." Darling, you just know it's so much bullshit, but the recurring question keeps coming back – why?

Only wanting to keep things going I join his train of thought. "Yes if they're like that, I suppose they'd never understand that immortality is in fact a natural consequence of our evolution. A consequence of thousands of years of scientific progress that began with the Egyptians. In fact, one could say, NOT to embrace automation is aberrant, a turning away from the natural progression of things." By this point, darling, I'm thinking we're sounding awfully like a soap box, and it takes some effort to stifle an ungenerous snigger. You know, however much I want to darling, it's impossible when he's yodeling on in this vein to take him seriously. Just see him as a jumped up Slick Back with a Small Man chip. Me darling? Ha, ha, whoever took me or anything I said seriously? Undeserving? Hehe, how could I argue with that? Yet how I will fight to the death for my right to squander my life making no visible contribution, and spending my way through Father's fortune. Though really darling, let's not whip me too hard. I'm barely a hamster stuffing its cheeks, given the gargantuan size of the Gargon cake. Yes darling, I am a cliché. But that's never hindered me. Attempting (again, asking myself, why?) to sound wise and horizon gazing, I add, "Yes I imagine there are many implications that we'll never anticipate, until they're nearly on us, and we have to knee jerk react, which never results in the best solution. Who knows, Rod, perhaps it's the beginning of the end of us as a civilization. It seems to me that almost anything's possible, with such a quantum shift in the social order that will result from this technology. In time the first BPOD will be seen as just the first baby step."

My mind a trifle slow (I STILL blame the fucking god awful hour of the morning darling), it's only the pregnant silence on the other end of the phone makes me realise what I've said. This is Rod's Big Moment. Only days away now from wheeling out BPOD's first fully functioning mass production prototype. And here's me putting the dampener on it. Though, God help me darling, there's times when I fear it's the most profound thing I've ever said. Anyway, the silence speaks volumes. Oh, fucking hell darling! Really The Boy takes himself way too seriously. But of course instantly I'm gushing, in a blue panic not wanting to offend The

Golden Child. "Rod, sorry. That didn't come out right. It will be a momentous page in human history. I'm as excited as everyone, and I'm sure whatever happens the day will be remembered by everyone." My mouth/brain at this point must have been taken over by aliens: I positively cannot stop myself from adding, "What they were doing when it happened."

Is it me, or is there the glint of malice when he replies, "Don't worry, Piers, I'll get everything out of this that I hoped for, and more. It was only ever a stepping stone to bigger and better things for me. Whatever it is, it will be nothing less than I deserve, given the contribution I've made. The BPOD was just another lame duck Blue Sky project before I joined it. And now look – everyone's an expert." Laughs derisively, "The fruits of fame are already there. Falling into my lap, if last night is anything to go by. You know that young Intern you saw me with yesterday? She's only just left my apartment. My god, what a body! What a fuck!"

This hurts darling, whether intentional or not: stabs, I won't deny it. I try not to let it penetrate, but he's not finished yet, The Shit. "And now it's clear we're going to make the breakthrough, who know what it'll be like. They'll be queuing up outside my bedroom I expect." Laughs again. I read spitefully, but that might just be me, darling. "I'll barely have time for work, what with all the girls throwing themselves at me. A Rock Star, Piers. What do you think?" Runs fingers through slicked back hair – god he looks just edible darling. Stares into the phone - presumably to make sure he's got the knife in just the place he wants it before giving the final twist, The Bastard. "And then it'll be on to the next project. The world my oyster is how I imagine it, Piers. And what will you be doing?"

Recoiling from the multiple barbs, it's with some surprise I pick up a touch of envy in that last, seemingly throwaway line. "Enjoying the luxuries that come from being the Director of one of the two most powerful corporations in the world. I suppose what I'm only just starting to get a taste of, you've always taken for granted?" Darling I had no inkling he sees me in that light. Then again, it might be him just toying with me. I find him hard to pin down, don't you know? Hard when there's nothing real to judge him by. When it's all ego. An image constantly transforming to mollify it. And then his fucking phone goes again: "Sorry, it's the boss. I'll call you back later." Hangs up.

As expected (though that doesn't stop it stabbing), he doesn't CB. But we'd arranged to meet later to discuss details of an important upcoming presentation, so at least I have the excuse to see him again today. Darling - and this is no exaggeration - I die a little when I don't have that to look forward to. Presently my whole day / life centres around when I'll see him next. What excuse I can find to

make it happen. Of course, I really barely need to: as Father's representative we're thrown together all the time. I am of course just a rubber stamp, nothing more. Do you know, darling, the other night I had a dream that I actually was a real life Rubber Stamp? Even in my sleep I couldn't help but laugh. How our mind's work! I suppose that will be the next cab off the rank after they've sorted the artificial body thing out. It gives me a headache just to think of what that would involve. I mean, work out how the brain functions and create an artificial duplicate. My god can you imagine what they'd find in mine! Eek! Actually very little when I come to think of it. Ha, ha, ha! Apropos nothing, if I'm being ruthlessly honest darling, I never actually need to see anyone, which makes me feel somewhat surplus, but then again, I don't know what I'd do if I had an actual Real Job. Well, really, yes I do. Fuck it up and then bolt and leave everyone to clear up the mess, hehe. It's what I've always done in the past, when I got it into my fat head that I needed to DO something. Why expect anything different this time?

The call to Rod was from CY Yang, Rod's cool headed boss. Rod relates the conversation to me later, making the excuse that it had made him so furious he'd forgotten to call me back. And when he'd remembered he'd been soooo busy. Hmmm, hehe, I appreciate that he takes the trouble to lie, darling. It can be a sign of something, otherwise why would he bother if he didn't care at all? When he EVENTUALLY calls back Rod tells me, "I recognised it as him before he even started speaking. A few sighs interspersed with long silence - no one can hold a silence as comfortably as CY. I ask him, "CY what do you want? Can't it wait until I get in?" Another long pause before CY responds. *"No it can't wait, Rod. I've got a conference call with the Financiers. They want to know the latest progress. They feel they're being left out of the loop. I don't know why but it seems as if everybody's convinced themselves we've solved the riddle. The rumor mill is working overtime, so we need to bring the presentation forward and give a full and detailed update before this entire project is jeopardized by unrealistic expectations. If that happens it'll make us look like unreliable failures, when, in fact, we're well ahead of the timeline. For which you can take a large chunk of credit. BUT, if we don't sit on this quickly, it'll be your head on the chopping block."*

I needn't explain (need I?) that the rumors are being spread by Gargon, as part of a Marcus inspired ploy to tarnish the so far lily white reputation of BPOD Technologies Inc. Or at least bring it nearer to the rather off white colors of Gargon's flag. What good it can do in the bigger scheme of things I can't imagine. It gives me an enormous headache if ever I try to work through one of Marcus'

Machiavellian plans. So I don't bother. Suffice to say, you can be certain this will merely be Stage One. Darling, there was a brilliant Chinese strategist that leaves the more famous Sun Tse looking chimp like. Because all his schemes - Kong Ming's that is - always have six dominoes in them, that all have to fall in exactly the right sequence and moment in time. But there any similarity ends. He is reputed to have been a man of great WisdomLove. And I can't think of anyone that imagines Marcus having even a broken toenail of goodness in him.

Back to Rod's conversation with CY. *"Be clear about this, Rod. It's got to the point where it's become political, and you know what that means. Logic out the window. All about perception. And, joking aside, we have many enemies that are doing all they can to see us fail. There's a lot at stake, after all. (Did I mention, CY is the master of understatement too)? We as scientists sometimes forget that this market will be worth trillions. These next few weeks will test the whole team to the limit, you should warn them about that. Anything unusual - it doesn't matter how trivial - anything out of the ordinary they should report to one of us immediately. We don't want a repetition of last week."*

Rod and the rest of the research team live in a 24 hour guarded condominium located in the grounds of the BPOD Robotics Research compound. Immersed in the final stages of the project it's been weeks since he's been outside it. He'd been refusing all my invitations, but then quite unexpectedly he agreed to join me. Hoping for an intimate evening you can imagine my displeasure when a positive gang of them pile into the stretch limo I've arranged to charabanc us. Most of them are already quite well gone, but I need to do no catching up, I assure you darling. Anyway, with my little picture shattered and lying discarded on the floor, we do the usual rounds of the bars.

Nothing of much interest to report there darling: it's on the way home it happens. Not more than a few hundred metres from the apartment in fact. Suddenly a fleet of non descript vans with windows blacked out has the street blocked off, a small army pile out, and then they're running at us with machine guns blazing. Being rather drunk darling I find it all quite hilarious, and start laughing at the pinging off the bullet proof glass. They're getting quite close now, whites of their eyes stuff darling, and suddenly someone in the car screams at me, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" Which of course only makes it worse. Tears streaming down the face darling - can't see a thing. I manage to bleat out a "Sorry, they just look so funny," before descending into another fit of giggles. Someone else, "What's so fucking funny? They've got a rocket launcher now." This does

bring me up for a second, but then I remember Marcus bragging about what the car is capable of withstanding, and so it sets me off again. Yes, darling, I suppose it is one of those *You had to be there* moments.

But in fact that's as far as our would be captors get. Suddenly the sky is full of helijets buzzing overhead, rocket trails, vans exploding and being thrown like little toy cars high into the air. All quite surreal darling: it crosses my mind how wonderful it would be if I'd taken something rather stronger. Wow, that would have been quite something, darling. Out of body, monsters and demons closing in, hehe. Mmmm, some of my favorite moments have been lost along the trails of my imagination. Then the cannons start. Wumf, wumf - that's from our side - and the terrorists are going down like skittles. The radio in the front suddenly crackles loudly, which makes us all jump a foot in the air, and someone yells something unintelligible. Which of course sets me off giggling again. I think someone must have punched me around then, because I don't remember much after that, and when I come to next morning my lip looks like I've pumped a sheepful of botox into it. Yes, rather a blur darling, but still fun for all that. Reality is so overrated: we can learn just as much, perhaps even more, in a dream or a drug warped scene. And isn't that what life is about darling? Learning? Yes, fuck reality darling....

Anyway, after I was knocked out, apparently the driver slammed his foot down, and in a second the limo was flying down the street, but we were heading straight at two wagons completely blocking the road ahead – no possibility of a way round them. Rod tells me, "Everyone was screaming at him to stop, but there was a panel of bullet proof glass between us, and even with all of us hammering on it he took no notice. But at the very last moment the vans flew up into the air and disappeared out of sight. I think I remember it - looking back and seeing them attached to helijets by cables and huge magnets."

We're never told who was responsible, and you know me darling, I don't like to delve too deep. Never know what you might unearth. A curious mind can be a dangerous thing in the wrong circles. Actually I'd almost forgotten about it, though the attack only took place a few weeks ago. Then again, the whole time since has been rather a blur. But CY's warning to Rod reminds me, and I say something to Rod about how lucky we were that no one on the team got hurt. There's a pause on the line and then Rod says, "Yes that time." He hesitates, "Don't tell anyone Piers, we don't want it getting out, but one of our senior scientists has been abducted, though fortunately for the project her work was virtually complete. Fool, she slipped out without telling anyone, to meet someone." I know the woman. Rather naive, and desperate. I mean darling, isn't it obvious I don't bat

that way? But that didn't stop her throwing herself at me. Very thin, in a brittle way; skin like parchment. Crushed self esteem and always strained – on the verge of a breakdown. What used to be called an Hysteric. And one of those people that trouble seems to follow. I remember her telling me of numerous times she'd been attacked, or robbed, almost to the point I thought she was making it up.

There's more to the conversation between CY and Rod. "As we talk I notice his voice is quite strained, reminding me of the juggling act he's having to perform, to which political pressure has now been added. He asks me, *"Tell me in a nutshell, where are we up to?"* To ease the tension, laughing, I respond, *"Well, tell them this then: it should make for some good sound bites. One more component, some minor modifications and calibration, and we're good to go. We're almost there. Tell them to get the champagne on ice."*

"There's a moment's silence at the other end, and when he responds his speech is a little quicker, and his tone is unusually sharp, which startled me, *There's so much at stake, Rod. Gargon are not far behind us. They could easily do it. I mean, all this work, and right at the end they'd get there first. We can't let that happen.* I was shocked to hear this; I didn't realise Gargon is still on our tail. I asked CY, *"You really mean it - Gargon could step in and produce the final prototype?"* CY, his voice flatter now, responds, *"In theory, yes. If we put a foot wrong they won't hesitate to pull our licence. And of course, we'd have to comply with it immediately. Without it we'd be up for murder if someone died. And don't think they wouldn't do it. We've got a lot of enemies out there. And they haven't forgotten the inmate trials, Rod. I've heard they still don't think we were punished enough for that. We're on thin ice, make no mistake."*

You know, darling, it's at times like these that I hate this job. I'm listening to Rod recount his conversation with CY, and at the same time recalling a meeting in which Marcus outlined a plan, which of course concludes with Gargon draped in the laurels. Not CY's happy ending for BPOD Tech. And I know which version is most likely to transpire. Anyway, the upshot is that in the afternoon CY does a very upbeat media interview, in which he fixes a date for this coming Friday for the presentation of the final BPOD mass production prototype. And the investor meeting – which was due to take place today and seems to be some kind of sneak preview for the Vultures - has been pushed back to tomorrow, Thursday. Assuming the prototype demo is successful – fingers crossed, with Joan Dark in it - full scale production will then commence in a few months.

For me there is only that. If she can hang on for a couple more days it will be a robotic body controlled by Joan Dark's brain that walks into the spotlight of the

world's media on Friday. I know I normally profess indifference – sick to the eye teeth of mention of the fucking BPOD to be frank – but still darling, it does send a thrill through me to picture Joan cancer free. When without it she'll be dead before the week's out. The media can of course be relied on to trivialize it and turn it into something putrid. But think darling: almost every person on this planet will watch the transplant being performed. Nothing less than the birth of a new fucking species darling. Who wouldn't be imagining themselves in her place? Immortal! Wow, darling. Bow, wow!

Despite being in pole position to win the race, these last few days will not be plain sailing for Rod and his team. The pressure's been rising for weeks already, and with D-Day fixed, it'll go through the roof. The whole world is watching and the rumor continues to circulate that BPOD successfully tested a prototype weeks ago. Expectation overload, so that with every passing day and there's no sight of it the headlines all scream FAILURE! And pedal the baseless scandals they live on - where fiction, by repeating it enough, becomes fact. As I said, the rumors were instigated by Marcus, but I can't fathom how they can affect the outcome of the war. But that is him all over. Never giving up; always looking for the weak spot to exploit. And if not found, manufacturing one. And I suppose it is still possible. If, buckling under the pressure, BPOD put a foot wrong, they're so predictably fucking weak and stupid darling, the politicians will demand someone's head. And the military, who have a vested interest, they've begun their dark mutterings. Even at this late stage, if the cock up is big enough.... well I'll let you join the dots of who picks up the pieces and gets all the undeserved glory. God, I find it so trivial darling, but so typical, of humans of a certain type. In the face of something truly majestic, that redefines us as a species, their heads are submerged in the pig trough of greed and self interest.

Rod, thankfully, isn't interested in any money for himself, which I find an endearing trait darling. Between you and me, actually he does plan to squirrel away a significant pile of venture cash. Not, as I said, for himself, but for a new line of research. One he hasn't even told CY about. He never did tell me the details, or perhaps he did and I wasn't listening, hehe. Lips are such mesmerizing things if you can imagine being kissed by them. And however much I may ridicule Rod for his monstrous vanity, he does make up for it in others ways. There's no sucking up, no compromise, and a certain willingness to risk it all. In the face of opposition from every quarter he went ahead and threw out the original BPOD design - thirty years in development - and replaced it with his own, radically different and elegantly simple model. A massive departure which has justified itself time and

again. Despite this (or is it because of?) Rod has made many powerful enemies. The all or nothing quality, few people are capable of it, and envy rears its head when they see it. But surely it's a (the?) critical attribute which sets the winners apart, don't you think darling? In Rod's case he's been prepared at different times to sacrifice his career, the lives of his patients and the reputations of his entire research team. Let me give you a theory darling: I don't know if it's true, I'll let you decide that. The project is an embodiment of himself. On a deep psychological level he needs it to make up for something, a lot of things it seems to me, that he is ashamed of about himself. He wants white perfection but knows he'll never find it in himself, but in his work.... What do you think, darling? Of course it could apply to a lot of other people too? You, perhaps?

But in the bigger picture the BPOD project is about one thing only. Mmmmmoney. And the Friday presentation, that's really all that's about. To get the Vulture Capitalists to turn out their laden pockets once again. You see, assuming the prototype is successful, which I'm positive it will be (does that shout too much of FAN!!), BPOD Tech. will require a colossal injection of capital for full scale production. Because, whilst large even on a global scale, BPOD Tech is not in the same financial paddock as Gargon, so they've needed investors every step of the way. We are after all talking trillions of dollars just for the prototype development darling. I know (from flying on the wall) that even Gargon would require investors to take the thing to mass production. But after that darling – well, it's impossible to put a figure on the profits the manufacturer of the BPOD would make. And that darling was from Marcus the Human Calculus for fuck's sake! A guaranteed monopoly for ten years. Frightening actually: the power. Quite shift the balance darling; it would put them on a par with the economies of even the largest countries. Imagine if he pulled the rabbit out the hat - Marcus at the helm of such an organization doesn't bear thinking about. After all, whoever has a monopoly on the production of a robotic human body will massively influence, most likely control, governments.

Thursday morning. The investor presentation is in an hour - to a group of BPOD's regular funders, plus some new ones needed to stump up for full scale production. In his office, preparing for the presentation while doing up his tie, which looks Private School, though for all I know it came from the pawn shop, hehe. I wouldn't put it past the boy. In between practicing sections of the presentation, and me quite content to enjoy the view (no not the one out the window, darling!) he tells me, loud and cocky. "They love me! Got them wrapped

around my finger. Listen, and I'll tell you how it works." I encourage him: not very hard darling, I assure you, the boy does like to talk about himself. "First. *Look the part.* I go for Slick Conservative. Pragmatist. Though perhaps a little unimaginative I'm the Scientist that delivers solidly commercial products every time." Darling, given that what he's working on is in the far galaxy of the unknown it is an impressive sleight of hand. But he's right - nothing too risky with lots of big numbers on the bottom line, and The Money Boys will suck it up like little babies on their mother's tit. In my experience - and remember I've met quite the spectrum (in and out of bed hehe) - they're the most dangerously arrogant dummies you'll ever come across. Know Fuck Alls (KFAs) darling. Quite sure if you cut them in half you'd find they were made of mud.

"Second. *Don a thick hide: as thick as possible.* Piers, I rub my hands whenever I hear of one of The Boffin types once again failing to secure funding. They despise one another, and he always ends up storming out of meetings, still hurling abuse as he slams the door on the way out." Like small grenades darling - which of course bounce off the armor plating of The Money Boys. "Because when I see him, I know I only have to wait and they'll come running straight into my arms. Arrogant, condescending, treat you like shit - but in YOUR arms, no one else's. Third. *Be a step ahead of The Money.*" Not fucking hard darling - remember KFAs? "The Boffin type - his work is just as worthy of investment as mine - but he doesn't look and sound right. Just goes to show how shallow and uninformed the VCs are." Exactly darling. Banker Wankers. "They've no real idea what they're investing in. But they'll spill their pockets barely understanding 5% of what they're hearing if the language is right. The buzz words." He doesn't say it, but Rod's marketing would win an Olympic gold in the bullshit stakes. "Fourth. *Despise them.* But hide it behind a painted smile." Well darling, I mean, what do they fucking contribute? You can say that about the whole financial services industry in fact. "They talk about risks: they've never taken a risk in their lives, just playing with someone else's money. Just hanging out for the commission." True darling - all so they can flaunt themselves in front of equally vapid people that give a shit about bling. Real risk involves life and death. The only one that counts in my book darling.

They think that merely swearing like troopers makes them men. "We are the Rulers of the Cunting World, and everyone bows down before the fucking Gods. Money, it's fucking everything: when you've got it, you've anything you want. It's a cunting Toy Shop." Darling I heard that while, on my knees, I was sucking one of them off. Looking down at me he snarled, "You're on the end of a man's cock now,

boy.” I have to say he did rather squeal like a little girl when I bit him darling, hehe. Fake as a cut snake darling: they’re not men, they’ll always be small dick little boys with dollar bills hanging out of their pockets. Make out they’re lions in the jungle when they’ve never been out there, not one of them. Never left their shiny little box of an office - a gilded cage, nothing more. And too stupid to realise. Computers, memos, meetings, and hiding behind a desk as you fire someone, your finger an inch away from the button that will have a security guard in there before the guy can get around your little fortress. I’m talking about bare fists, and getting a bloody nose. And no, I don’t mean metaphorically. I mean a real bloody nose that turns your expensive white shirt crimson. Though I hate all forms of confrontation you might be surprised to know that when I absolutely have to - well, yes, *I am capable of standing naked in the jungle, darling*. So now you know, let’s move on.

As with this one, all the investor meetings take place in a boardroom with a large window at one end which overlooks the main research lab: just in case they aren’t sure where their money is going I suppose, hehe. Darling, they’re fucking stupid enough to not know! Watching from the back, quietly drooling at Rod up on the podium - so mesmerized I must appear quite the desperate spectacle sometimes. But *I don’t care*. There’s nothing more than love darling. ANYWAY, I’m here as an observer, with my Gargon hat on, as always wonky pitched. Really darling, it never sits at all comfortably. Rod’s entire team is lined up at the back of the stage. Supposedly the best research scientists in the world in their respective fields. *Who wouldn’t be attracted by the chance to work on the project of the fucking century?* Rod’s words not mine darling. As I look along those tensed up faces (trying desperately not to show their fear), it occurs to me that I must be the only person in this building that doesn’t give a toss whether this project fails or flies. And then there’s the audience: fifteen high powered investors, lazily complacent, everything about them screaming MONEY. Expectant schoolchildren, waiting to be entertained. “Come and suck on my dick,” their expression says. And there’s women amongst them and they’re no different. They at least should know better I feel darling.

I know I’m being flippant. Well fuck it darling, these things are usually such complete bosh. But in fact today as soon as I walked in I’d immediately noticed something different. The excited hush, something almost barely contained and quite tangible, creating a real knife cutting atmosphere. My goodness, darling, I do believe even they, these heartless fish, who’d struggle to rustle up a brain cell between them, even they get the moment’s import. A moment later and Rod’s

coming out to the podium. Straight away I see he'd picked up on the tension and been startled by it. But it's only for a moment thankfully, and then he's off and running. Goodness darling, he doesn't hang around. After the briefest of introductions of his team, he launches into the update on progress and what's going to happen tomorrow. And then finishes up with cap out, a winning smile, asking for a trillion bucks! Good boy! And I'm sure he'll get it. Though really darling, jokes aside, does any of this actually matter? Big Picture? I mean, for something like this the money would always be found somewhere. All the huff and puff, the sack of gold held out of reach, just to make them feel important. All I can think about is poor Joan, and whether she'll hang on. While these Philistines.... you could tell them her story, and thirty seconds into it their eyes would glaze over. I don't understand them, darling, really I don't! We are so a different species.

It seems like it's all over, and some of the Suits have started to get up, but Rod waves them down and goes on, "Ladies, gentlemen, I know this will sound pompous. But I don't know how else to say it...." His voice, trailing off, is diffident, hesitant even, which immediately puts me on edge. Too much feeling and they'll get restless! You've got them where you want them: shut up while you're ahead! But then his voice gains strength, "We, together, have performed an act of God. We have created our own humanity. Ladies and gentlemen, do not become complacent as time renders the act commonplace: with your funding we, together, have shaped the future direction of our civilisation." I promise I'm not making it up. Have to cram a hanky in my mouth to keep from sniggering. But when I look around I see only True Believers, all with a docile, cow like expression on their faces. Rod, the Master Bullshitter, has utterly captured them again. After that they're complete putty, submissively following him like sheep over to the window and then listening as he runs through what's taking place in the lab below. Understanding zero but hanging on his every word. Please, were they really taken in by that fucking B Grade movie script? Actually darling, I have to make a confession, I wrote it. But it was supposed to be a joke! But Rod loved it and insisted on using it. I was terrified he'd make a fool of himself, but there you go, darling, I've never been a good judge of human character. They baffle me.

My attention wanders, taking in the battery of expensive equipment arrayed throughout the large open plan research facility. Random body parts strewn across benches, like a macabre murder scene. Absent mindedly I notice that if collected all together, the parts would actually make up a complete body. And then it twigs - they're going through final testing for Joan's operation. This is the

BPOD she will have. Goodness darling, my brain explodes at the thought. Our puny little race standing toe to toe with God, and shouting "Yes we can!" What nerve we have. You know darling, it's one of those rare occasions in my life, if not the only one, when I felt proud to be a human being. And yes, I will have it both ways, so don't bother pointing out the contradiction with what I said earlier.

Over here a leg attached to lots of wires flexes. There, what looks like a severed head is in animated conversation. This particular one reminds me of a rather gruesome video I watched as a nerdy, supremely body conscious teenager. Probably looking for porn darling - it seemed I spent the years thirteen to sixteen doing little else. Came across this archive footage, you know, from the early twentieth century about the pioneers of blood transfusion. In which the dismembered head of a heavily sedated dog survived for some time, and responded quite normally to external stimuli. Oh that dear little head with the bright, wet nose. Darling it was such a gorgeous dog, you could almost feel his tongue on your hand. I can't watch it any more. And, looking at the white coats down in the lab it makes me think, yes, there's really quite a strong connection with those cold looking Russian scientists and you lot here. I despise you all, for your intellectual arrogance and the cold emptiness of your hearts. I'm reminded - I suppose it's the knife edge mood everyone's got themselves into - of the precarious early days. Reminded of the shenanigans that nearly killed off the project when still in its infancy. Which later proved to be the catalyst for the flood of venture funding, and confirmed that old adage that all publicity is good publicity, hehe.