

so much for the thinking

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Wetting Myself

So, my name is Eugene Xanoc. I am mildly schizophrenic and I have a penchant for cold toast. Which explains why I'm talking to myself now and why I am, at this precise moment, craving a chewy, carbohydratey slice – purely soft on the inside, singed to coarse golden brown on the out. I wish I'd put one in before I'd gone out, it'd be awaiting my return, all malleable and yeasty.

I should have put on two.

How come I always think of toast when I'm naked?

“Could Jack ‘ave Dave?”

“Wha?”

“Could Jack ‘ave Dave?”

“I reckon.”

“I had Dave so I could ‘ave Jack and we’re the only hard ones in the class.”

“What ‘bout Richard Evinngs?”

“What ‘bout the fucking wanker?”

“He ‘ad Dave.”

“I ‘ad Dave.”

“I reck’ you and Richard Evinngs is the ‘ardest in the class.”

“I could ‘ave him.”

These boys are about 9.

And now I'm naked and smiling and turning so, I don't know, so the 9-year-olds don't see my smirk and attempt to converse with me, in their crude, even savage, way. Actually it'd probably be not as much conversing as swearing.

“Fuck.”

“What?”

“I ain't got no pand for the locker.”

And I ain't put no bread in the toaster and I'd have something to look forward to if I had. Once I've slipped my trunks on, and swimming shorts over the trunks, as you can never be too careful, and of course I've wiped the smile off my face, I turn to look at the disgusted and disgusting faces of these two boys.

“Fuck.”

“Go get i' from reception.”

“You go get it!”

“You go fucking get it! It's your fucking locker!”

“I ain't got no fucking change though!”

“Well don't look at me I ain't got none!”

“Jesus fuc...king Christ. You're such an idiot.”

“I spent it at Macdonalds di' I?”

I sense something inevitable so I busy myself with my garments and the delicate arrangement of them in my locker – that *I* do have money for.

“Hey, ‘scuse us.”

I do not move any part of my face unnaturally, including and especially my lips. The only things that move are the lips inside my mind – that I like to believe I have, that smile to myself.

“Hey, ‘scuse me. You.”

Shoes go here... shirt there... I’ll just shove it in. I’ve found it doesn’t get creased – even after an hour.

“Hey mate!”

He waves a dirty hand in front of me and so I suppose I must look at him.

“Got a pand for the locker?”

I point at my ears.

“What?”

I make various muddled gestures.

“What?”

I close up my locker and walk off, leaving the boy standing there with eight swear words on the tip of his probably yellowed tongue. As I roll the very-much-used plastic-key-chain around my wrist I walk in the direction of the showers.

A long time ago I observed that people talk far, far too much. They talk when it’s completely unnecessary, when it serves only to irritate, about things so trivial they should be avoided. And I don’t. I have never on any occasion given my deaf pretence away, which I like to think is partly due to my perfectly reliable discretion. I don’t milk it, I mean.

I have never in my life been embarrassed. I have only read of such a thing and seen it in various films, where the embarrassed character is invariably the object of a joke of some sort. I have also, and I’m sure this is related, never been present when I’ve been the object of a joke, of any sort.

Of course, I am at liberty to play my own jokes, of many sorts, and I get a slice of satisfaction in rendering a couple of fools confused. But *never* have I made myself appear the fool, *never* have I been embarrassed. Call me special, skilled, lucky, bizarre – whatever, but at the end of the day don’t tell me what I already know. Call me Eugene. And let ‘Eugene’ mean all of these things.

You, friend, shall soon see that there are many things I have never done or never had done to me. I admit it; I take a little pride in my few odd characteristics. Perhaps I have portions of my brain missing that everybody else has. Perhaps I have had an urge from birth, or whenever, to be unique. I think about this a good deal but my mind’s time is rationed off in a much larger helping to another pressing thought – why are people so different from me? Why are people so much the same?

Why must the showers be on so hot?

“Scrub a dub scrub a dub scrub a dub dub.”

An elderly man continues to sing and scrub, a dub dub, whilst spinning himself under the flow of water in order to catch the liquid he hopes will cleanse his full set of crusted body parts.

“Oops, sorry, didn’t know you were there.”

I say nothing, as I usually do, smile politely and turn around. I caught a sight of his rather diminutive member and scant hair in its immediate vicinity. I wonder why I glanced down at it but then I wonder why old men insist on frolicking naked around other males.

I'm no kid either, but I *am* wearing my aforementioned two pairs of unders. Now, that does not mean four 'lots', rather two 'lots'. Basically it means more than this old man's. "Boo ba doo be doo."

He's a little quieter now that I'm here and I think I'll make my way to the pool because if this pathetically endowed little man wants peace and quiet to ruin with his crooning, I say let him have it.

I have nothing against him or any other person who exhibits himself in swimming pool changing rooms. It's just it always captures my attention and draws it away from what are probably more interesting things. I believe I was daydreaming of toast.

It's late into an autumn's afternoon and the pool people haven't put on the lights so the water looks unimpressive. It's just sort of sitting there, flowing a bit here, splashing a bit there, being a general pile of wet without being as beautiful as it could be. Far down the pool I see a patch of water on which is cast a generous amount of setting-sun-shine and that may be pretty.

Splash. Straight under, no gradual immersion for me. Perhaps in the sea where the water actually freezes up your body – particularly the dangly bits – perhaps there I'll go toes then legs then arms then body then slide my head under. But here it's just a splash and now, with goggles on, away I go.

I have never been sure of what stroke I do but I know *exactly* how I do it. I saw one worn old man do it once and used my memory of that one time to teach me. Now I have a lovely custom stroke. I breathe, then I plunge or rather dive down, flapping my legs, and then stretch my hands and arms up and point them back at the surface of the water, to take me up, and I repeat. And I'm sure you have no idea of what it looks like – I'm as sure of that as I am my fellow swimmers think me a weirdo. Their looks tell me that much. When I'm quite submerged I smile, to myself – of course – for who else do I have to smile to?

I swim and swim and I see a used tampon at the bottom of the pool and I cringe and swim and swim.

And think I have nothing better to do than think about my life.

My father was involved – high up – in the production of cheap pens. The feeble kind of biro that's given away free at meetings and conferences, with a colourful company logo and not a great deal of sophisticated pen-technology inside the weak plastic frame. Those pens. When I say 'high up' I mean he was an administrator or titled manager or something. He used to always joke that, sure, he could bring back free pens from work, but they were free anyway. I once asked him to just take a big box of 500 or so but he said that'd cost too much.

I've held, I would estimate, around a thousand of that type of pen and I'd guess my father recorded the manufacture of approximately 786 of them. But not one of those 1000 – or 786 – was given to me by my father.

I'm not sad about this. I hate the bloody pens. My father gave me love and attention and all the necessary, not fat biros with *McGrain Enterprise* or *Corporate Steel* or, funnily enough, *Xanoc Medicines*' logos stamped on them. And when I say 'was' I mean 'was and is' considering he's still in the business, I'd imagine. And when I say 'was and is' I mean

that's what he does, or did, for money. He did other stuff than sit at a desk accounting for priceless scribblers. He was a person too, oh yes.

And my mother was a bouncy-castle designer. And a good one at that – designer stroke inventor *par excellence*. When I was old enough to understand the intricate physics of a bouncy-castle – or *inflatable entertainment structure* as she called them in the business – she used to tell me all about her new ideas and models at suppertime. Crenelations, for example. They're not easy to make – that is if you're going to be as adventurous as to make them at all! I mean most people don't *care* about how to maintain a flow of air solid enough to support gangs of raging jumpers throughout a whole plastic edifice! And I must say I don't blame them at all. But I admired my mother's enthusiasm intensely. Oh there was never a shortage of bouncy-castles at *my* primary school parties.

Now, and by the way I am continuing my wavy stroke, the professions of my parents are not really a part of 'my life' but parents are pretty important to a child, which you'd know if you've ever listened to Alexander Portnoy, or thousands of psychologists, or common sense. Also they can be used to show various things about me and my youth. For instance, my mother 'inflated' my life with air of care. She was the care-bear and I was the cub. In that way she was much like other mums but it was extraordinarily bouncy care from an extraordinarily bouncy person. My mother was a partial eccentric and had her way of doing everything.

Once we made jelly together. I just nibbled on a bit of raw jelly cube. Then we both did and soon there were no jelly cubes left and we giggled to each other while looking at the empty packet. The jelly was lemon-lime.

She bought Easter-eggs in the post-Easter sale a year in advance as they were half-price. We weren't a poor family.

Every night she would tell me that she loved me and prayed to God for – and with – me in my bedroom, before tucking me in for 'sleepies'.

To me, out of my parents she was the butch. Which would prove to be ironic I think I'm pretty safe to say.

But my father was no bitch. If he *were* a bitch then he was a fat bitch, but he wasn't so he was simply exceedingly plump and had all of the extras included in the deal – red cheeks, a good sense of humour and a general air and mien of jolliness.

He had a bottom on his front, that is to say he had front-buttocks. It may be hard to visualise but he literally had two sizeable bulges above his legs and below his abdomen, on his front. I suppose it made him marginally more symmetrical than most. I never mentioned it to him. I never asked him why.

When I was old enough to assess characters, which at its most primitive level was being able to put a descriptive word to someone's personality, it was my father's that I resolved on first – 'kind', and later 'happy'. My mother was also both of these I suppose but even now if I think of kindness and happiness it's my father's puffed-out face that I see.

I'm not sure exactly how I came to that quick conclusion, but I know that I was completely correct.

Ultimately, to him I was not just another cheap pen. And I guess that counts.

So, what kind of house did I grow up in? A house directed by two lovely people – I was an only child of course – and plenty of readily available love. I would say it was a *Fun*

House and due to my mother's job it didn't share only the name with the popular game show. It also had one or two inflatables.

Never once did I cry. I have never cried since either, and I couldn't really describe how it feels because I simply *don't know*. My eyes have watered because of proximity to onion, but I never cried. Of course I must have wailed and so on as a baby but from what I remember I *never* cried.

A number of small children don't cry though, that's not particularly odd. Thing is I wasn't a particularly strange child. I was a loner at school and I didn't have any great mates. I got on alright with the other podgy-cheeked thumb-suckers but I didn't bond with any of them much. Do small children? I suppose most of them did, but I was perfectly content doing what I liked doing and that differed from what they liked doing. I occasionally joined in while they played kiss-chase and other forms of silly-buggers but I didn't talk about *fancying* girls with the boys, or about dirty things I had heard of but didn't know fully. I didn't share many laughs with them, so I didn't get to be close friends with a single other undeveloped soul. Those things just didn't feel like the things to do and, as you'll see, I only ever do the things that feel like the things to do. Lots of children do though. You see a bottle of paint and you squeeze it to make it squirt with fun colours. That just happens.

I mean as a child there were a number of weird elements to *me*, for example no I didn't cry. And no, I never once wet myself at school and yes, this is something I am proud of. I was able to command my bladder in reception class – and beyond! – and who knows how much that shaped my life? I was a joyful, constantly dishevelled little urchin and my hair was a mess.

But what I want to explain is that lots of kids at primary school have hair that is a mess. Literally and so to speak. There is a kid who doesn't comb his hair, who has it anywhere and everywhere, who zooms around pretending to be an aeroplane, who shouts when he shouldn't and irritates others, who has obscure, even wacky ideas on every subject, at *every* school. I was just our school's one, or one of our school's fine selection.

What I am trying to explain by *this* is that I was fine – because loads of primary school children are like this and it's OK for a ten year old kid to be weird and individual. It's only later in life when these characteristics would be properly frowned upon. It wasn't odd to be an odd kid.

Basically I was just a normal kid until I found out that my mum was a lesbian.

I get out of the swimming pool now, for I have done my quota of lengths for the week, and walk back to the changing rooms. People could perceive me to be a melting lump of meat. Well, that or a wet and dripping man who's just stepped out of a swimming pool.

My two fellow melting-meat-lumps in the showers are the pair of vile, pre-adolescent roustabouts who amused me in changing rooms earlier. I feel like taking off my trunks and shampooing my pubic hair just to shock them.

"Nah I got hold of 'em."

"Ya never."

"I fucking did."

"Ya never did!"

"I did! Oh my days! They was way too small though."

"It looks like she's got small tits."

"Well she 'as."

In a couple of years' time their bodies will mature and sparse hair will grow above their top lips but they will preserve their immaturity and refuse to shave off the accumulating mass of scraggle. This is their nature.

They attempt to whisper.

"Look it's that wanker who would't gi' us a pand."

"Aw! Is it?"

"Weren't he deaf or something?"

"He's a cock."

I give the impression of paying no attention and I suppose all their words are doing is reinforcing my disapproval of them, which was already pretty solid. I could lecture them (with sign language!), or just imagine myself lecturing them, about respect and treatment of others and maturity and so on, but why bother? Why not just laugh about it later? That feels like the thing to do.

Hopefully I have de-chlorinated myself sufficiently and shall now get dried and dressed.

God, what if I put the toast into the fridge? I mean perhaps not straight away because that'd likely upset the cooling system, but once radiation has already robbed it of the warmth the toaster gave it? Could be tasty.

"Hey don't let 'im see you look but look at the deaf guy's cock."

"Fuck."

“Your Mum’s *so* Gay!”

What if everyone blinked at the same time? Nobody would know and nobody would care. For one moment the world could be completely unseen. What tricks it could get up to!

It’s a short walk from the pools to the bus stop though I stop off at Sainsbury’s in order to pick up an inexpensive lunch.

Inside, Sainsbury’s smells of piss. It’s probably some new Italian sauce.

I choose two 24p crusty rolls and two 26p simple jam-doughnuts. On my way to the tills, I once again sense a suspicion of urine in the air. It’s only when I get to and wait at the conveyor-belt, where I place my mini-feast, when my theory is confirmed. The customer, a likely single-mother with hooped earrings, and the atrociously faced middle-aged woman dumped on her seat are trying to keep their conversation quiet.

“Oh I know! Oh I know!”

“So she just sits there?”

“Yep, yep, right there. Every bleeding week as well!”

“Oh well that’s terrible ain’t it?”

“It is and the manager comes down and tries to, you know, get her to leave.”

“And does she?”

“She takes her time.”

“Oh that’s terrible.”

Tracking their glances, I see an elderly lady wearing perfectly normal elderly lady garments, nattering to all passers-by, and apparently she is the source of the stench. I would like to relieve my nostrils of the far from comforting aroma, but these ladies are enjoying their nattering too. Thankfully I think I managed to catch just the last minute of the episode.

“Poor lady.”

“I know, I know, and it’s probably, you know, something wrong with her.”

“What with her... with her head you mean?”

“I don’t know about what specific but something.”

“Do you really reckon so?”

The cashier nods and bags the items. They look over at Miss. Stinky together, then back to each other and, ha!, they both blink almost simultaneously.

It’s funny how many interesting things I notice once I’ve engaged my brain on that subject. Not that this time there was anything interesting at all in the blink – the two blinks.

They say their goodbyes and it’s my turn.

“That’s one pound please.”

I give it to her, stuff my stuff into a bag and walk out, starting on a roll as I go. It’s no cold toast but it’s a nice roll and I let crusty crumbs fall around me. My bus happens to be right outside and after allowing the fresh air to refresh my lungs I get on. I flash my travelcard and he initiates a complex chat.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

I usually say as little as possible, but if I don’t say ‘cheers’ or ‘thanks’ – depending on my company – at various junctures, I can find unwanted hostility. My seat of choice is the single on the pavement’s side, which I’m pleased to see is free.

I finish off the roll and ready the first doughnut.

A great way of learning things at school – important, developmental things, not key-stage-syllabi things – is to listen in to what people are talking about. It’s a great way of learning anything really, and as Jimi Hendrix said, ‘knowledge speaks but wisdom listens.’ How would I have known about the piss-drenched-lady if I hadn’t listened in? At school it meant I got all of the necessary information without getting involved in the annoying arguments and aggression that exciting new topics bring up. For example like talking about what it’d be like to have two dicks. There was always one boy who knew of some story somewhere of a guy who actually had it – and I’m sure there are some people around who do have two penises.

School was where I learnt about such fascinating things. Last year of primary was a very educational year. I learnt words such as ‘whore’ – the meaning of it, technically, as I’d known it from before but, crazily!, thought it just meant ‘nasty lady’, which of course it also does. And ‘fanny’ – there was a definite theme to these words. And ‘Oedipus’. I overheard a pretty crude version of *Oedipus Rex* during a mathematics lesson. Long division, I recall.

“This kid shagged his mum!”

“I read a story about that somewhere!”

“But this guy *actually* did it. He killed his dad and shagged his mum.”

“Was his mum a whore?”

“I don’t think so but I don’t know.”

It seemed even sicker than having two dicks, though both ideas were difficult for me to comprehend at the time. Anyway, I went home from school early that day, just after the maths lesson, because some kids had left the taps on in all the sinks, with the plugs in, flushed all of the toilets repeatedly and hence both flooded the school and left its water supply below regulatory levels. What an achievement. I’d always thought it was just a glorified myth, that if you take the water from the school, the school has to let all the children go home. Well, they let all of the eldest children who lived nearby go home so that they had more teachers to deal with the problems.

The perpetrators of the crime were suspended for three days each but I should think it was worth it, for that story to tell for years to come. Their actions certainly had a tremendous impact on *my* life. But was it to be a destructive or creative force? Ooo. The drama.

Just as I’m getting to one of the most momentous times of my life, I take a doughnut bite too quickly and jam splatters over my face and arms. Not to worry, it’s still all good and it can all be licked up. I get to taste my arm sweat as a treat.

Where was I? Building up the suspense for the drama?

Only three times or so prior to this occasion had I gone home early by myself and so there was still some element of adventure to it. I hopped and skipped and peered here and there mischievously down the total of two roads I had to travel down. I imagined my father would be at the pen-factory and my mother at the bouncy-castle-laboratories, if you can call them that, but there was a chance she'd be working from home.

I got to my flaking-blue-paint door and felt a buzz from being all grown up and using my own key to get into my own house.

Well my mother was home, but she wasn't working. She was naked. She was standing in the hallway with a distinct lack of *any* clothing. I intelligently closed the door behind me straightaway and even *more* intelligently the first thing I said to her was:

"Put your clothes on mum or I'll get Oedipus on your arse!"

Of course I *should* have said 'Oedipal' but what am I going to do about that now? It was the rudest thing I had ever said and I was reasonably impressed with myself. I'd only just picked up the 'Oedipus' bit and popular American fight-films could be thanked for the last words. I could say things like that though because it was, as I've told you before, a Fun House. A whole lot of fun. Prizes to be won

There was a bonus prize in this Fun House. Another naked lady was singing to herself while walking down the stairs.

It's a real crazy show, where anything can go.

She saw me, I saw her, she stopped singing and I didn't like the awkwardness of the silence so I broke it.

"They let us go home from school early because some kids messed with the water supply."

"Oh. This is... this is..."

"Is it your girlfriend? Is it your girlfriend mum?"

"Yes. Yes it is."

"I learnt what a 'lesbian' is at school ages ago. It's OK mum."

Well, that was a lie. It was only two terms ago when I heard the word 'lesbian', which was amazingly a whole two years after I first heard of homosexuality or, as I first came to know it, being a 'queerbo'. The 'bo' was – and I believe is – a rare embellishment of the word.

"OK son. Now, this must be a shock to you."

"No it's OK mum. But what about dad?"

"Dad knows."

"Is dad OK mum?"

"Dad's OK."

"Is *she* OK?"

"She's OK."

"I'm OK. And don't worry, I know what fannies are."

"OK... son."

"I'm going to the toilet now."

"I love you."

There was a lot of fanny and breast covering up going on all through that, but that's what was said. Then I went to the toilet and by the time I was out the other lady was gone, my mother was dressed and wanted to talk.

But I wasn't really shocked so I didn't feel any need to talk about it. My mother was happy (I got her to assure me), my father was content and the girlfriend was *very* happy. She had been singing – I remembered the tune and researched into it at a later date – *Unchained Melody*. Commendably so.

It feels like the thing to do to get out here, one stop early, and walk the rest of the way to the train station. It is the second roll's turn.

“Cheers.”

What point was there in letting myself be sad or embarrassed or... or *cry* or something like this? I had been enjoying life, I was having a great time walking home by myself and all the skipping and hopping etcetera. And I continued to be happy. For me, it felt like nothing had changed.

I suppose there *is* always one boy who knows someone who knows examples of these things, but I certainly wasn't going to tell anybody at school. I pictured the astonished faces and accompanying laughter, the calls of ‘Your mum's so gay!’ that would for once be completely true.

So, my mother was a queerbo. And?

Things didn't change and I didn't change.

And this, I've come to believe, was quite important for my life.

That roll was really chomped down and now I'm onto the last spherical source of nourishment and sugary sweetness. Briskly walking on my carpet of golden, fallen leaves, I follow the movement of a black cat that darts out in front of me. It reminds me of the black panther I saw while on my epic world adventures, which I'll speak more of later. The cat slows, turns to me and blinks.

I called that panther Cassie, after Cassis, French for blackcurrant, which is one of the blackest things in the world. Anyway, there'll be plenty of time for that later.

This cat runs off just as fast as she came and now she's gone. I take in the pleasant smell of wet leaves, mud and their thriving, odour discharging insects. I jump to take a leaf from a high branch, tear the leaf in two and throw it on the floor.

My mother and father still loved each other and preferred each other's company to anybody else's but my mother was having a sexual-come-romantic affair with a woman called ‘Tricia’. That wasn't much for my head to get around, even at 11 years old, I mean I can say it in one sentence, come on.

I wasn't in denial and I didn't try to trick myself into thinking things weren't different from how I'd originally perceived them. It'd been like that for quite some time, I just hadn't known about it. They'd planned to tell me and there were details that I didn't concern myself with – my father had completely lost his sex drive (I don't know, could *that* have explained his front-bottom?), my mother hadn't always been a lesbian and blah. I could tell you about my parents' unique variance of coexistence but – and call me self-centred if you will – I'm telling you about *me*. Eugene. And as far as I'm concerned, Eugene hadn't even really been born yet.

I guess I didn't let my discovery change my life. It didn't feel like the thing to do. I was an odd kid – a normally odd kid – at primary school and I didn't change. So I let myself become an abnormally odd adolescent. If I had to analyse my life then that's what I'd say. I remained childish.

The only thing that did change was my hair, which turned completely silver over the summer holidays. Not grey! Don't say grey! Silver! Elegant, refined, and special silver. And I still wear it with a grin.

"Can I just check your ticket sir?"

Sir? The people I'm passing by are becoming more and more refined themselves today!

"Thank you, sir."

"Hey Jim?"

"Yeah Bob?"

"Look at the pair on 'er!"

"Argh! That's a cracking arse as well!"

"She's all bubble and squeak."

"And no mistake."

Or maybe not.

I will buy a packet of fruit-pastilles, masturbate in the station toilet and then wait for my train.

3

Revered Freak Me

Tricia – my Mum’s lesbian lover that is – gave me an ocarina bass. It’s a tiny little, beautifully sounding instrument that fitted snugly into the right pocket of my brand new pair of secondary school trousers. Grammar school, naturally. It was on a leather necklace and was encrusted with a handful of shards of coloured cut glass. Maybe Tricia got it on holiday somewhere and felt sorry for me so wanted to give me a present and, well, I definitely did appreciate it. Sometimes when I was bored I’d just fetch it out and play it in my own way. I never learnt any popular songs on it, or read music or even found out how to play it properly, I just blew my own tunes. Simple things that sounded nice.

I still have it now and I still play the same simple things and they still sound nice. It’s in my trouser pocket now. In fact I’ve almost always had it on me, wherever I’ve been – what a cute little attachment I made to a lump of clay.

But at secondary school I made very few attachments. From the induction day I sort of thought it. Hundreds of scared kids, some with messy hair, trying their mightiest to make friends and still remain cool, needing help with the daunting new world and trying to find people who watched the same TV programmes as them. At the risk of sounding supercilious, I felt a lot more grown up than that – and looked it, what with my bonnet of *silver* hair. Despite the colour, the hair was still messy. Yet shorter, as long silver hair is quite a disaster and I was man enough to realise this. I suppose their initial impressions of me ranged from thinking I looked wicked to fearing I was diseased. But I can only suppose for I didn’t dwell on the subject much then and I shan’t do now. I didn’t need them. Sure I got lost on my way to my first music lesson and sure there may have been some element of fun in their card-collecting games, but I didn’t really need *them*. I didn’t really want *them* – the other boys I mean. They could have their break-time scuffles and shared swear words and feeling of camaraderie and – as much fun as that was – I said thanks but no thanks. Cheers but no cheers. That left me as the one boy in our form who sat with an empty seat next to him, who wasn’t invited to any of the many private puberty parties, who didn’t join in with the relentless teacher bashing. I was, and this is all by the end of the first year, the boy who a quarter of the year-group thought was (this would prove to be a good idea) deaf and dumb. All in all: friendless.

Ten minutes till my train comes in. There’s a pigeon in front of me, trying to snatch a slither of orange skin. Snap-snap the beak goes, but the peel is too big for it. It’s frantically wobbling around, snap-snap-ing and flourishing its wings intermittently.

Oh look, here comes another pigeon who perhaps the first has called – or cooed. They’re both having at it now, letting off little squawks as well. It’s just a bit of orange peel! It’s worthless! Fools!! They’re amusing me at least.

Actually maybe they do have some use for it, in a nest or as camouflage if they want to live in a fire or something. Maybe it is me who is the fool and they are the only ones who know why.

I like to let my imagination have a pretty free reign.

I was a reasonably intelligent child although I wasn’t smart or ugly enough to be called ‘boffin’ or ‘bodrick’. Must have been the absence of all that nurturing human

interaction, oh damn. Maths and science and English and all the rest never really fascinated me so I didn't try especially hard. If I had more enthusiasm and effort then I would probably have achieved more, but I still got mostly As. I mean I could have been a boffin and I could have got all As, it was just I didn't feel like it and as usual I did the things that felt like the things to do. Which, funnily enough, wasn't repeating formulae for hours or looking in-between the lines of books that didn't interest me.

So, what *did* feel like the thing to do? Well, many and varied things. During lower-school I frequently walked the school grounds all by myself, both through the student-ridden corridors and the wooded areas I was fortunate the school had. Both, and the mixtures of both, I enjoyed in different ways.

To be able to step out of a noisy yet dull lesson and run off to sit on a chopped-down trunk of a tree in a little completely unordered sprawl of life and beauty, that was what felt like the thing to do some break times. I'd rest or kick logs or play on the ocarina or go all intrepid explorer.

Once I constructed a forest fortress of twigs, leaves, and other dirty woodland bits 'n' bobs. It took the entire free time of one day – break and lunchtime – and I remember having to wash my filthy soiled hands off twice, both times attracting extremely concerned looks from students. They'd hardly guess I was out making a *fortress*! The most other kids did in the woods was smoke and take crafty looks at their dads' pornographic magazines.

I was pleased with my fortress. There was a powerful, hard-timber barricade setting out its boundaries, all on top of an earthen mound that was a good defensive site, naturally. A path of pebbles led up to a gate that was in reality an empty cigarette box. Four turrets were formed at strategic positions on the main barricade – these were basically piles of forest debris, with twigs sticking out of the top and little scraps of old wet paper wrapped around one twig on each turret to resemble flags. Inside, protected, were castle buildings like stables and a dining hall and so on. A delicate bit of twig-work had to go into making them look like real buildings. I knew what everything was and why everything was what it was but I can't remember all that now. There was a King's chamber on the top of the hill, which was also made of twigs, but bigger twigs, and covered in a glossy gold and red Tunnock's Caramel Bar I had unearthed – very regal. Inside the mock-throne-room enclosure I dropped one of my best finds – a fat stag beetle. I named him 'Stagmore' and I called the whole thing 'Stagmore Fortress.'

At the end of lunch I messed it all up and threw the bits back into the undergrowth. There was no *point* to Stagmore Fortress but it was fun. I did many things like that in the school-grounds, avoiding the malodorous smokers as I went about my business.

The pigeons are *still* pecking at the orange peel. They are going quite crazy over it. But they want it so much. I feel like chopping it up so they can take it back to wherever they want it.

I'm getting up and shooing them away. I get out my knife and slice the peel into smaller portions before sitting back down.

I've noticed there's quite an attractive lady down the platform though she hasn't distracted me a great deal yet.

Sometimes I didn't venture so far as the relaxing glades for entertainment because there was ample stimulus swarming around the school buildings – the children. I was quite the observer and indeed still am an avid onlooker of the multitude of things that go on around me. Half the time I couldn't care less about what people are getting up to, as I'm

deep in my own thought or plan or whatever, but for the other half I can play the spectator with a jot of obsession.

Occasionally I'd have lunch in the main dining room, which seated hundreds of scallywags of various ages. As I've mentioned before, this was a classroom of a different kind for me. Listening into conversations was truly enlightening although not once did I really think 'Oh I'd so like to join in with the chatter!' The older boys actually revealed developed – and sometimes intriguing – opinions on a number of subjects. I chomped on my banana or the like and pricked my ears up for a meal of education. I lapped it up and took it all in as if I were a nosy neighbour.

Potentially I was also a perfect spy for teachers, but I had no reason to tell them all of the things the miscreants got up to.

Not only did I listen though, I have already said I was an *observer* and I looked at the ways they all did their things – their gesticulations, their emotional signalling, their exhibitions of machismo. A lot of the time they nauseated me and I loathed them but I observed on.

Walking changeable circuits around the school was a means for me to pry on other people's business while exercising. Talking of exercise, when I was around 14 I began a fitness schedule that involved swimming twice a week (all by myself!), doing fifty press-ups and 50 sit-ups and 20 minutes of weight lifting a day. I still do it today and, when I've been where there are pools and weights, I've never forgotten or put it off. I do it because I hear it's good for me, but mainly because I enjoy it. The day it doesn't feel like the thing to do, I'll stop.

So I strolled around school literally looking and thinking. When I was young the others must have thought I was a strange little beggar.

"Umm excuse me"

"Yes?"

"Is this the right platform for the train to Cradley?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

- I lied! This is not the right platform for the train to Cradley. The attractive lady, who has an adequately proportioned body, has sat down next to me now, though she is still quite anxious this is not the right platform. I want to look at her so I told her it is.

The library was another one of my haunts, where I entertained myself with, predictably enough, books. I ferried many between it and my house as well. My room was covered in books. I was always 'reading' (picking up now and again) ten books at any given moment, there were a hundred books in my room I really wanted to read and always about a thousand in the world that I'm sure I would have enjoyed consuming. I liked learning of all kinds of different things and experiences and stories of adventure.

There was great disparity in how different teachers saw me. To some I was just another head to fill up, to others for some reason I was a source of amusement and to one an 'exceptionally odd fellow.'

When I was 15 I was allowed out of school at lunchtimes and I had the Year 11 tie to prove it. My pastimes changed somewhat with this new freedom. No longer did I only

have piddling around in the school grounds to entertain myself with, I had the whole of Kent! Well, as far as I could get in an enlarged lunchtime. Other groups of lads stumbled off to the chippy or to a slightly more picturesque place to smoke, but I wanted to feel more than just that. More than hot chips I'd already tasted before, more than sticky lungs. I wanted adventure.

A usual order of a day was morning lessons, eat a little and patrol the corridors at break, more lessons, then walk as far as I could away from the school in a completely random direction, come back, finish off the lessons and go home. The lunch-hour was curiously an hour long so I could keep walking in one direction for thirty minutes and then I'd have to walk the same way back. Never late back. I don't think the teachers or pupils ever knew where I went. Half of the time nor did I.

"You know now you've got me thinking, I'm not sure this is the right platform for Cradley."

"Oh, well—"

"Don't worry, I'll check the sign."

What? You did not think I'd let her get on the wrong train did you? What if she had a lover to fuck or a Granny to kiss? It was simply that I enjoy looking at her that I told her it was this platform. I take pleasure in watching her as I took pleasure in licking the jam of the doughnut.

"I'm terribly sorry lady, that was my mistake, this isn't the platform for Cradley."

"Oh, which is it?"

"7. I really am very sorry."

"It's OK, I haven't missed it have I?"

"No, we've got plenty of time left. That was a bit of luck!"

"Thanks."

"I mean fancy we were both on the wrong platform!"

"Did you want Cradley too?"

"I did and still do, thanks a lot for that."

And just as I enjoy another doughnut I enjoy watching her further so I change platforms to hers. She is after all a remarkably pretty lady.

All of the orange peel is gone.

As a sixth former I also had free periods which, suitably placed, allowed me to venture much farther from school. For every walk I went out on a whim. I'd just let my legs take me or set myself bizarre goals (which I'd often fail) like having to see ten cows (I achieved that one), or I'd find myself a nice viewpoint where I could see landscapes I'd never seen before. I could equally wander around the High-Street and buy particular things that excited me, which one day, for example, was a packet of Bombay Mix. I bought the Mix, sat on a bench eating it, taking my time over it, and then returned to school. Most of the time there were hardly any hair-raising activities involved, I did what I felt like.

A marginally more exciting example is when I climbed a mountain in a lunchtime and two free periods.

Perhaps it was more of a hill. No – a very large and grand mound of land that took well over a half an hour to scale. I had set off without any idea of where I was going and had at first followed an old and lumbering man, just because I thought he may have been

going somewhere fun. Even secret. He was as a matter of fact going rather innocently to the pub, after – less innocently – peeing against a tree *right* in front of me. It was from *The Cock in Hand* to *The Bird in Hand* for him. I left him at the pub. He'd set me up to stride south, beside a stream that for no reason at all drew the attention of my eyes. They tracked its course and brought my legs with them. I realised I was walking against its feeble current and yearned to find its origin.

Soon I had to abandon the beaten track and jump a fence in order to stay with it. I was then forced to stop myself from slipping off a slimy bank and tip-toed over fallen rocks that at points were the only ground that had any respect for my school shoes. A few cottages reminded me that civilisation was still there, somewhere, but at that moment what I *really* wanted was to find the start of this insignificant stream. A good twenty minutes after leaving the rogue urinator (what *is* it with old men and putting their phalluses on show for me?) I looked back on myself properly and saw I'd actually come quite a bit up a hill. A mini-mountain, I liked to think. What was more, there wasn't all that much more to go so I forged on.

And at some point I reached the top. There was no collection of marvellous natural water features – no fresh-water-falls or ponds or anything sparkling in the way water sparkles – at all. The soil was just a bit damp.

But the view was wondrous. If I could paint I would have painted it. Further to the south I saw rolling hills of multicoloured fields, snatches of trees scattered here and there – with perfect landscape-painting potential – and in the distance some cows. At least ten! I didn't have the cow-objective though, that was just a frill. To the north I saw the waterway I'd walked by. I saw the trickle near by me, the streamlet that grew from that, then the stream, and I convinced myself it grew to the size of a river, far off and over the horizon.

For a quarter of an hour or so I rested on the largest rock I could see. I played a little ocarina and I nibbled a little Bombay Mix and then I left my mountain.

The only notable event of my return journey was the smelling of the old man's urine.

"Er can you tell me if this is the train for Cradley?"

"It is and it's leaving in one minute."

"Thank you."

"Everybody's going to Cradley today!"

I *very* rarely make jokes in public but I felt like saying that to this flustered middle-aged man. Gosh the station signs must be pretty poor. Why must it be so hard to find the train for Cradley?!

I don't think I've ever been to Cradley before – perhaps because it's so badly advertised!

Oftentimes I let my adventures take up hours after school as well, and my parents left me to it all considering. Now, I would go into more interesting and exciting adventures but you'll soon see my life is packed with adventure – adventure that makes my schoolboy escapades seem cod to lobster.

An elderly lady gets on the train just before it pulls away. I feel like checking.

"This *is* the train for Cradley isn't it?"

"Oh I do think so, yes."

“Thank you kindly.”

In the sixth form however, and this always makes me smile, I wasn't seen as the dirty little odd kid anymore. Oh I was still peculiar. I mean I didn't actually talk to anyone for crying out loud! But for some reason that was sort of cool.

Happily minding my own business, *someone* would disturb me in nearly every lesson. To ask me for a piece of paper, an answer to copy or to pose a question to the tune of “why don't you ever talk?” or even “how well equipped are you?... *downstairs*.” I was happy to answer teacher's questions and oblige with pieces of paper and whatnot but any question that verged on personal was answered with a simple smile from me. It amused me greatly that they cared about my life, why I was quiet, and “has he told anybody why he has grey hair?”

I'd correct that in my mind to 'silver' but I just smiled to them. Because that's what they really expected and that pleased them in some little way. I was, throughout the sixth form, the freak of the year. But I was respected. In a way they admired what must have appeared to be my stoic calm, my uninfluenced direction. When I passed a lone sixth former in a corridor he'd grin and nod to me – not a grin of mock or malice, rather a grin of actual amusement – and a nod of respect. We shared our grins and nods and not much else.

I didn't have any friends at secondary school but I still felt comfortable there. I know I was surely the butt of many jokes and insults I never heard but I think that overall they liked me. At my cockiest I felt revered. I was different to them and that gave us all some joy.

If I *have* to stay around the same people for long periods of time nowadays I do just as I did then. I act perfectly agreeably and keep my thoughts perfectly hidden. Works for me.

Cradley *already*? What was all the fuss about? It was only a four-minute trip. I am getting off the train and there is my attractive lady. I suppose I follow her because it feels like the thing to do.

At the end of the sixth form I did reasonably well in the examinations. And then I went to University, where I decided to go crazy.

More Willy, Less Willy

My name was, of course – I mean *of course!* – not Eugene Xanoc. Eugene Xanoc is an absolutely ridiculous name! And that is why I chose it. I mean I wasn't christened 'Eugene Xanoc', well I wasn't christened at all, but I *definitely* wasn't christened 'Eugene Xanoc'.

It didn't say that on my birth certificate and I would say that's because my parents didn't want to title my life as a farce – to name a baby 'Eugene Xanoc'! – but, well, loving people as they were, they did near enough do that anyway.

I have never been embarrassed and yes maybe that's because I'm odd or maybe I say it because I like to think of myself as different, etcetera, but there is a reason I attribute to it, which is my former name – my certificated name – the name I *would* have been christened, had I. Bouncy-castle designers and cheap-pen-production-administrators can't be the most intelligent or worldly people and as far as my name was concerned my parents blundered big time. My family's name was 'Richards' and my, possibly naïve, parents chose the name 'Willy' for innocent little me. How ironic. My mother was an aspiring lesbian and yet she had her a Willy! I don't know, perhaps I was striking in that area at birth.

Can you not strain your eyes and intellect to see the 'problem' of having the name 'Willy Richards'? I mean 'Willy' is obscure and laughable enough but to be called – and I was – 'Willy Dicks' – can you imagine how that feels? Can you imagine how *embarrassing* that feels?!

Ah! Well I never did! And this is precisely why! Because at around the same time I was wise enough to sense the hilarity of the name 'Willy Richards' (i.e. it contains the word for a very funny little thing) I must also have been developing my sense of embarrassment! See I picked up on the comedy before I was aware others did, so if they said my name and tittered I knew exactly why and, come on, after a few times it got so lame and done-before, to me, that I didn't even react to it.

It was like me realising 'Therein lies the comedy' and streams of predictable kidders came up to me to say 'Wherein lies the comedy?! There!! He-he!' and I was saying to myself 'Yes! Yes therein lies the comedy, my friend, and I'm very aware!' Though I'd use the term 'friend' lightly.

I was very confident in myself as a person who was not a penis!

As if I wasn't stable enough anyway – just to reinforce this side of me – by the time other people had cottoned onto the fact 'Richards' could be translated comically and that I was nick-named (by some) 'Willy Dicks' the joke was tired! I was spared embarrassment yet again and, it seems, forever more.

I can't put educated reasoning to every one of my movements away from the norm but, well, at least it's one thing I won't link to my mother's sexual practices! Admittedly though, it can be linked to my mother. She *was* one of the co-authors of the first, two worded, chapter of my life. The chapter was viewed by many to suck.

There's a chance that anything to do with embarrassment and the lack thereof was pure coincidence. I like to think it may be so.

It was a silly name so I changed it... or rather *no*, that was not the reason at all. I'm all for silliness and I feared embarrassment about as much as I relied on Superman. Oh no, quite the opposite. I yearned for silliness – 'silliness' by most people's definition; fun to me. I didn't just want a silly name, I wanted *my* name. I thought up Eugene Xanoc.

When I turned 18 I legally changed my name to Eugene Xanoc. My parents had always treated me with a generous helping of tolerance and although they couldn't comprehend *why* I wanted to do such a thing, they couldn't think of any reason *why not*.

I told papa the second name and he nearly chuckled his front-bottom off. As I've told you before, one of his contractors was 'Xanoc Medicines'. He used to get all mock-excited about 'ooo the new Xanoc deal!', Xanoc contract this, Xanoc contract that – I'm sure all of the talk of Xanoc Medicines at the dinner table actually did our health a touch of good. It was an absurd name and it was to be mine.

Combined with a good first name. That represented *me*. Circumstances dictated that *me* was usually *you*:

"What are *you* doing?"

I needed to build on that.

"Hey, *you*!"

Everybody kept reminding me that so few people knew me.

"Why don't *you* ever talk?!"

It was right in front of me and ready for me to snatch.

"Excuse me... yes... *you*."

Eugene. Eugene Xanoc. Master of the world!

She walks fast for a lady. I feel slight sensations on my cheeks and hark it is raining. She's got her umbrella out pronto and bravo to her for it is a smashing specimen. Pink – nice and feminine.

I do not carry or want an umbrella. I'll walk in the rain as I'll walk in the heat or freeze or whatever. As long as it doesn't do me any serious harm it's all good.

This garden I'm passing looks crisp and idyllic. The sun, in its last setting breaths, is throwing shafts of orange light onto the highest reaching plants, which hold it back and allow a patch of grass and bed plants to rest in the cool shade. Light and water droplets splash off the glossy green of their petals and show off the splendour of their flowers' colour. White and red roses mark where the dirty pavement ends and the pointless prettiness begins.

I take a cautious look around and then take my knife from my pocket. I cut a red rose flower. The petals feel like wafer thin wet velvet. I must shove it into my breast pocket as this fast-walking lady is getting away.

I put my knife away.

Perhaps that was a shock to you – the invention of the name I mean. Plenty of people think of names they'd rather have and plenty change their name, as the guys in the TV are eager to emphasise – by Deed Poll. Most people with my former name would consider it. I'm aware that it increased my chances of continuing to be an outcast, but was that necessarily a bad thing?

That was my little present-to-self for my 18th birthday. Although I could have done it earlier, I wanted to do it between school and university so that there was a definite turning point in my life – as you have probably realised I often love to strain the drama for all it's worth. Also on that birthday I received sweeties, a pen with my new name on, a mahogany desk and cash.

So, University. I went to Edinburgh to study some subject or another. The city was stimulating and a good distance from anyone I knew so I liked it. My preconception of it was as a really blue place but when I went there for the first time it didn't really feel like any

colour in particular, it felt like where I wanted to be for a few years. I was Eugene Xanoc and I felt crazy. Crazy in a mainly good way.

I'm walking on the opposite side of the road from her and three shabbily dressed boys approach me. They completely fail to acknowledge my existence.

"No that's the hard-water tap."

"Is my tap hard-water?"

"No, soft-water."

"What's his little tap?"

"Soft-water."

"I thought it was hard-water."

"Well I'm not sure but-"

"What's the difference?"

"Which one tastes better? Isn't the one?"

I like the feeling of hearing random snippets of conversations that pass me by. I'll never know how that intriguing discussion on different water types arose or what the conclusions will be. That's a nice sense of flow. It is reaffirmed – the world spins round and goes on without me. The troubling uncertainty is this though: if the flowing world were modelled as water, would it be hard, or soft?

And which tap would it come out of?

Edinburgh and its rugged surrounding lands were to an enthusiastic explorer, surprisingly enough, much more satisfying than a small area of roads leading to tops of hills purporting to be mountains. I delved straight into that – the protocol for which remained mostly unchanged. I'd head off in one direction, just as I would before, walk until I did something or got somewhere and went back, to the city centre where I had an apartment all to myself. I'm getting a little ahead of myself – I'd just like to recall one of the first conversations I had with my course co-ordinator.

"Eugene Xanoc?"

"Yes."

"Xanoc. Eugene *Xanoc*. Xanoc – where's that name from then?"

"Oh it's of Indian derivation."

She keenly observed that I was not Indian but didn't mention it.

"Oh aye! That's a nice name you've got there."

"Thank you."

"Bring any friends with you, here to Edinburgh."

"No."

"So you've been making yourself some friends here, have you?"

"No, no not yet."

"Don't worry, it all happens very quickly and painlessly!"

"I'm sure it does."

"With the help of a wee bit of drinky usually!"

Indeed. However, while most of the excitable undergraduates formed into teeming masses of befriending drunkards I was being all queer and solitary and – that new addition – crazy.

She has nice breasts. They're well contoured and move admirably with the rest of her body – there's none of this jumping and sagging that looks so bad on so many women. I can near enough make out the outline of her brassiere, straining through the back of a thin black jacket. It, like all her other garments, fits tightly onto her show-off-able frame. The smooth, tight skirt stops a little above her ankle and I find my eyes are repeatedly drawn to the portions of well hued flesh.

The rain falls all around her but it doesn't touch her and it doesn't affect her. I get the impression that her dry, shoulder length, blondey-brown hair would be super soft to the touch. The delicate strands further beautify this already glorious cliché of a sunset.

But... she has a vile perfume.

My pace matches hers.

At University I was a great believer that appearing crazy would be fun for me, though I didn't really wish to just come across as odd and irritable to fellow students and teachers who I had to, occasionally, do some proper work with. Outside of my circle of academic acquaintances, I experimented – psychologically. Well, when I say experimented I hardly mean with controlled variables and repeat trials and so on and so forth, I just mean I did new things that appealed to me, as per usual.

"I would like a packet of brains."

"Brains?"

"Brains."

"*Brains?*"

"Yes, brains."

"We... we..."

"Don't tell me you don't sell brains."

"We don't."

"Then give me a Mars bar."

"That'll be 36p."

It was rarely constructive. To surprise and shock people and provide some stimulus that diverted their lives from the same, long, bland and dreary course just momentarily – was there anything wrong in that?

"And how about a Flake?"

"Umm... OK... that's 36p again."

"Oh and the finest lady of the house."

"Look... mate, we don't do- "

"Nope. Good-day."

Silly and childish and naughty – spank, spank – but good fun. So many children, and adults mind, sit at their escapist computer and video games thinking "Hey, what if I do *this!*", "I bet nobody's thought of *this* before." They ripple the placid waters of the environment inside the fictional world because it's... fun.

Do I live this world like they play their video games? No. *They* get ‘Game Over’ over and over again while I game on. Also, the inhabitants of the two sets of worlds are very different. Whereas characters in games will hit back and call the city guards if you so much as shove them, people here are too timid and unsuspecting to do much about having their routines disturbed.

Besides – life isn’t a game, life’s real. Didn’t your Mummy tell you that?

The rain is coming harder and harder. The escalating pitter-patter is drowning out the stamping of her high heels and I am becoming rather soaked. Not to worry, I don’t expect I’ll have to follow her for much longer... though I should make a decision... do I go for it now or wait a little longer till she ends it herself?

You’d probably be amazed at just how many different ways of appearing weird there are and equally just how much I got off on each one. I enjoyed going *right* up to strangers – so I was virtually touching them – asking them what the time was or how to reach somewhere. I enjoyed seeing their instinctive reactions and their attempts to suppress them. I enjoyed practising not looking into people’s eyes when talking to them – a skill that’d prove invaluable later on. These things and the rest felt like the things to do.

Now I quicken my stride and cross the road to her side. I don’t think she’ll get away. I can hear the stamp-stamp of the stilettos once more. My hair is nearly saturated with cool water, the same cool water that drips from off my nose. I am only a few metres away from her. She just twitched her head in a vague I-want-to-see-who’s-behind-me-but-I-don’t-want-to-seem-strange conflict of impulses. I ready myself to overtake on the right and I shall put my hand out to-

She turns away! And escaped my grasp. I shan’t bother pursuing her down her own garden path.

I take a cursory look around the area and see a road-sign. This is ‘Greenyoke Road’ and she entered number 56. I take a piece of paper from my pocket and make a note of this before walking onwards.

Some boys at primary school called me Cock-boy-cock. Others called me Penis-breath. Their favourite was ‘Willy fingers’. That’s ten willies. In hindsight I think two ‘Dicks’ were enough.

By the way, I wasn’t going to rape her.

No? I don't blame you, but it is actually pretty elementary. I *seem* crazy yet I am *not*. I *seemed*, to you, to be weird enough to do something bad to that woman – who lives at 56 Greenyoke Road – yet I didn't. I may not have been christened and I may well be capricious but I have morals!

Don't worry, the misconception was intentionally insinuated, by me, for kicks. Yes, I suggested that I had malicious plans because that gave me some satisfaction.

I say that I do such things just after I say that I am not crazy and, you may be wondering with frustration, isn't that a blatant contradiction? Aren't they crazy things? Isn't *this* crazy talk? Aren't *I* crazy and am just trying to explain my way out of it and confuse you in the process?

Nope. I'm not crazy and I have the documents to prove it.

While I'm in Cradley I may as well see its attractions. Cradley town centre is in sight and looks oh-so-tempting. In fact, as I near it, it seems more and more like a village. There's a handful of village shops that I'm sure around 50 elderly ladies call a 'precinct', pleasant arrangements of shrubs in big pots, and I bet there's a village pub not far away. The rain is easing off but I'm already soaked to the bone and back.

Yep, there the pub is, *The King's Head*. I'm sure the whole of Cradley is packed in there so that's where I'll head. I don't think there's anything grander here and I must urinate.

Not that that's stopped me before from knocking on doors and asking if I can use strangers' toilets.

"Hello, I really must spend a penny and there are no public toilets anywhere near."

"..."

"I won't be long and-"

"I don't know you, do I?!"

"No. Look... I'll only do number one."

"Well if you must, I mean it really is rather-"

"I'll give you five pounds for the inconvenience."

"No that's OK I don't need any money."

"That's very kind of you."

Certainly charismatic. But crazy?

I lied when I said that I was mildly schizophrenic, well, technically. Technically I am not schizophrenic. A team of psychologists told me so. They decided that I could act and reason perfectly rationally; that I ration off areas of my brain reasonably; that it was not the home of various antagonistic forces. I did not meet the criteria of being diagnosed as schizophrenic, or schizoid, or schizotypal or any other schizzy-thing that sounds rather scary.

And I'm not autistic. I didn't get nearly enough ticks. I wouldn't be surprised if you had already whacked on my figurative head, with a fat rubber stamp, 'Autistic', but I'd rub your mark off – or at least the psychologists would. I have no problem with communication – no problem that I don't create. I say it like an alcoholic – I can stop whenever I want! The truth, which would to the ill-educated mind appear ironic, is that I am a man and I'm in the rain yet I'm not Rain Man. It's not that I lack empathy because I'd say I have an above

average grasp of what's afoot in other people's heads and I can talk and make sense and everything. Hold off with your rubber stamps for the moment.

"Right mate?"

Why must everybody call me 'mate'? Do I look like a mate of his? I suppose he's just greeting a stranger in the most cordial way he knows, while he makes sure his beer doesn't spill as he gets out of my path, but I still think he's pathetic.

I am not his mate.

The best thing about smokey pubs is the people. So smiley and jolly and happy and with so little reason to be either three! They are all each other's mates and they'll all stop their beers from spilling, together, while sharing mundane news, cigarettes and the odd dirty joke. They have no money yet they'll spend whatever they do have in here – having fun in slightly modified states of mind. This is their world.

But it isn't mine, so I head for the lavatory.

In Edinburgh I got a taste for night-time walks. I rambled around the streets and the countryside in the dark. That may seem decidedly dull to you. At primary school it was OK to be odd; at secondary school a thing that people laughed about; at University it was something nobody cared about – which was fantastic. They probably never thought twice about my dullness. They had their girlfriends and their boyfriends; their legal drugs and their illegal drugs; their pubs and clubs; their sex and their ambitions – all were so unconnected to wayward, night-walker Eugene. Why would they admire me as they had done at school, when there was such a surplus of freaky attention-grabbers?

"Where does that Eugene Xanoc hang out?"

"I dunno."

See, if you want to be clever, I was symbolically moving into the darkness. I found my place – one of my places – in the shadows of society. But what was I *literally* doing? I can safely say I was not just, as my dusty dictionary says on night-walkers, "one who roves about in the night for evil purposes; specifically, a prostitute who walks the street." I don't think that I've ever gone out of my way for evil purposes. In darkness there is beauty, solitude and ambience otherwise unobtainable. To be enveloped in blackness forces the surrounding physical world into the background and, to make a change, it's what's going on in your mind that's the most illuminated thing.

You could just sit in a room and turn the lights off, I guess, but it has a different effect.

I tried to find a prestigious name for myself, for while I was on these walks. The dictionary didn't help much though – I was not a robber or prostitute, or user of prostitutes so I couldn't call myself a night-walker. I liked the sound of 'noctambulist' but that apparently means sleep-walker. I remember one night, when I was searching for a label for me, in one of these books, and a thought came to me like a bright light through the darkness – maybe *I* wasn't in the dictionary. Maybe I could be explained in ways that had not been predefined for the mass-market. Oh it was a good thought.

I still haven't really said what I did, when I was being all unnameable; I did pretty much the usual. Thinking, doing and trying new and fun things. One example, from a hundred possible, is that once I set out to make somebody happy. That was my objective –

to make some random Edinburgher happy. I did it on a full-moon. I didn't know what to expect so I just followed the Scottish coastline north, as you do, looking out for an opportunity to put a smile on a face. In an hour or two I'd come to a remote cliffside cottage and upon creeping and spying through windows I found it housed one elderly lady. She seemed a remarkably hairy lady and was sitting by a fire, sipping on whiskey, with some sort of terrier at her feet. Her eyes were fixed on a space filled with nothing and her mind seemed equally vacant. With one hand she raised her whiskey glass, with the other she leaned a little to stroke her dog. That seemed to be the entertainment for the evening.

I had my orders. My first idea was to show her flowers, I think just because I associated old, smiling ladies with flowers. But how could I do it? I couldn't just dig up flowers from the ground and sellotape them to her window. Well, I could, but I was under the impression that wasn't guaranteed to make her smile. Besides, I had no sticky tape. I considered just going in and talking to her, but decided against that as she may well also have thought that a little odd and terrifying.

I could have phoned her up – I found a payphone a few hundred metres away – telling her that I was from the English government and that for some obscure reason she was to be given a tax rebate of £4, 326. In fact I followed this idea all the way to the nearest village, where I searched for a phone directory, but for some reason felt it'd be a little mean to do something like that as the hairy lady's happiness would be somewhat transient and would, well, give way to great sadness. Morals, you see!

Eventually I gave up on any fiendish or elaborate plan the second I saw in the window of a late-opening newsagent's something that was sure to put a smile on her face: whiskey. More drink would equal more happiness. It'd warm her up a wee bit on those cold Scottish nights – fighting on the same side as her whiskers and baby-beard and, I'd imagine, leg-hair galore. It cost less than ten pounds.

I walked briskly back to the cottage, placed the bottle outside the door and rang the bell. I then snuck off into a bush a good way from the building, from where I could still see the seat she sat on, the glass and the terrier. She had got up to answer the door. She didn't get an answer but she got some whiskey.

I heard the door bang close and soon saw what I expected- a hairy, old *and* nonplussed lady, holding a bottle of cheap whiskey. She sat down, stroked that doggy and looked around as if some sort of resolution was hiding in her living room. I remained in a contorted position in the bushes for some time, determined to discern a smile. I waited and waited but it wasn't coming. She settled a little but I was hanging onto nothing as far as demonstrable happiness was concerned. So I returned to the door and rang the bell. She reacted properly to this and soon I saw the hair up front.

"Hello? Yes? Can I help you?"

There was something behind her that caught my eye – just a silly bright flower – that gave me an idea.

"Well, I hope so, though I'm in a rather bizarre predicament."

"Oh?"

"See I think I left some whiskey at your door a few moments ago."

"You did! Well I mean someone did! I suppose that was you – who *are* you?"

"Jack. I'm really very sorry about all this, you see there's been a bit of an accident."

"Really? What kind of accident?"

"Well, I'm from the University you see, and I was just coming up to give a present to my Grandmother as it's her birthday. And- "

“Yes – so why did you put it at my door and disturb me like this?”
“Well – if you’ll let me explain – yes I wanted to give her the whiskey for her birthday and-”
“Yes?”
“It was meant to be a surprise and, well, I-”
“Yes, what?”
“I left it at the wrong house.”
Her face became uglier.
“This cottage is miles from another one! Are you... are you *crazy*?!”

She said it with a grimace of bewilderment and an element of warmth, but still. I was the crazy one. Not her – not the hairy lady sitting in perpetual boredom. I was asked if *I* was crazy. I’m the crazy one. Not the thousands of students back in Edinburgh who were crying over exams or overdosing or laughing at their own jokes or incessantly copying each other or dedicating themselves to specific little things that few people cared anything about. Not them! But me! Not the crowd I left downstairs, here in this pub, sitting in a room filled with noxious fumes, chugging copious amounts of poison and cackling. It’s not deemed insane to do *that*. *That*’s not met with a hairy grimace. What was *crazy* was a young man dropping off a present for his Grandmother and putting it at the wrong cottage by mistake.

“No, I’m blind.”

And then the penny dropped. She realised what she had really thought was odd about me – I hadn’t made eye contact with her. My gaze drifted from here to there, as I mimicked the blind people I’d seen on TV and in the hospital. It all made sense to her now.

“Oh!! Heaven’s, I’m sorry laddy!”
“It’s OK, you weren’t to know; I haven’t my stick.”
“No, oh! I’ll get your whiskey for you!”
“No rush.”

It all made sense – even though it actually really, really didn’t. Why did a blind man go all by himself to a remote cottage? And how could he find a *wrong* remote cottage? Why wasn’t he going to leave a card with the whiskey? Why didn’t he pop in to say Happy Birthday? That didn’t matter to her – things were a lot less crazy.

“Here it is – it looks very nice!”
“Thank you very much, maam.”
“Oh I am terribly sorry... if you want to have a drop of my whiskey you’re very welcome.”
“I wouldn’t like to intrude.”
“You wouldn’t be, it’s just Roger and me. And Roger’s a dog.”
“I suppose I could...”
“It’s a little lonely out here.”
“One drink and I must be on my way.”

No longer was I crazy. I was a guest.

I took an intentionally clumsy step into the house and then my mission was complete. The hairy lady smiled. She didn't smile for my benefit, because I 'couldn't' see it, she must have smiled because she was happy. Good work Eugene.

"Oh! I completely forgot – I've got to get this to the real Grandmother still!"

"Of course you do!"

"Thanks for the invitation though, it's much appreciated."

"That's OK – my name's Ruth."

"Thank you Ruth and I'm sorry about this upset."

"It's OK, I hope you find the right house next! How do you do it, without your sight?"

"We blind have our ways!"

"I'm sure you do."

We said goodbye a number of times, she thrust the whiskey into my hands and I stumbled off. I couldn't resist walking into a tree, for comic effect.

I'm in the toilets and am about to make a trickle. The contents of the bowl looks like a whole lot of apple juice, but I know it's not. I flush and then begin.

Trickle-trickle.

"I hate it when guys go into a cubicle and piss."

That's nice to know.

"More like gays."

Ha.

"Did you hear me sonny?!"

"Yep."

"Why don't you piss in the urinal? What, you poof or something?"

"Because I prefer the cubicle."

"Why's that then?"

"Why do you prefer the cubicle to excrete in?"

"What the fuck are you talking about? You can't shit in a urinal!"

"Why not?"

"Shut up, you're having a laugh."

I had decided upon going crazy and people, such as the hairy lady, had labelled me accordingly. I knew that I wasn't and that it was all a splendid façade, or at least I thought that I wasn't at all crazy considering I was conscious of all that I got up to and all that I appeared to be.

The whole thing fascinated me. What was crazy? Who was crazy? If I could seem crazy yet think that I wasn't, then are the people who society tag as crazy actually crazy? What makes a man crazy? Why do people go crazy? How crazy could one be? How crazy could I be? Who decided what was crazy and what was not? Was it possible that in the future I would become crazy? Crazy, crazy, crazy.

"What do you mean, why can't you shit in a urinal?"

"Well, why don't you?"

"Because I'd look like a twat."

"Why?"

“Because I’d be shitting in front of everyone!”
 “And?”
 “And they’d see my arse!”
 “And?”
 “Don’t just keep saying ‘and’ sonny, it’s damn rude.”
 “Why?”
 “Oy! And ‘why!’”
 “What would be wrong with everyone seeing your buttocks?”
 “Well it’s not all that pleasant, let me tell you that!”
 “How so?”
 “Look, trust me sonny, it’s not pleasant! Especially doing what it’s doing now.”
 “If there was nobody here, would you excrete in the urinal?”
 “Why are you asking these questions?”
 “You started it. As Aristotle said, all men by nature desire to know.”
 “Know what? If I’d shit in a urinal?”
 “That and whatever else they wish to know.”
 “Why do you wish to know? Who’s this Aristotle guy anyway?”
 “A very old man. Why did you wish to know why I was standing in a cubicle?”
 “Because it’s fucking stupid.”
 “Like excreting in a urinal?”
 “Yeah. Look, you’re doing my head in mate. I think I need a drink.”
 Flush. I think it’s time to ask.
 “What’s your name?”
 “What?”
 “What’s your name?”
 “Derek.”
 “Derek who?”
 “What’s it to you?”
 “Oh, that’s a secret.”
 “Seriously mate, I’m telling you right now that I’m not a poof.”
 “I understand the seriousness of your claim. What’s your name?”
 “What’s yours?”
 “Eugene.”
 “Eugene who?”
 “Eugene Xanoc.”
 “What kind of name’s that?”
 “A Russian one. What’s yours?”
 “Derek Reddleman. It’s... it’s English.”
 “Thank you Derek.”
 “For what? You’re doing my head in sonny.”
 “Goodbye.”

He opens his cubicle door, washes his hands, air-dries them and opens the toilets door. He then hesitates a little and closes it again.

“Won’t you tell me the secret?”
 “No.”

“For fuck’s sake, you’re a joker!”

He leaves.

The joker in the pack.

I pondered for great lengths of time, during my residency in Edinburgh, on the subject of insanity. To the point where I was seriously considering making myself a student living out of it. Well, an unnecessary surplus. My parents already made enough money from cheap-pens and bouncy-castle related professions to wholly support and partially spoil me at University. Not that I spent a lot – it's surprising just how little you can live on, when you don't rate alcohol and eating out as necessities.

I had various ideas, as per usual, and the simplest one was to be an assistant at a Fudge shop. Fudge-packing – somebody has to do it. But that'd only amuse me for a few weeks.

Then came the *crazy* idea. Edinburgh is, like all student-infested cities, abounding with theme-pubs. Not pubs like this, that by the way I am leaving right now, but pubs I admire. Original concepts, in beer-driven form. Naturally I despised the vast majority of the people who used them, the themes were used only so far as they could get money in and they too often just had the same cocktails but with different, 'wacky' names, but they were one of the few elements of typical student life that appealed to me.

So I thought I'd start up one of my own. An insane asylum. There'd be old-fashioned, state-hospital musak playing. The staff would wear doctors' and nurses' uniforms and slip pills (vitamin pills!) into the drinks, which would have wacky names. There'd be private, solitary-confinement rooms and rooms with nothing but padded walls, where people could crash out. It'd all be in the name of fun and insanity.

But that idea bore no fruit. I had no substantial start-up funds and too many other whims to satisfy. Actually, the real reason was I found that my bank-balance didn't go down when I withdrew money from one special hole-in-the-wall next to a shop that sold Tartan underwear.

Derek Reddleman. He'll go far in life. That little episode has reminded me of some of my exploits of craziness that I enjoyed in Edinburgh. See, I dabbled with the idea of creating people in my head. Sort of synthetic split personalities that could speak to me and to each other and have a gay old time. For a few days I had three guys shouting at each other over my neural pathways. I called them Dave, Mike and 'Arry.

"Alright Mike?"

"Alright 'Arry?"

"Ow's it doing?"

"Tops, tops."

"Good stuff, did you see Chelsea?"

"What a blindin' game!"

"But it should 'ave been 2-1 mate."

"You're not wrong there. Oh! Look 'oo it is! 'Right Dave?"

"Boys! 'Ow's it doing?"

Now I don't see many things as wastes of time but that, well, nearly was. By the end of it I was convinced that my skull was not well suited to being a pseudo-pub. The Boys do however visit every now and again.

Baron Roy was also born and bred somewhere between my ears. He was a bit more fun as he was a man of superior class and taste – so was naturally easier for me to construct.

I used to talk with him about horseracing, respectable women and city finance. I'm a fantastic conversationalist and we never experienced any awkward silences – the world misses out – but that was also too much effort and too little reward. If you can't help having proper split personalities or voices in your head then you may as well enjoy them, but they're a lot of bother for those of us who have a choice.

"Eugene old boy, do you know how the Yank economy's holding up?"

"Impeccably apparently. The new governor of the Federal Reserve is by all accounts producing some rather sterling work!"

"Oh get me another whisky for that horrendous joke you devil!"

"On the rocks, Baron?"

"Surprise me."

"Fine I shall – Captain 'O' Rama won the 3rd at Chapston."

"Really?"

"Oh yes indeed."

"Heavens. Cheers."

As you can see, I tried my hardest to go crazy, you can't fault me on that!

After a while of toying with, among myriad things, my own sanity, I wondered whether or not I could actually affect it.

For the second time today I am passing 56 Greenyoke Road. The rain has let off and Cradley Station beckons me.

Could you make someone go insane? Actually insane – clinically insane? People cry all the time, "oh you're driving me mad!" but *could* you reply, "no, I'm not but I could if you want me to"? In the course of history, in wartime and tyranny such as Nazi Germany, people have, sometimes under the respectable label of science, experimented on extremely unfortunate beings. I don't mean that, I never meant that at all – as I say, I have morals. I had loving parents for heaven's sake.

No, no, not force insanity through harm. More tease it to come out, in as fun a way as possible. Could you woo a man into insanity? If the incentive was, for remaining sane, a big juicy cash bonus?

What I'm trying to explain is the idea that's genesis was wandering thoughts on a wandering night walk. I thought, "what if", as many people do, what if someone agreed to play a little game? In which people would try to turn him/her insane. Using any means they could think up, as long as they didn't actually cause any damage to the person – physically, at least. The person would have to waive his rights to freedom, privacy and sanity. He or she would do this with the knowledge that if they maintain their sanity for a certain time period they get a serious wad of cash. Enough money'll make people do more than enough. They'd also have the joy of the experience.

And the fame – my thoughts developed those years ago – it'd have to be televised and packaged for the mass-market. I called it The Insane Game.

It was a crazy idea, I know. I was very well aware that this idea could never materialise in any way. TV was heavily censored then, relative to now, and I only thought about it as a "what if" similarly to how a child looks at a computer and thinks "what if it turned into a spaceship and took me away to the planet Toroboga." The sad, yet still

comforting fact was that I didn't live in a futuristic game show environment.

"Destination sir?"

"London."

"Platform 2."

Do I look lost? People love talking. Mostly just for the sake of it. Did they really *need* to ask me where I'm going? They'll be asking me if I'm going to see the Queen soon, even though they couldn't care less. It reminds me of my mother. She was forever talking for the joy of it – asking questions that had meaningless answers, mentioning insignificant observations, making jokes that could only be expected to rouse polite, social smiles. It's all just nice and polite, I know.

The train for London is here, all aboard. I am by a newsagents that has, as well as a plethora of modern crisps, chocolates and drinks, a bowl holding a tempting selection of fresh fruit. Yet the train is poised and ready to roll. I'm feeling a wondrous flight or fruit conflict. Do I dare to eat a peach?

I make the decision, speedily make the cash/peach exchange and hop onto the train. It's soft and yummy.

By the way, I shan't be going into the palaver and pedantry of what's crazy and what's not so much as to test your own sanity. Though would that be such a bad thing?

I picked up an upper second at the end of my course at Edinburgh. I then went on a plane to Cape Town International Airport with practically no plans. That was to be the start of one of my world adventures.

The core of the soft and yummy peach is hard and tastes grim. I toss it out of the train window, into the darkened brambles of the railway bank.

In this compartment of the train there is only me, a bearded young man who I saw when I got on, and a black boy, who I hear has just begun harassing the bearded young man. At least, he sounds black.

“Better give up rich bruv, else I’m gonna pug y’up.”

But, then again, you can’t jump to these conclusions these days.

I turn around nonchalantly. He wishes he were black. But he’s not black. He’s definitely white. A very dirty white.

I can remember pretty much exactly what I had on me when I left Cape Town International Airport. I had a backpack. Clothes-wise I had nothing special, just what would keep me warm and covered up. I was completely fine with wearing the same outfits for days in rows without washing either them or me, as I wasn’t seeking friends who’d care about the smell, nor sexual pleasures from any ladies who’d be put off by that developing odour and my scruffy appearance. I mean I wasn’t seeking sexual pleasures at all. Not from any ladies. That’s never really appealed to me enough. One type of clothing that I had to have in many multiples was underwear, for I found in my Edinburgh years that I’m a little susceptible to groin-chafing in hot weather and apparently South Africa was to be a bit hot.

Toothbrush, toothpaste, toilet roll (luxury Marks and Spencer’s, which quickly gave way to buying what passed as toilet roll on the go, then to simply making do), digital watch, 2 pens, tiny notebook, dark sunglasses, cup, cap, cash, some emergency medication just in case, a mirror and Tricia’s ocarina around my neck. No map.

At first I wandered the streets of Cape Town gleefully, randomly and ignorant of time. I’d chosen Cape Town as the first port-of-call on my expedition because I’d always liked the sound of fruit from The Cape. It’d always sounded tastier than other fruit. A picture of South Africa as a rich, colourful, plentiful land had formed in my mind and that was a land that I wanted to visit.

I bought a banana from a small stall and, yep, it was tasty. I don’t think it was the tastiest banana I’d ever had but then again can anybody actually remember which banana, specifically, was the tastiest banana they ever had?

Cape Town was beautiful. I can still remember the realisation of just how beautiful it was, which occurred as I finished that above-average banana. I’m not talking just about the vibrant settlement nestled into the mighty mountains, or those mighty mountains, or the light fluffs of cloud that their relief encouraged, or the magnificent blue skies that those clouds adorned, or the postcard image of all of these things together. It was more the feeling that I was at the bottom of Africa and I didn’t know what the hell I was going to do.

“Don’t be messing with me, star.”

“Look... I... I...”

“What? What? Where’s your wallet, your money mover yeah bruv?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

“My business? Star, don’t go giving me none of that disrespect.”
“I’m not-”
“I don’t want to have to go mad on yous, geek.”
“I wouldn’t want you to, just-”
“Just borrow me your wallet then, fuck, come on, don’t waste my time.”
“I didn’t ask you to... violate my privacy... you know.”

We’ve gone into a tunnel so it’s hard to tell what the ‘geek’ and the violator of privacy are saying. The attempts of the gawking young wretch seem rather futile, considering he’s on his own and I don’t think he’s going to be able to plead his case eloquently or persuasively enough.

“I know you’ve got money, this is shit man!”

He’s a brute, a modern-age barbarian. He’s trying his mightiest to be a bully. His speech, his body language, his smell and his costume have all been carefully chosen to present him as what he wants to be: a ruffian, a hoodlum.

“Geez I’m gonna get my lads on you, you geek, just borrow me your money.”

Today he is a sole rudey. They usually attack in swarms but I suppose some people just love being criminal – I mean not just for the social life. Some people love living as the dregs of humanity.

In Cape Town, just after the whole banana and realisation thing, I came across a blind, black beggar-man. He was sitting up against a five-star hotel on the road-side and was surrounded by a jumble of paper, bags, dirty foods and rags. A poor man in Africa, who would have thought? I knew he was blind straightaway because he wore thick, black, obvious for-a-blind-man sunglasses. As I passed him I took a side-glance at his messy sprawl. I rubbed past something with my leg and before I knew it, he whacked me with a stick.

“Moneee sir? Moneee sir?”

I halted, thought for a split second about how I was just whacked by a stick in this beautiful land, and then stared at the beggar. He had hit me with his blind-man’s cane and was now staring up at me, with huge white teeth gleaming away inside a pained smile.

“Moneee?”

He rubbed his free hand’s fingers together and kept smiling up at me. After a few seconds of inactivity on my part he changed his hand gesture to a point and directed it towards the fruit stall of my atmosphere-enhancing banana.

“Food. Food for eat. Moneee?”

I considered this guy. His shiny white teeth poked out at peculiar angles and he stank of hot mud. It seemed that the entirety of his worldly possessions were laid out in

front of my rich-man's eyes. The blind man was in a bad way but I didn't get the impression that he was emaciated and that any banana, or equivalent, would save his life or anything. And I still didn't know how much a 'Rand', the South African unit of currency, was worth. So I hesitated and waited to see if he could tug at my heart strings any harder.

"Sir I ha no moneee no moneee no food no moneee."

It was something like that – he was just emphasising the situation that apparently made his proposal i.e. money for nothing, legitimate. That wasn't buying me and therefore I wasn't buying the nothing. I had my reasons. I took another gander while his head remained cocked up at me, his blind-man's cane still floating around my trousers.

"I'll buy your stick."

It was the only thing that I wanted from him and it did appear to be pretty good quality. Obviously fully retractable, durable and even shinier than his teeth. I fingered it a little just to make sure and decided I could pay an over-reasonable price for it. It was a fine white with a black handle and a red tip. Just like back in England. He watched my feeling fingers and a tad of confusion crept into his smile.

"Moneee for stick?"

"Money for stick indeed."

"For *this*?"

"For that. How much?"

It was now technically his turn to make a decision but I liked the dominant role. I thrust a wad of foreign notes in front of him.

"I'll give you this much money."

"Ahh."

He touched and flicked through the cash, just like how I'd had to touch the cane, and then nodded enthusiastically. I didn't know how much was in the lump of paper – the symbol that I had a better start in life than the blind-beggar – but it was evidently enough. The greedy beggar took the cash and I completed the transaction by taking his cane. Within an hour in South Africa I had exploited a blind man and took advantage of our respective comparative advantages.

"Than than sir than."

"That's OK. You go crazy."

"Than!"

Should I just have given him the money? Was I bad to a beggar? Boo-hoo? No. As I believe he was actually *posing* as a blind beggar. He was in fact probably just a beggar, or at most a thieving beggar. I'm not just saying that for the sake of my conscience; there were a number of give-away clues. Firstly, he was no skeleton and he didn't *need* any *moneee* for food. Secondly, in amongst his rags was an assortment of wallets and crucially, he saw. He watched my feeling of his cane and he kept a gaze up at my head. After walking down the

street a little, I looked back over my shoulder and saw him playing the same game. The only exception being the absence of a nice stick.

I stroked *my* stick. I retracted and extended and twiddled it, and I was very happy with my purchase. It smelt of poverty a bit, but I knew that wouldn't endure. I imagined that one day I'd find the original owner of the cane and give it back to them, in true adventure style.

Well that never happened and the cane's by the door of one of my homes at this moment, presumably.

"Give us ya money cha."

It takes me a while to realise that this order was uttered with my ears in mind. It's this disgraceful chap who, after the bearded young man got off at a station just now, turned his attention to the second most respectable man in the compartment. We are now the only two here. I think that I am in the process of becoming a victim of a crime.

How delightfully picaresque.

With my banana in my stomach and my cane in my hand, I was ready to explore South Africa. I wasn't a backpacker and I didn't intend to be or become one. That's not to say that I didn't have a backpack, as I did. That's to say I wasn't searching for things to call "awesome" in conversations with other guys who called things "awesome", or "sweet", or "mad", in youth-hostels and muddy tents. I wasn't there to do "the world expedition" thing and get photos taken of me doing thumbs-up in front of "awesome" things. I was there for my own adventure and so the last thing that I wanted to do was to follow the crowds on their "awesome" package-adventures.

So, where to? I decided to go to wherever looked like the most fun – quite literally. I stared at a clump of signposts and picked out the one that displayed the funniest name and followed it.

"Hello?! Can you hear me, star? Give us your money... cha."

"Cha? What does that mean?"

"What?! Are you cussing the way I speak, star?"

"No. I asked a question. I'm sorry if it offends you. If you can't handle it, I'll leave it."

"What?! Look have you got any moneys on you?"

"I'll leave it then. I do have money on me, yes."

"..."

"But it's all mine."

Stellenbosch. The first funniest name. Hardly cutting-edge comedy but it was good enough. Where I went, Stellenbosch was full of drunken and drinking tourists. They drank and I laughed at them, or had riveting conversations with them, or listened into their slurred and confused words.

I thought that it would be fun, in The Insane Game, to surround the guy with drunkards for hours to see if it'd make him feel more drunk, and perhaps more insane.

Next after Stellenbosch was Oudtshoorn. Getting funnier? O apparently stood for Ostriches, as it was as full of them as Stellenbosch was of drinkers. They've got chickeny heads, long necks, and fat chickeny bodies; they look a little evil. I enjoyed seeing hundreds of fat, long-necked chickens running around – it was a feeling of superiority almost as great

as seeing hundreds of wasters running around, occasionally vomiting on each other, that I experienced in Stellenbosch. I didn't stay with the ostriches for long.

Riversdale – I thought I remembered that from 'Lord of the Rings', though through post-adventure-research I found that was Rivendale. Neither of them was or is a funny name. I can't remember anything from Riversdale – I only clearly remember the interesting or amusing things. Like ostriches.

"Well let it like be all mine, you fuck."

"I fuck? Whatever. What do I get for my money?"

"Huh? What the fuck?"

"What service do you do?"

"Shut up you geek."

"Don't you do anything?"

"I'm taking your money?"

"No you're not. I've still got it."

"Yeah but not for longer. 'Low it over, bruv."

"I take it you aren't the guy who sells the sandwiches?"

Humansdorp. Mildly funny? I called it Humansdrop – to myself.

All my expenses for this voyage were paid for, by the way, by my parents. I had been a good boy and I guess they had to make up for the 'tragedy' of one of them turning lesbian (that's my mother). For that little thing they gave me excess amounts of cash and love, which I definitely appreciated.

Humansdorp was the first place where I noticed some friction between whites and blacks. That probably wasn't because there was more of it there than elsewhere, it was just because I happened to come across some shouting and swearing guys with knives there, by chance. They were white and abusive and idiotic. I encountered them on the outskirts of the town and tried to get to the inskirts as swiftly as possible. This was my way of dealing with any of the cultural problems, though I stayed to observe if it was completely safe. I'm not all that keen on confrontation. But I have my moments.

"I've got a fucking knife, star, and I've used it before!"

"No you don't. Don't play me."

"..."

"Bruv."

"Ah shut-up, bruv, I have too got a knife but it at home."

"And?"

"And I'll stab you if you don't borrow me some money."

"Only if you know where I live, get your knife, then come and get me."

"Yeah, well I'll do that you fuck."

Following on from witnessing some colour clashes that still existed in post-apartheid South Africa, in Humansdorp, I journeyed to Alexandria. I didn't go there for the nature trails or bird watching or beaches, pleasant as they were, I went there for the name. I could say that I'd been to Alexandria and people would probably think I meant the famous Alexandria in Egypt. Who would I say it to and what would be the purpose of saying it? Good points, but I was in a holiday spirit and it felt like the thing to do. Then the thing to do was to go to South Africa's East London to spot any likenesses to the other East London

I knew – there were few – and then to Butterworth. At Butterworth, after an hour or so of contemplation, I decided to give up on the sign-tracking theme of my adventure. It wasn't entertaining anybody. I made my way to Durban, simply because it was the largest city near to Butterworth and I was in need of some inspiration and something to do.

I wasn't particularly inspired by Durban. I went to some shops, I talked to some people, I bought a nice pair of brown shoes and I learnt a little Latin. At night I wore the bottoms of my trousers rolled and paddled in the cooling water of an ornamental fountain. There was a black South African family strolling by – parents and a toddler – who noticed my solitary antics. The kid jumped up onto the fountain's stone side, his hand firmly clasped by his father, and he put his hands out to touch me. The parents stood with fixed, wide smiles, but didn't let the child touch the odd foreigner. He would have loved to paddle but I suppose it was late and he had to get to bed and I looked drunken and disturbed. He was a fat and ugly child and they were definitely his natural parents.

I moved away from the fat child and onwards – to Swaziland.

"Well aren't you going to ask me for my name and address then?"

"What, do you wants me to, bruv?"

"Well come on, how else are you going to stab me up?"

"Don't diss me."

"I wasn't – why don't we exchange names and addresses?"

"What?"

"It must have taken some courage to come and say hello to me."

"What the fuck is this?"

"And ask me for money and everything."

"Tell me, what the fuck do you talking about, bruv?"

"Let me explain."

When I say 'to Swaziland', I mean more to and fro because that was it. I didn't feel like I'd done with South Africa. I'd eaten the banana and worn various t-shirts but I hadn't *done* South Africa. I found a suitably touristy slither of borderline, placed a foot over to the Swaziland side, felt the land, and withdrew it. Another thing that I could tell people: I'd gone to Swaziland, and it was awesome.

Next awesome spot was 'Joburg' – as everybody calls it. I wonder why they don't just call Johannesburg Joburg? Why don't they just call mayonnaise mayo? They do, but why don't they all?

After a bit in Johannesburg, that was four months. Four months in South Africa – pretty much as far, downwards, from Edinburgh as I could get. And you may have realised that I had done nothing. My search for hilarious signs had led me, as if they were in cahoots with the ministers of fate, along the same route as the backpackers. I'd followed the worn tourist track and I hadn't actually done all that much. I wanted to restart.

So, via many a peculiarly named settlement – I fell prey to funny names again – I found my way back to Cape Town. That took two weeks. The first thing I did in Cape Town was buy a banana.

"Would you want to have my address?"

"What?"

"So you could stab me?"

"I don't want to stab you, bruv! Just give me some fucking money."

“That would be an illogical redistribution of income. Can’t we broker a deal?”
 “Can’t you just borrow me some fucking money?”
 “No, no, no. My address for your address.”
 “Look, bruv, all I wanted was your money. I’m not a fucking gay.”
 “I promise that I’m not a homosexual.”
 “A gay?”
 “No gay.”
 “I ain’t giving my address.”
 “Then I ain’t giving mine.”
 “You gonna borrow me some money then?”
 “Nope.”

It wasn’t the best banana I’ve ever had; it was on a par with the other one. I thought that maybe I was over-analysing my bananas. That was at the same fruit stall as before.

“Sure you won’t give me your address?”
 “Why do you want it, bruv?”
 “There’s a reason but it’s a secret.”
 “What the fuck is? Blud, this is mad.”
 “I’m mad. You don’t actually want my address, do you?”
 “No-”
 “I mean you don’t actually want to stab me.”
 “What if you don’t give me any money and you’re bitching me?”
 “Am I?”
 “Fuck yeah. Give me some money, don’t waste my time.”
 “If I give you some money-”
 “What?”
 “Will you give me your address?”

And across the road from that fruit stall was the blind, black beggar-man. He was still there – with his mangled teeth and his dirty rags, his stolen wallets and his fully operational eyes. Four months and it was as if he hadn’t moved. The only difference was that there was something missing from his blind-man accoutrements. Due to the way he was sitting and those chunky dark glasses, to the random tourist he’d almost always be labelled as blind, as was desired, but something else would have made the façade even more convincing. I felt around in my backpack to make sure I still had that something else, and I did. It was *my* cane.

Was I going to give a poor old beggar, who’d been sitting both literally and symbolically by the wayside for at least the last quarter of a year, his cane back? It would have been a good way of emphasising my second try of South Africa. To reset the cane would have been to move away from those four months I’d almost wasted, and begin afresh.

But I had a better idea.

“You’ll tell the fucking pigs.”
 “Why would I tell the police? Where’s the crime?”
 “Ain’t it... ain’t it against the pigs to steal?”
 “But you wouldn’t be stealing! I’d be giving you money.”
 “How much money?”

“As much as I have on me.”

“For an address?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah come again star, why do you want it?”

“I promise it’s for a good reason.”

“I’m not batty.”

“I know.”

“I mean it, I ain’t playing.”

“Look if it doesn’t turn out to be a good reason, you can stab me.”

“You gonna give me your address then?”

“Yes. Yes I will. Then you can come stab me if I use your address for-”

“Being batty.”

“Yes. Have we got a deal?”

“Wait, have you got any puff on you?”

“No. But you can buy puff, with money.”

“That’s true. Show me hows much you have then.”

“All I’ve got on me is this-”

I take out the contents of one of my many pockets. I present my lot: a five-pound note and my ocarina.

“Sorry, that’s mine. It’s worthless anyway.”

“Is that it? Five quid?”

“Yep.”

Basically I bought the beggar’s glasses, thus completing the set.

I’d had the starter of my adventure and I was, with my cane and chunky glasses, ready for the main course. And where better to welcome the new platter than on Table Mountain? I felt the beauty of the city once more and was more ready to embrace it. I climbed.

Well, I more sort of strolled. It’s a large mountain. It wasn’t like the hill that I liked to call a mountain, though it definitely reminded me of it and I engaged myself in reminiscing every now and again. I had plenty of time to, as it took a good few hours to make it to the, or a, top. The paths were overrun with tourists, who for the day I tried to utterly avoid. When a gang of Japs or Frenchmen or whoever came trundling up the slope, I waited, keeping to myself, and let them walk on by. As I tried to keep my distance from these people, I realised that was one thing that really did feel like the thing to do – to move up and away from dirty backpackers and their dull towns that I’d already had my fun with. I thought that I wanted to see new things and take on different perspectives.

It was awesome. But don’t worry, I wasn’t becoming whom I despised. I wasn’t going to adventure so that I could regale my friends with exciting tales of mysterious lands and foreign pals. I’ve never had any real friends. Would you say that you’re my friend?

For the first few hours of walking I was surrounded by a forest that was alive with a million things. There were all these trees and beasties all doing what they do – all by themselves and for themselves and regardless of me. And I thought that was just what I would do: my own thing. I was feeling in a very analytical mood – too analytical a mood. It was just a pretty forest. I already knew that I wanted to do my own thing. I didn’t quite

know what that was yet but I was willing to dawdle along the road of life until I came across a random bouncy castle on my path. As it were.

I didn't come across a bouncy castle, even symbolically, half way up Table Mountain. I came across a mighty waterfall. I sat down in a secluded area on a rock and I played a few of my tunes on the ocarina-bass. I had to play at quite a volume to compete with the roar of the water. Some of the tunes were the same ones I played on my little mountain back near secondary school. There wasn't a waterfall there – just soggy grass. I'd come so far.

I went up and then all the way back down and left Cape Town for the second time.

"Fuck, blud, that ain't a lot."

"All I want is your address. Here's mine."

I'm writing down my address. It's one of my real ones. I'm putting down the post-code and everything. It's on the receipt from the two crusty rolls and two doughnuts.

"Shall I write mine or what?"

"Yep."

"It's... it's..."

"Can you write?"

"Don't mess with me, star!"

"Can you write?"

"Fuck you, star, of course I can write. I just don't know if I want to go giving my address-"

"To a weirdo on a train?"

"Yeah. Yeah, star. But happens you don't look too wrong so I'll give it, right?"

He's writing the address.

"It may be fantastic for you. It's definitely a fiver."

"Now borrow me the money, blud."

"It's been nice doing business with you, take care."

"Char man."

My new course was north. I tried my utmost to keep away from tourists and perhaps this contributed to the way the towns I passed through got very shanty very quickly. On the expedition, my greatest fear had never been of culture-shock or loneliness but of machetes. This concern reasserted itself in these more foreign – and enticing – areas. I considered investing, for my life's sake, in a weapon of my own. I decided that I could rely on my social instincts and improvisation during any dangerous situations, though I bartered for a little knife, just in case. That is another item I usually keep on my person. A knife can be a very useful thing.

With my wits and knife about me, I travelled fast to northern South Africa and even more northerly than that – to Namibia. I left South Africa, for that time, as a country in which I did very little. That was fine for it had been fun. I was only faintly aware that a country called 'Namibia' even existed before flying to Africa and in it lay more miles and miles of fresh pastures. Crossing the border was amusing. An official told me, so I guess it was official, that I stunk for a white boy.

The itinerant money collector, whose address is now tucked away in my breast pocket, has walked off. Tail between his legs; five pounds in his pocket. I'm sure he's a five-star pikey when he has friends to back him up. He won't be able to earn himself any

more profit on this train journey, as it is nearing its end. This is Victoria, London, and I feel in the mood for a coffee.

I have to press the button and hear the hiss and now the door's open. I step out and am walking for the exit. London – my London – the first city. This is a veritable hive of activity. So many annoyed and hostile people all going nowhere and shoving each other out of their way to get there. So many nasty faces whooshing past me. The boy is lost somewhere in the crowd.

I see a very pretty lady. I may think about her later. I've never had sex. I didn't need a woman for sexual pleasures in Africa and I haven't needed one since. I am me, Eugene, *semper solus*. Always on my own.

On Their Own

Aren't these people always on their own? Won't they only ever view this world from one perspective? Won't their thoughts only be processed in one brain? Here they run in packs to better their chances of finding a quick train and to share the problems of arriving at their destinations late. They make each other laugh so that they can feel funny; they fill ears, including their own, with light conversation in order to avoid being left with their own uninteresting thoughts. That man kisses that woman for his transient sexual pleasure and she kisses him back for hers. As hard as he looks into her eyes, he won't be able to see from the other side. Would he want to though? A frustrated mother shepherds her flock of children so that she can get onto a train and rest her legs. They hold her genes so she holds onto them, but will she ever really understand them? They are looking eagerly at MacDonalds. I should think they are hoping that they missed the train, as that'd allow them time to feast. They eye each other as they all want to be first in the queue.

Some people doubtless seem altruistic, selfless and caring but would they be all these things if it didn't make *them* happy? Besides, I see few examples of such people at this station, now. I see boys – who are now buying themselves fatty chips – and mostly mean looking folk. Also, I'm being a smidgen cynical. It could be that I'm simply trying to justify my choice of lifestyle, but to who?

They all go on their own jolly ways and I go on mine.

Neon lights guide me and it won't take long to get to one of the many coffee shops around. They're all the same.

Could loneliness make somebody crazy? What if someone was left by themselves for weeks? If people and all visual and auditory stimulus were kept away, would what's left be enough? Would it be enough to allow the person to function sanely? Would that life be worth living sanely? Why not create worlds and people in your mind? Because it'd be goddam crazy? Or because it'd be impossible?

So many people are content leaving these questions unanswered.

"Can I take your order please?"

"Yes, yes you can. I'd like a large black coffee."

"Sure."

"And put a wafer on the top would you?"

"Sure, that'd be an extra 30p, I guess."

"That's fine."

"Would you like any biscuits, cakes or sandwiches?"

"No thanks, but can I have a few coffee beans to munch on?"

"OK... just a few?"

"Seven."

"I'll just get them. That'll be three twenty five."

"Thanks. I've got the change."

I take the stairs and I hope there'll be a free armchair up there.

Namibia was a boundless, exotic and refreshingly raw country. At first it was necessary to travel over miles of arid desert, on a camel of course, but in time I came to rich, fertile land, which had a bustling town plonked in the centre. I saw lights and heard music coming from a large building and found there was a high-class private party taking place. Surrounded by such natural beauty and energy – both of the majestic desert and the greener bits – I thought it'd be cheeky of me to ignore it all and entertain myself with something sickeningly human for a night. So I gatecrashed.

My plan to get in involved the use of my wit, my intellect, but more importantly my stick. It didn't take long to transform me, with cane and glasses, into a blind-man. Although the doormen were confused as to why I was there, who I was and why I didn't speak their language, they wouldn't turn a blind-man away so they turned a blind eye. Now, when I say 'high-class' party, I mean it seemed of the highest class after experiencing the desert and its people for days. The building was actually a much-decorated barn and nobody inside wore suits. I definitely didn't. Luckily the hundred or so guests comprised an ethnic mash and so I'm quite sure I passed as an authentic, blind partygoer. I chatted to a number of the people who had grasps of English, about people I didn't know and things I'd never done. Within thirty minutes I had, without aiming to, developed my personality for the night into cheery, polite and sentimental. I was a second cousin, twice (or sometimes thrice) removed, of Rokaki's wife's dead niece. It was Rokaki's birthday and I found that I was related, often very convolutedly, to nearly everyone in the revelling mass. I was South African, I had come up to see my distant relatives and my name was Dave. David Flowerbottom, married, two children.

I tried to participate in any sessions of nostalgic reminiscing that arose and talked of how lovely the food had been at Rokaki and his wife, Ramanji's wedding party, how it was great to see them all grow up and why I thought he was a marvellous chap. Nobody was quick to accuse a blind-man of lying, but if anybody looked confused or didn't laugh when I laughed, I told them something like, 'oh, that was before I was blind, you wouldn't have recognised me!' or 'the accident smashed my memory to bits!' or something. Besides, they were all completely drunk and very willing to accept me as one of the gang. Only once did somebody ask me why I was blind. It was one of Rokaki's (five) brothers, and it was after I told him about the wife – Henry – and the kids – Petals and Branches. He obviously sensed some superiority in me as he always called me 'sir'. He was fat, sweaty, and wore a flimsy shirt that was far too tight. I got the impression he was a bit of an idiot.

"The bad eyes – how that be sir?"

"Do you know the sticks with the cheese and the pineapple?"

"So I do sir."

"Well I was preoccupied with them, walking around a dance floor one night, with little to do."

"A-huh sir."

"Some drunk was really getting into dancing to 'Night Fever' and was stabbing out with his finger and caught me in the eye and blinded me."

"In two eye sir?"

"Oh no. Not in both eyes – the other one's a longer story."

"That bad sir."

"I know, it's tragic."

"I sad for yo man."

He hugged me. I think he was just being courteous but the man stank of body odour. I felt around him as if I couldn't see his bulbous frame and then pushed away casually.

Tragic? That wasn't tragic, it was a mere quirk of extemporisation. A boy growing up in a forest thinking that a sack of potatoes was his parents and sacrificing his own life for them – now that's tragic! A girl working her every living minute in order to save up to buy a medicine for her dying brother, and then being struck down by the disease herself *just* before she had enough – that's tragic! Well, I mean, if they actually happened.

When Rokaki's brother walked away his smell went with him. I realised though that I probably smelt just as much, for I hadn't given much priority to washing. Still, I thought, they were all smelly bastards so it didn't matter.

I had to avoid the failures of the thieving beggar as far as putting on an act of blindness was concerned. Which meant, above all, not noticeably looking at people, or indeed anything. I was like an upgraded version of the beggar. The black glasses allowed me to view things directly in front of me without giving the game away but they had let the moneee man do that as well, I had to be more careful, and was. I kept head movement to a minimum and went everywhere slowly, hitting people with my cane 'by mistake'.

For the night I was the epitome of conviviality – the blind one at least.

There was a free armchair. It was very comfy; it still is very comfy. I'm sitting here, relaxing after a terrifying encounter with a monstrous street-robber, and I'm feeling the comfort. I'm also feeling the love. Smack in front of me are two intricately connected loverbirds. They have conquered the sofa – probably the comfiest piece of furniture in the room – and are covering it with their sticky love. It's emanating from them and reaching all around this room, to parts that welcome it and others that are unmoved by it, and others that do not like the intrusion. The couple are hardly trying to dim their love's glow, in fact quite the opposite, they're talking loudly and moving emphatically, and letting the love shine through.

They look greasy and smug. He is dressed in a long, black leather jacket, black jumper and jeans, while she is wearing only soft, colourful garments. Huge smiles accompany bright and mellow eyes in what is an almost constant stare from him to her, from her to him. A meandering conversation, most of which I can pick up, is repeatedly broken up, or indeed joined together, by adventures of tongues in lands of flesh. I get the feeling their tongues and flesh would happily clash much more energetically if there weren't nosy people around, though quite honestly I don't think they'd necessarily let that stop them. They are in their late teens. They probably have a great deal of sex. They seem very much in love with each other. Two spirits weaved perfectly together here, on this sofa – a picture, an embodiment, a force, of happiness and love.

Love is a warm form of obsession. Is it just me, or is it getting incredibly hot in here?

Before I ventured deeper into Namibia, I felt it wise to reduce my to-be-killed-by-savages potential. I achieved this efficiently in Rokaki's town by purchasing a large envelope, stuffing 90% of my cash into it, sealing it up very tightly and sending it back to a Mr. Eugene Xanoc, in England. I did that, officially, so that I didn't get killed for my possessions. Over-cautious? Paranoid? Well, perhaps there was also that element of entering the wild with little more than my skills as a person to rely on, as well; but I was seriously taking machetes into consideration. The other thing was my skin colour. I wasn't black and most of the

indigenous folk were. While I was adept at blinding others to my perfect eyesight, I thought it would be more than moderately difficult to trick people into thinking I was black. There was plenty of mud around, that sometimes got me thinking, but no matter how much mud I could have smeared on my body, I wouldn't have been able to convincingly brother myself up, and I'd never have got such fat lips.

The blacks weren't out to attack any old whites that showed up though, obviously. Let's not stereotype. Most, at first, were charming, civil and accommodating. Most spoke English anyway. As I went from settlement to settlement, with a nose high in the air, sniffing out for anything that smelt like the thing to do, I worked out that I didn't want to be around the civil and civilised, English speaking Namibians. I wanted to be with the hard-core. I talked to strangers in cafes and bars, asking around for the whereabouts of classic, authentic, native Namibians.

I travelled and progressed. I won't go into how pretty the deserts, the culture and the sun were. I'm not a travel diarist. They were pretty. More importantly, within a month I had found my hard-core natives.

The romantics have a hot chocolate each, though I don't think they're going to mind if they get saliva on each other's mug. I believe they have little sprinklings of chocolate as well, how cute. They talk as if they already know half of what each other is going to say. The conversation is perfectly comfortable and relaxed, while probably thoroughly deep and meaningful, for them. Its development and the accompanying body language have artistic qualities, a sort of poetry in motion. Even I can judge the power of this poetry, without knowledge of the allusions and the secrets and the personal relevance.

They snuggle up, keeping each other warm.

"What is God though? What's his purpose?"

"Quite. I think the only important thing is what God means to us."

"David Hume, bringing a little sophistication in, said something like, if God is willing--"

"- and able, to rid the world of evil, why does it still exist?"

"I see you were reading my popular philosophy book."

"It had a nice and shiny, glossy cover. I was familiar with the idea before though."

"If God's willing but not able to defeat evil, then he's powerless."

"More God-less really. You can just imagine a little imp called God who does nothing."

"But sits there, in a little hole, being very willing to defeat anything bad."

"Singing to himself a noble song now and again."

"I'd worship him. And if God is able yet not willing, to defeat evil, he's malevolent."

"I think that's the wrong line of the philosophy."

"Oh me too. Just because someone doesn't stop evil, doesn't mean they are evil."

"Maybe God created good so it could overcome evil itself."

"Or just free will, so that evil could be overcome, if that's what we wanted."

"That's Epicurean philosophy, by the way."

"I know, I know. At least I think I know. All God not intervening so we may as well--"

"Just love."

"And be loved."

"I don't think that was actually their message."

"Oh well."

Kiss. Or more, a pleasant wet mess.

It's not only that I've never had sex. I've never made love; I've never been in love. I've never felt that warmth.

My hard-core natives lived in a village, or rather a scattering of huts, that they and few else called 'Partrilandka'. To me, its moniker was 'Partridge Land', though there was never a single partridge to be seen. The 'hard-core natives' were Namibians who were poor in money but rich in mud. They couldn't speak any English; they spoke a weird language of their own that involved much teeth banging. Initially they were wary of my presence but I tried my hardest to show I came in peace and found a great way of charming them: my ocarina. Their way of speaking used, in addition to teeth-banging, a system of tunes, that made their sentences sound like songs and their conversations like long, poorly composed and performed musicals. It was a little like the communication between birds – they'd hum and warble and whack tooth against tooth, then I'd play a little ditty, and they'd show their appreciation by striking a high note and chattering their teeth maniacally. Their over-enthusiastic teeth movement worried me a bit, at first, as they could well have been getting ready to eat me. But they didn't eat me, thankfully.

It'd taken me around six months but I'd sort of found something that really felt like the thing to do. I wanted to live with these complete strangers – not as a blind man, not as David Flowerbottom, not as some random character I could make up in five minutes, but as Eugene Xanoc. Perhaps a much harder character to play than all the others.

I wonder if getting a dozen people to stand around someone, hammering their teeth continuously in an intimidating manner, would break the person down into madness. The guy would probably just get used to it, as I did. Or maybe the teeth actually did turn me crazy and I've been too crazy ever since to realise.

I walked to Partridge Land all by myself, from the nearest proper village. The only directions I had were points, from villagers, in the vague direction of "old Africans" and it took me two days of walking over inhospitable ground to get to humans and huts. A welcoming party, who had spied me coming down the garden path of sorts, was made up of three men, one spear, and few clothes. I did the ocarina thing and I felt we were getting to know each other. I knew that saying English words very slowly wasn't going to work and even with words it would have been hard to tell them why I was there and what I wanted. The three of them chatted and chattered amongst themselves, keeping a number of eyes on me, and I noticed that they kept repeating various strings of sounds. I was just about to say "take me to your leader" for my own amusement, when they ushered me towards the huts and took me to someone who I thought was their leader.

The leader, or as they said, '(teeth click)(teeth click) Dooki (teeth click)', was the most venerable member of the village. He could say a few words in English. I tried to present myself as harmless and helpful. The English words that he could say were 'white', 'man', 'no', 'go', 'peanut', 'butter', 'you', 'me', 'stay', 'consider', 'water' and 'diyomond'. I think that was all. The conversation, excluding happy notes on my ocarina and what seemed to be random clicks of the teeth, went something like this:

"You white man me Dooki."

"I white man you Dooki. I Eugene you black man."

"Rachi bokirachi mong yau peanut butter."

"Peanut butter?"

"Peanut butter."

"Do you know what peanut butter is?"

“Peanut butter white man. Diyomond white man. Imi Rach ikgo white man. You white.”
“I’m white. I mean no harm. No guns or- ”
“You stay.”
“Yes... I stay.”
“You stay.”
“Yes yes, noble African man, I stay. If you’d be so kind.”

He took me out of his hut and showed me their village – Partridge Land. Everything was dry and I guessed that was one of the reasons why the place had developed so little. The huts were made of dry mud, or large stones, with simple wooden roofs. There were around 15 huts set around a central and solitary tree. I wasn’t sure whether it was dead, due to the drought, or just luring me into a false sense of insecurity.

Later I found out that it was alive and represented their Gods or something.

Dooki smiled proudly as he pointed out, 50 metres from the huts, a water hole. I was well aware that I’d have to drink from there for quite some time. He then pondered calmly a little, before taking me to one of the huts and talking to its owners. Dooki showed me around the hut, in ten seconds, and turned to me.

“Stay. Uichiracho dokbo. Consider.”
“I’ll take it.”
“Con-sid-er.”
“I’ll take it Dooki. Me Eugene.”
“Consider.”
“Yes. Me stay.”
“Peanut butter!”

And with that he left.

I never managed to learn their language fluently, so all of the indecipherably colloquial phrases I put there were just made up by me, now. I did try to learn the language but soon found that they didn’t even use it much themselves. I also discovered that Dooki wasn’t really a leader as such, as their system didn’t use leaders, he was just the one with the greyest hair. They loved to touch my silvery hair and that turned out to be quite an evening event.

I still don’t know why Dookie gave me a place in a hut and why no one else seemed to be bothered. I wanted to pat myself on the back for being so good at reassuring him with nice bassy ocarina melodies and one of my nicest smiles, but that can’t have just been it. Maybe I wasn’t the first eccentric white man to want to stay with the hard-core natives – maybe my predecessor brought some peanut butter.

Could you say that these lovers are on their own? I think it’d be difficult just to physically separate them. Yet as much as they may believe there is a love that bonds them, aren’t they both still foremost individuals? Surely they both have their own relentless internal monologues and surely they have their own unavoidable personalities. Would it be desirable to be so connected to somebody as to lose touch with who *you*, on your own, are? Would the sex and love be worth that? Is there anything that good sex and good love would not be worth? To most people.

“Well precisely, it assumes that evil is a bad thing.”

“Evil sucks.”
 “Does evil even exist though?”
 “It depends on how you look at it.”
 “May I say that classic multipurpose line? Everything’s relative.”
 “You can’t prove anything.”
 “There wouldn’t be good without bad just as there wouldn’t be hot without cold.”
 “Prove it.”
 “I couldn’t.”
 Wet mess.
 “Only, cold is just an absence of heat. So is bad just an absence of good?”
 “Is evil like anti-hot – an actual different thing? Or just *severe* absence of good?”
 “To be fair on God, if evil is just lack of good then there’s nothing he can get rid of.”
 “Absolutely.”
 “There’s just stuff that he can encourage.”
 “Do you remember that time last night when we did that... thing?”
 “Of course.”
 “Wasn’t that like a *severe* lack of anything bad? Completely and utterly, all good?”
 “Yup. If God was one of us he’d be you, for me.”
 “And she’d be you for me.”
 “Oh sweet blasphemous baby.”

Looking around, I see that these two have a duopoly on the coffee shop love. A lot of people here are obviously only paying a little attention to their own drinks and conversations and are concentrated on the movements and articulations of these passionate beings. It’s a kind of very soft-focus porn. Loads of people are getting off on their sexual energy, though few would probably admit it. I’d think that the pair themselves are quite aware of it and keep subtly revealing ‘things’ and ‘times’ that everybody knows refer to some exciting sexploits. It’s that old boy escapism as well. What a great surprise for the nosy guys – not only coffee, but also a chance to escape for a few minutes from the troubles of life, to a world of fantastical romance that may well remind them of their youth or of their hopes.

Equally, I’m sure that a few people here may well be getting bitter. Humans have been known to be self-centred at times. Jealousy and depression are fuelled by this reminder of what they haven’t got and what others have. Somebody to my right is biting harder than he usually would into his sandwich and getting quite worked up. I think that he just wanted to have an insignificant sandwich in peace. They could have stayed indoors and in private, but why not share the love? Whose fault is it that this man is getting mildly furious and taking it out on his chicken and salad sandwich?

“Maybe evil is a part of God’s plan.”
 “A cunning plan?”
 “Obviously – he is God and everything.”
 “He is everything. Maybe.”
 “God completed the almighty task of creating everything. Now he leaves *it* up to us.”
 “He gave us everything, including free-will, so that we could be good.”
 “We’re starting to sound like preaching loons you know.”
 “Good.”
 “The thing with any ‘God did this and God did that’ theory, is... why?”

“Well... Why not?”

Maybe it just felt like the thing to do!

I shared a hut with a man named something like Akibkuki and his daughter, Bubki. They were generally very happy, as were most of the people in Partridge Land. They were primitive idiots, but they were happy.

Akibkuki represented the chaps in many ways. His attire consisted of an A4-size sheet of leather covering up his front bits and an A5-size sheet of leather covering up his bottom bits and various custom-built necklaces and bracelets. He worked the crop fields by day – growing some kind of millet, I think, though I was never sure. Clumps of vegetation served as toilets, inadequate hunting ground, and a source for making things such as necklaces, bracelets and more obscure objects. His evenings were spent sitting around that tree that was feigning death, where he danced, ate, talked and chattered with most of the villagers. He went to bed quite early.

Bubki wore clothes of the same motif as her father and the only real difference was that she wore another A4-size sheet of leather, around her breast area, and had fatter necklaces. She joined other women in tending to cattle that were fed from a supply of the millet-esque crop. It was less physically demanding than the field work and didn't seem to take so long, meaning she had time to gather stuff from the small forests, cook meals and make fat necklaces. She was attractive, for an African, and enthusiastically helped me settle into what was, I presumed, *her* hut, that I had no proper right to be in.

After sleeping soundly through the first night in Partridge Land I was instructed, by an array of pokes, points and looks, to plough the land along with half a dozen men. This was fine and the strange idea of a hard day's work appealed to me. Heat was the only real problem as the sun definitely had his hat on and he got quite intense. I wore white flannel trousers and shirt and most of my neck was covered by gleaming silver hair. I still had on my trainers that I had bought in Edinburgh while they were at the height of fashion, though they were just a little tatty by now. They handled the soil pretty well – probably more due to the dryness of it, than any actual quality workmanship. I had become quite used to sweating constantly throughout the day, though had always been able to jump between spots of shade before. My dark sunglasses were no longer dark enough. After two hours I thought of a way to deal with the relentless shine of the sun. I went back to the hut and whipped out the chunky blind-man's glasses and they worked a treat.

The guys didn't seem to think anything of those glasses and I don't think they had a clue that they were for blind men. They treated them in the same way as they did most of my possessions: with a little bit of staring and appreciation, but only a little. Then they'd leave it be and move on to other things. Their lack of amazement, coupled with my accepting mood, meant there were less of the frantic struggles to communicate ideas between very different cultures than would have been appropriately emotive.

There were a few occasions though. Akibkuki showed me around the trees one morning. He carried his shabby spear as if he was going hunting, though it turned out he was actually trying to relate to me why he *wasn't* hunting. He would keep thrusting his spear forwards into thin air and then throw disappointed looks at me. I followed him for quite some time as he walked around the trees. At first it seemed as if he was making his path up as he went along but the concentration on his face led me to believe it was all carefully planned. Again and again he'd stop and thrust at nothing. It was almost like a modern-art exhibit presenting the futility of life. I was keen to catch his drift.

In time he stopped. I didn't know what I was expecting and we stood looking at each other for around a minute. In a similar situation between two people back in Britain it would have been a painfully awkward silence but for me, and I guess for him, it was powerful and calm. I was pleasantly confused and intrigued; looking into his eyes didn't explain anything. Their black centres were surrounded by darkest brown lining on a creamy white background. They twitched slightly here and there. I felt and smelt his light breathing and he definitely hadn't used toothpaste in a long time, though his teeth were flawless. I didn't think that he was gay and coming onto me, by the way. There was obviously something important to him that he wished to relate to me and perhaps it was traditional to bond like that before any saucy secrets were shared. I don't think it was tradition though. It felt more like a special case.

He didn't look gay – none of them did. He must have been in his late forties, had an athletic body that was always on show, and was pretty much my height when I was wearing trainers. I didn't even consider the possibility that he was going to spear me to death. He had no grey or facial hair. His face was well curved and strong, giving the impression of a wise warrior, somehow.

I've never stared at a man for so long. As I looked into Akibkuki's eyes and he looked into mine I thought that we understood each other. We didn't know each other at all. We didn't know each other's life story or favourite hobbies or political views; we hadn't shared more than 5 words from each other's language and we had done nothing together. I just felt him and presume, though it's hard to know for certain what's going on in somebody else's mind, that he felt me. I wonder how many people have felt their friends or even lovers in such ways. It was ridiculous but it was nice.

I'm sure these lovers have felt each other in many effective ways. They may well say they can see each other's souls. If they like what they see – is that what true love is?

Akibkuki banged his teeth together thrice and bent down. He took a cover of leaves from off a raised bit of ground and wanted me to help him inspect what was underneath. I saw a heap of bows and arrows and not much else. The weapons looked plain but functional. I still didn't see why we'd taken a trip to the woods. Akibkuki took a small bow and handed it to me. It felt unsurprisingly like a long bit of wood. I don't know what the string was made from. Suddenly something clicked – he wanted us to go hunting together. What a lad's day out, I thought, but I was mistaken. I was all ready to be taught how to kill African beasts but Akibkuki wasn't ready to teach. He picked up a bow for himself and then put it down, stressing the actions. He returned to his spear and played through that old motion: the stabbing of nothing and the look of disappointment. Finally he put down his spear as well and took on a grave face. I think that at around that point things made the first little bit of sense. He didn't use these objects anymore.

What he was trying to show me was that there wasn't anything, or enough, in his land that he could hunt and that it made him sad. The way in which he held his spear and his bow told me this, eventually. I was running through ways in which I could ask him to explain why he could no longer hold his spear with pride, as I was sure he once did. He broke my thoughts with an attempt at the sort of explanation that I wanted.

“Man. White man. White man, black man.”

He pointed at my arm, rubbed it, and then pointed at his own arm and rubbed that. He then put our arms together.

“White man, black man, Partrilandka.”

He dropped my arm and made a ball with his hands that got smaller and smaller.
“Partrilandka.”

Akibkuki knelt down and used his fingers to draw a picture in the soil. He begun to draw a wibbly line that went all over the place and although I was patient and wanted to know what he was bringing to life, he changed his mind, rubbed the line off and started again. The new and improved, simpler picture was a circle. He put his finger on the centre and said ‘Partrilandka’ once more. I understood that the circle symbolised Partridge Land.

“White man, black man.”

He drew a smaller circle inside the first. He then rubbed out the first.
“Partrilandka.”

The bow was picked up and put down again. I’m no fool and I sort of worked out what it was he was trying to say through the mud and wood.

It took more mud and wood and time before I’d understood this thing that Akibkuki had taken me to the trees to tell me, which was important to Partridge Land and its people. Akibkuki’s gang were hunter-gatherers. They used to roam the land with bow and spear, killing all manner of things, working as one massive travelling family. That was their nature. But they couldn’t hunt anymore and they couldn’t roam the land. Their livelihood had been taken away from them by more developed peoples – both black and white – who forced them to live in a much smaller, confined area, wherein they had to completely change their way of life.

It’s all too easy to go all evocative and sentimental about the plight of the poor oppressed Africans. They didn’t have a lot and yet what they had was taken away. And so on. Of course there would have been socio-economic causes and probably a little stubbornness on the tribe’s part. Everybody’s got to adapt to changes and there’s not much point in crying about your problems, in any case. That’s not to say that they did. Away from the cache of bows and arrows, Akibkuki and the others were positive and often beaming. They lived in huts that they would have preferred not to have been tied down to, they worked the fields that they’d never kept before, and herded cows that they probably wanted to jab to death. Such was their life.

No, I’ve never had a girlfriend. I’ve never gone out with anybody. To the pictures to ignore a movie and force conversation with intervals of slurping on each other’s orifices? Never. Taken a girl back to my house for tea, crumpets and a little bit more on top? Never. Have I ever fancied a girl enough to actually want to be with her for hours on end? Have I ever felt that there was somebody I found who I could love? Never.

He’s licking up her neck, leaving a trail like that of a snail or slug. One hand pushes back and ruffles her well-combed hair while the other slides somewhere between breast and arm. Both pairs of eyes close when his delicate tongue reaches her ear. Glum faces hide intense lust and contentment. People often look sad when they’re kissing; it can be an awfully serious thing. He strokes her hair with his nose and takes deep whiffs of her hair spray and perfume. Her clammy hands hold his face knowingly and tenderly, instinctively pulling her sweetheart closer. Lips separate, tongues creep out and bodies press harder and hotly against each other. They are now technically getting off.

It’s a pretty good opportunity. I take advantage of their amorous exchange and silently swipe a mobile phone from their side of the table, as if it’s mine. I get to the text

message inbox and see who's sent this person the most text-messages. There are dozens from 'My Jack'. I quickly select one and scan it.

i love you so much.i love u more than anybody iv ever known.always feel me near you, inside u.i will always want to feel u, love u, be with u, be there for u xx

I shouldn't read more, it's indulgent, but I can't and shan't resist.

xxxxx i want u 2 be inside me.2penetrate me as hard and perfectly as last nite.that was perfect sex.i love u so much.ur my angel.ill always love u. xxxxx xxxxxx

Sent from a number that I write down on a napkin. I cancel the menus, lock, and replace. The napkin can go in my breast pocket. I think this Jack is trying repeatedly and rhythmically to find *her* breast pocket but we both know there's no pocket there. I could have looked at a few more of her messages because they're definitely otherwise detained and don't show intention to stop. Why should they?

I chew on a coffee bean.

I learned how to plough the dusty Namibian fields and sow millet. Akibkuki and another man showed me how it was done and done well. Recently they'd had to learn how to be cost-efficient and run a maximally productive economy. It was untraditional and radical but I thought that they were getting the hang of it. Western civilisation had had its influence as far into Africa as that aboriginal tribe; its hands had groped deep. It was a demanding job, in a demanding climate. The morning period was long, as was the afternoon, though I always had my digital watch on me to tell me when my lunch break was. I got an hour. Akibkuki told me to rest, in his own special way, for as long as the sun was between two points. I couldn't judge the position of the sun from my lowly standing on the earth so I just gave myself an hour.

I didn't rest much though. I had my lunch-hour again. It soon became routine to nod to the blacks and head off in a random (is anything truly random though?) direction. That usually meant half an hour of exploring new lands and another half remembering my way back to my temporary home. Often I took little snacks on the way – mostly food I was unfamiliar with, that I didn't know the name of but knew was tasty and filling enough. I watched out for sharp-toothed and clawed and hungry animals and men: creatures more normal than the people of my Partridge Land.

And I did feel that in a way it was *my* Partridge Land as I grew accustomed to it and its trapped tribe. They were not my friends; we were not friends. There simply existed a beautiful mutual respect. I let them whack their teeth in however furious and illogical a way as they did. I let them preserve whatever traditions they could. I let their gimpish children stroke my distinguished hair. I did their work and in return ate their food and used their shelter. I was allowed to wander wherever and stay to myself whenever. I was never much of a friend but I never felt like an intruder.

So for a good number of months I lived in an interesting niche. I'd habitually stop my mud manipulation for moments as I pondered my life. Fresh from a prestigious University and brought to toiling with simple farming tools by an irresistible and highly individual impetus, I was satisfied thus far. My mind was as much at ease on this side of the world than any other. I thought of many things, some crazier than others, and developed my ideas, plans, dreams, muscles and whatever else, under the massage of an immense warmth. The place and time were truly awesome.

"We say God as if it's a he but we mean more just – just a sort of ultimate power."

"Yes – something that is inside of and essential to everything."

“It’s a spirit that is all around.”

“It’s love, isn’t it?”

“I think it is. I like to think it is.”

My sweltering nights were frequently spent in solitude, though I also enjoyed the company of the locals, mainly Akibkuki and Bubki. Where the mother was I didn’t know, but they seemed to function as a family quite successfully. I was like the silent foreign exchange pal who rarely argued or put up a fuss, and though I don’t think they were used to having silent foreign exchange pals, they dealt with it very well. Bubki was especially good at catering for my needs and I ended up spending a fair amount of recreational time with her. She tried to show me her soil and her trees and her animals though I think that somehow she knew that I didn’t care much about geographical knowledge and when she accompanied me on walks we just followed each other’s random impulses, not communicating verbally for miles. I was perfectly comfortable but she had the sort of personality that I felt is mass-produced by our race. She was clumsy, hopeless and uninspiring – but she was a good walker.

At around 18 or 19, possibly, she showed both a worldly maturity and an emotional childishness. She took her work and play in sensible portions and with smiles. I was mildly alarmed but pleasantly surprised and flattered when she turned up at my area of the hut, offering sex.

The love is exiting from the room. He has picked up his mobile and she has got off her bottom. A kiss is thrown into the action somehow and now they’re gone. I too have finished my coffee and place the last coffee bean on my tongue. I leave a suitable pause and now shall take command of the sofa whose last users seemed to enjoy the stay. I try to do it inconspicuously but it doesn’t matter if I don’t.

Here’s a hint at the warmth and smell of lust. My sofa now. I can stretch and bend my legs in many more ways and I have a view of a dark alley down below. I think that I can see an old acquaintance down there but I’m not certain yet.

Akibkuki was out with the men. I was alone and getting ready to go to ‘bed’, as was the perfectly normal thing to do. I think I may even have wanked myself off into a leaf on the floor but maybe I just considered that – I was never sure afterwards. Bubki kind of pushed the flap of wood that passed as a door open and stood at the ‘door’ for a few moments. I thought maybe she was doing the staring-at-me thing and that was a ritual between hosts and guests in Partridge Land. I was wrong. Seriousness and a half-smile combined on her face. She probably felt compelled to bring herself and her urges to that incredible sexual force: me.

A4-size piece of leather came off her breasts and there they were. I’d always imagined African women’s breasts to be saggy and pancaked – a racist preconception or a logical conclusion, taking the native African brassiere industry into mind? But they were pert and substantial. I mean I *think* she was offering sex. It was either that or something African and odd.

I stood there salivating, with all my manly hormones gushing round my blood system. And we know where the blood was going. I stared and thought and put my finger out, like ET, towards one of her nipples. The finger got closer and closer, but to what? What was I moving towards, really? Just a tit? Two areas of my body pulsed. All I had in front of me was breast.

I was staring at the breasts and the breasts were staring back at me. They looked longingly and provocatively at me. They looked sexy. My finger showed hesitation as my brain was filled with calm deliberation. I was a man with needs, but needs for conflicting things. It would have been pleasurable to politely accept her breasts and the rest and give her something of my own in return, but I needed to be me. I would have just been using her to quench my sexual thirst – though that was probably what she was doing too. There would have been no harm in that. Perhaps just *that* would have been fine, but I didn't want to make any connection. I didn't want a bond like the one between ET and the little boy. Between us there was no love and I wasn't going to pretend otherwise. I didn't want to be with her.

And so I withdrew my hand and took one last glimpse at the beady, nipples eyes. After a few gestures and looks of rejection from me, those eyes were soon shut beneath that A4-size piece of leather again. I patted her warmly but patronisingly on both shoulders, faintly feeling the flesh that I could have held so hard. I think that she tried to explain herself in her own language but of course to me it was just a jumble of words that, because of their way of speaking, was like a terrible tune accompanied by a little toothy percussion. I allowed her to play on and from my trousers I got out my special ocarina. It was an odd way to say 'there must have been some misunderstanding'. I played along with her tune and blew out a few of my own. The sounds she made seemed to change in response to what I was playing and soon I realised that, in her own set of words, she was singing along to my music. An impromptu non-love duet. Funny how we did then connect in some way after all, but I still kept a suitable distance from her. It was important to me.

That was the first test of my celibacy and, my God, so many more women have tested it since – an endless stream of feisty ladies vying for Eugene's scarlet prize.

From this love-stained sofa I can see my train-thief boy down this dingy back-alley. Memories of his tormenting words and mighty actions make me feel so scared I want to cling onto this upholstery and hide, but somehow I manage to overcome my fright and am peering curiously at him – him and a handful of chums. They're casually kicking bottles, as well as the walls and the floor, with their extraordinarily coloured trainers. I can see they're muttering half-sentences half-arsedly to each other. Some lean with raised shoulders on the graffitied walls as others stumble coolly – as they're well hard – around, looking to the street for some reason, dipping their caps repeatedly for another. This set, replete with cigarettes, boldly woven brand names and cold eyes, is the rightful set of my trading partner who was weak on his own before. Now and again I lose track of which one is him – who lives at 34 Rookborn Estate, Bedfordton, Kent – as caps and similarities in appearance make it hard to distinguish between individuals. I can tell he's amongst his people.

They're obviously awaiting something or someone. Whatever it is probably explains why they're looking criminal and are tucked away here, doing not a lot. It's not just hanging-out time as they're not really engaging with each other or cackling in the satisfied way they do, in response to great insults, anecdotes and mishaps. There's an air of anticipation and smoke.

The morning after I got a visit from Bubki the temptress, I laboured in the fields as usual. I had noticed, or at least thought, that my muscles were building up thanks to the sheer amount of earth I was picking up and chucking around. It could also have been due to the lack of any chance to gorge myself in Partridge Land, where food was much more an essential and less of a luxury than elsewhere. I still wore my chunky black glasses and white clothes that I washed around once a week in their meagre supply of water. I could by that time complete the farming tasks just as fast as the natives.

At lunchtime I was just about to set out on one of my silly walks – I knew a fair amount of the Partridge Land territory already – when I saw Bubki approaching from the village. She walked slowly and directly towards me. As soon as I'd put my tools in their place I went to meet her. With neither of us making a sound she turned and we walked back to her (our) hut. She smiled most of the way and I think I laughed a few times, to myself.

Bubki had a little stash of personal belongings in her part of the hut. She pushed at my chest to get me to stop by her door – another flap of wood – as she knelt down to search through the stash. In a while she stood up. She produced from her hands a tiny item and from her mouth a familiar word.

“Diyomond.”

I nearly felt touched. Bubki said it in such a sweet and innocent way. One night she offered me her body, the next a tiny, shiny stone. This time I took the offering. I opened my palms and she dropped the sparkle from off her black hands and onto my hands that were ruddy brown with soil. She stood there with her fat lips hanging wide apart. I thought I was holding her most valuable possession though in all honesty thought her breasts were prettier. It was a half-cut or badly-cut diamond. A diyomond. The last special gift I'd received was from my mother's lesbian lover. I said two words quickly, knowing that she would understand.

“Thank you.”

Then I thought of what I wanted to actually say to her. I wanted to say thank you, again, and perhaps even sorry, and thanks for letting me live in your hut and for respecting what I wanted even when neither of us knew exactly what that was. It's not that I wanted to open up but I wanted to say things like that. I knew she'd think I was saying that sort of thing anyway, how unoriginal my style was, so I had an idea and instead of saying all of that, I spouted nonsense words.

“Treacle Ullyses trification grim moat beast strawberries apple-bottom.”

I went on-

“Rizzle-rizzle-pop garage pontificator muddled pie! Warts beholder dummification lesbian pornography.”

It's how you say it.

I think she got the message. Her fat lips formed a fat smile and after saying a few words of her own – which may well have been equally nonsensical – she imitated my actions from the night before and patted me on both shoulders. Then I said a word we would both know.

“Bubki.”

“Eugee.”

Soon I left the hut and walked. I'd done well in the last fifteen hours – I'd preserved my virginity and won a precious stone. There was a spring in my step. Then again, there usually was.

What was expected has come. Somebody has come and grabbed these boys' attention. It's a man who looks just as disreputable as them and seems just as at home in this alley. It's an inner-city Rastafarian in a pimp's jacket. It's got thick dreads and a scrawny beard. It's a drug dealer. It's a social predator and although I'm no socialite I think I can roughly gauge the cut of his jib. I know what's going down.

A word that came quickly to mind was 'Rastafarian' but I'm not actually certain about his political or religious stance; it's just that he looks like that sort of black thing. I'd think that's what he's aiming for. It's an image thing.

This guy is older and colder, and he stands straighter than the fun-boys who obviously occupy a lower level of this dismal slice of social hierarchy. He asserts his authority by making it clear he has no time to waste on them (these youths who are looking to get mashed in a cool way) and by using direct, condescending arm movements. He points at who he wants to talk to, indicates where he wants them and emphasises his speech – that I can't hear very well at all – with aggressive hand action. They watch and learn and though they cling proudly and comically onto their own already-borrowed ways, his style will seep slowly into theirs. Elements of it, at least. They'll adapt to their market and their world, together, or with identical others.

The dealer gets out conveniently sized packets of some substance – I couldn't possibly guess what. It looks like dirt in clear plastic bags. Portions of pooh. The fuel of a few hours of escape from the normal and boring state of mind. Five pounds' worth.

That seems to be the going rate. Most of the boys are having their turns, one by one, at exchanging their five pounds for the stuff. It'll probably play up a crucial part in their week's entertainment.

I can see that now the dealer's got onto my co-traveller. He's just as he was on the train, except he may be forcing a show of a little more confidence. Pleasantries are swapped before the drugs change hands. He's paying with my fiver. Aw, I'm funding illegal activities. My money will surely run via the multiplier and in time cause a great increase in the income of London rudes. Maybe it'll chain its way to the hard-core criminal sector and, who knows, go right to the top, to the evillest man in London.

Drugs can make people go insane and, sometimes, die. Perhaps it's that glimpse at insanity and uncontrolled feelings that makes up a bit of their appeal. I wonder how many people would take drugs if it was craziness without consequence – no hangover, no downtime, no people crying (because they care about you) whilst you're enjoying your fleeting ecstasy. Just the fleeting ecstasy. I'm sure this man and these lads would swear there's no badness in this gear but I think I'd rather not, all the same.

The rasta has done his business and is leaving. He's walking one way down the High-Street, towards and past this coffee-shop, while the laden pikeys are walking away. I have enjoyed this sofa enough. I am getting up and going down the stairs – I think I'll be able to catch him up.

It wasn't the day of the diamond, but it wasn't long after, when I went on a walk and came across a fantastic product of nature. It was hot, dry lunch-time, as per usual, and I sent myself in a direction I'd only tried out once or twice before then. As I stamped my way over the fields I'd worked on to a bank that served as a natural perimeter to the main Partridge Land plot, I overheard a couple of my hard-core natives whistling while they worked. Singing, actually. At first I just thought it was a charming activity and a pretty song. I left them behind me as I walked on. Their song was nearly lost in the growing gap between us but I caught a few distinct notes on a gust of wind and was struck by the feeling that I recognised them.

It wasn't a famous western pop song or nursery rhyme, no: it was my song. Well, it was Bubki's song. The men were singing what Bubki had sung to me during our impromptu jam, just after I'd turned her loving down. I was completely sure of it because the song followed the same basic tune as a melody I'd been playing since secondary school. There they were, working on their land and singing a song of my co-creation. I thought that they sang with proper words, their own words, but I didn't know what they were. I never did. They could have been the same words as Bubki's on that night of opportunity, but they really could have been different words altogether. They didn't look at me – they weren't singing the song to me. They probably just heard Bubki singing a catchy song and it got into their heads. I considered getting out my ocarina and joining in by playing the original melody, but I really had milked that ocarina thing.

When I finally reached that bank I stayed a while to appreciate the view. Around me was a near-perfect panoramic scene. I don't get easily halted by magnificent sights but, well, if it feels like the thing to do. The strikingly blue sky turned from thick, dark blue up above to light, hazy blue over the horizon and was cloudless apart from cotton-woolly fluffs hovering over distant mountain ranges. Wavy sand dunes covered a lot of the land but they were broken up by low-lying shrubs, scattered trees, natural rocky paths and the odd scrappy forest. Rich sunlight pervaded these simple features and everything was hot yet still. When I turned around I could see farmland – land held back from the grasps of the desert – and a rough circle of pathetic little huts. A pool of water glimmered in defiance of the heat. The largest forest I could see was the forest that apparently didn't contain enough animals to be hunting ground. Thin cows lazed in the oppressive sun. Brown bodies moved here and there, some of them singing a special song. I walked on.

I could walk quite a distance. My great propensity to walk can be thanked for how now I can walk faster than virtually anybody on the streets. At least at the amateur level – I mean that's not to say I'd be faster than the gimps who walk as an athletic event. But they *are* gimps.

I walked and walk with power. It's not power walking – it's not gimpish at all, I think. I don't need to break into a run to catch up with this leather-coated drug pusher. He's a man of the street and he knows how to walk it but I'm so faster than him. I am so his daddy.

Twenty minutes of walking – fast and gimp-free walking – had got me to a savannah of long, dry grass that I thought must have been partially dead. The earth was still dry and sandy in places and the most alive things appeared to be trees that anybody could tell had a hard time. But from my time in Africa's harsher spots I'd learned there was much more to these wastelands than victims of the climate. I'd seen lots of the animals from wildlife shows throughout my stay in South Africa, Namibia and to a lesser extent Swaziland. I went on a

touristy safari in South Africa when I was on that well-trodden route. There was quite a marvellous bunch of beasts there but I felt like just another person who looked at foreign animals from far away, most of the time in a jeep that'd been used for the same tour for years. I tried to get closer and do my own things a bit but there wasn't much chance.

Being startled by pouncing or crawling or hissing things – *that* was the fun way of finding new organisms. Coming across them in their truly natural habitats, all on my own, was much better. I'm sure some of the animals I met with had never seen another human, but then again would they know or remember that they had? I enjoyed many encounters where I was shocked by some living thing that caused me to instinctively fear for my life. I would grab my knife out, tell myself they're probably more scared than me, look at myself and sometimes realise that really wasn't true. I'd always stroll off perfectly fine. I was never hurt by anything.

I definitely wasn't hurt by Cassie. I was up to my knees in yellow grass and was just about to turn around and go back to central Partridge Land. I think that was still technically their territory, or around the boundaries of it, but I rarely came across any natives on my walks. There was too little to hunt.

Well, I found something. About fifty metres from me was a big black cat walking to one side, taking it easy. I approached it with intrigue and caution. I got closer and closer, knowing that I'd be late back to work but that nobody would be bothered. He was moving so slowly that I was soon within 20 metres of him and was able to admire his sleek, jet black coat and the muscular body it covered. I crept closer still. I tried for silence. I could make out his whiskers. He was just a giant, cuddly cat. I failed at silence. His neck jerked, round head raised and I was greeted by mirthless eyes. I'd disturbed his contemplation. The massive-cat whiskers rustled very slightly as his mouth opened and he revealed his sparkling, sharp white teeth.

I picked up a rock by my foot and threw it to the side. The cat was not amused. He seemed to look to where the rock fell, look back to me and shrug. His tail swayed hypnotically. I noticed his claws were just as substantial as his teeth. The sunlight reflecting off his oily coat seemed extremely bright to me and I was wearing super dark glasses. Light wind whistled miles away. We were the only two things on the plain.

'Curiosity killed the cat', I thought to myself.

Then I thought, 'I'm not a cat'.

Then, 'But this is. It's a large and lethal cat.'

The cat wasn't curious at all. He just appeared to have nothing better to do than kill me.

I had been curious.

But it wasn't curiosity that was going to kill me.

It was the cat.

The cat snarled at me and tensed his hot muscles. I was certain that he was just about to make his pounce.

And then he fell over. Lazily.

He fell into an exhausted heap on the grassy floor and yawned. Then he licked over his teeth and rested his head in his paws. I took out my little knife and went over to him. He rolled his eyes up at me with great strain and the effort was too much for him so he looked straight ahead, at his paws. He was unmoved when I stroked him softly with my knife. In front of me was a hopelessly lethargic puma.

And that was all there was to it. From what I could tell he was just a constantly sleepy black panther – at the time I thought of him as a black panther but I think a black

panther is a puma. Black panther sounds scarier. He didn't mind me at all; he barely acknowledged my presence. He couldn't be bothered. He just lay there, soaking up all the rays with his blackest of black coat. I hadn't seen anything so black in all of Africa. I called him Cassie, after Cassis, French for blackcurrant, which is pretty black. It amazed me right off that he was so black in such heat. When I touched him with my fingers I felt the tremendous radiating warmth and thought it was no wonder he was chilling out. I wanted to put my blind-man's glasses over his eyes but didn't want to get cocky.

Cassie didn't move from that plain much. I visited him now and again in my lunchtimes and he was usually lying down in some completely wasted state. He seemed perfectly healthy though. He must have found food somehow. I didn't see another puma on my travels. I never actually found out why Cassie was where he was, how he'd got there or what he was doing. It was far too hot for him. I thought he might have escaped from a National Park. I couldn't ask the people at Partrilandka what animal he was exactly because, to be frank, I rarely understood a word they said. I asked about pumas and the like at the nearest town, after my stay in the village. Everybody I asked said they had never seen such a creature in that area. I liked the strangeness.

Had I been unnecessarily curious in going so close to Cassie at first? Is there really such a thing as too much curiosity?

"Hey."

"Hey. Woh, what's up?"

"Well I was--"

"Just checking – mate I don't know you do I?"

"No no, sorry, no."

"Cool, just checking."

"Yeah I was just sitting in the coffee shop and I saw you sell some stuff to those kids."

"I don't know what you're talking about, my man!"

He's not really Rastafarian at all; I think it's just one of the styles of the modern black man. We're walking down one of central London's main roads and he isn't stopping to talk to me but he isn't trying to escape me. He's sporting a smug grin and is starting to laugh lightly while shaking his head.

"Oh you don't have to admit to it."

"Yeah I was selling them some hash, why, you want some, my man?"

"Just like that? How do you know I'm not from the police?"

"What? You think cops can be fucked with hash? Do you wanna get hooked up?"

"No no, not today."

"So what's your business, my man?"

"I was--"

"You want something else? I mean you want harder shit or someth?"

"No thanks."

We're having to cut our own ways through the thick London crowd. I'm staying as close to him as I can. He doesn't seem to mind. He turns off from the main road and so do I. There is a further pause. Now he looks at me with the same grin as before.

"Now it's nice and all to have your company and shit but what do you want?"

“I’m not sure really. What do I want? Let’s see. I’m doing something on drug culture.”
 “What, like an article?”
 “You could say that. I was just having some coffee and saw you out of the corner of my eye.”
 “Sweet.”
 “Thought I shouldn’t miss the opportunity.”
 “Sweet. So, what do you want to know?”
 “I want to know how it feels.”
 “How it feels to do what?”
 “How it feels to fuck up people’s lives.”
 “He-he. It can feel pretty sweet! No, but, my man, I ain’t fucking up people’s lives.”
 “You’re just letting them have their fun, right?”
 “Fuck knows. I’m in it for the money. You think I give a shit about some dumb townies?”
 “You don’t give a shit?”
 “Not a little bit. They’re dumb shits, my man, just trying to impress their mates.”
 “So it’s a completely different side – the sellers – to the buyers? You’re not like them?”
 “I ain’t a little bit. I’ve got a life that doesn’t involve base-ball caps, know what I mean?”
 “So you don’t smoke any of it?”
 “No, I smoke a little. Only my good stuff. My premium blend.”
 “And you’re not trying to impress your mates?”
 “I’m trying to get high. Just easing the pain of life, my man.”
 “I see.”

This mofo isn’t impressing me. A druggy is a pikey is a pussy ‘ol. There are plenty of pussy ‘ols about, these days. We’re walking through progressively minor roads. He has rolled a cigarette – I think it’s just a cigarette, it smells of cigarette – and he’s taking long and drawn-out drags. Strange how the people who smoke usually seem even more despicable than the ones who don’t. The cars lining these roads are cheap and rusted. I think I can hear the faint buzz of a garage music bass line in the air, but my imagination may well just be adding that for effect. It’s funny to walk side-by-side with people as vulgar as this. I do it nearly every day. It keeps my spirits high. He’s making me high. I’m such a lousy townie.

It’d been a long time; it’d been over a year in Partridge Land. Then one villager started to cough. Then another and another, and soon half the village were coughing painful, nasty coughs. One man coughed until he died. I decided it was time for Eugene Xanoc to move on. I don’t think it was an act of cowardice. I think it was the thing to do.

It took me two hours to prepare to leave. Just before I left I looked at some of the ill to see what they looked like and how they were behaving. I showed them my bag and conveyed the message that I was leaving. A lot of them were in a bad way. They didn’t seem to like me looking at them in that way and didn’t try to tell me what was wrong. I thought it was a little serious, you know, a disease wiping out their tribe. I remembered what they were like, at least. I left.

I asked around for someone at the nearest town, after that long trek. It was the same town where I asked about the whereabouts of hard-core natives and of a black panther. They told me to go to a larger town and pointed me in the right direction again, acting like a cog of fate. The larger town was to the South, not that that really mattered, it was all still very foreign and unknown to me. I asked around and this time I got pointed in a definite direction. Some random Namibian assured me that he pointed the right way and when I

followed I found who I was looking for. He was called Doctor Thomas but despite the name he was very much African.

Doctor Thomas didn't seem to have much time for me. Although he could speak good English he didn't think I was really worth the effort. To him I appeared to be just a lost white boy who was rambling on about old tribes and fatal coughs and medicines for free. I tried to explain the situation and the symptoms of the people of Partridge Land but the Doc grimaced underneath his wiry spectacles and seemed to be interested in ways of getting rid of me instead of ways of helping me and the ill.

"Well what do you want me to do about it? I don't know these people. I don't know what's wrong. They're not in my town. Why should I help them? What's wrong with your hair?"

I persevered and made it clear that even if he didn't particularly want to help them, I did. Around 10 minutes into our unscheduled meeting, I knew the only way anything was going to get done was through money. Perhaps it's a shame how human most doctors are. But I'd sent most of my money back to England.

"I mean you've given me very rough idea of the problem. It looks like might be an illness that infected a number of small villages in the last ten years. There's medicine but costs a lot to make. They couldn't afford it. It isn't *that* deadly but it can last a long time. There's not much I can do. I mean I could sell it but that's all."

Then I told him that I didn't have any money. He regained his unhelpfulness and I started to think of what I had in my backpack that was valuable. I showed him my watch but then he showed me his. My clothes weren't even worth considering. He wasn't going to buy my blind man's gear. I was just about to give up and, I suppose, leave the town and Namibia, when something sparkled its way to the front of my memory – the diyomond. Bubki's gift would be the answer. Her diamond would help her people. I took it from out of my pocket and placed it on the table. A compact little piece of wealth. Doctor Thomas inspected it. Within seconds:

"Diyomond?! Yah! The girls give them to all the men! Diyomonds are not worth much, here in Namibia. Take it back to England. You couldn't cut anything out of that. Look, they've tried already. Medicine is worth a lot more than one diyomond."

I supposed it was a bit of a pathetic thing. I had to pick it back up, get up, and say goodbye to Doctor Thomas. He was pleased to see the back of me and get on with his paperwork. Just before I left the room I turned around and said:

"In England we have an old childhood friend called Thomas the Tank Engine."

"..."

"How ironic."

There was no irony there. I left and closed the door. I opened it again and in a few seconds time shut it again. There was no logic there. I had an economical lunch somewhere and thought about what I was to do in the next few days and with the rest of my life. Cunning thought led me to a safari shop where I bought the cheapest telescope I could find. Then I voyaged back to Partridge Land. On my journey I thought a lot about why I was

going back— why it felt like the thing to do. I had a suspicion that I had, with all my Western infection, given them a disease. It excited me: just how much impact I *could* have made. Backing up that thought was the idea that surely hard-core natives were resilient and resistant to their natural diseases. Was that why I was going back to that backwards village? Going to check up on some dumb Africans I'd got familiar with?

The plan was to get within viewing distance from the huts. Then I'd be able to spy what was going on. It was a poor plan and I couldn't see anything. Instead I just walked up to the huts and the people — something I was originally trying to avoid — to see if they were still coughing with such vigour.

They weren't. They seemed perfectly back to normal, their normal, as abnormal as that actually was. I heard not one cough. I didn't speak a word myself. I think I nodded to everyone I saw though. I plopped the telescope down in Bubki's room in my old hut. My room was as empty as I'd left it the other day. Akibkuki and Bubki were out, probably on the fields and with the cows. Then I left Partridge Land and I've never seen it since. I wasn't going to miss Akibkuki or Bubki or Cassie or the others, really. I'm not saying that in the traditional, nasty way. I mean I wasn't going to weep about them and wish I was back in Partridge Land. Life was rolling on. It always does.

I exited Namibia and then got on a plane, with my flexible return ticket, at Cape Town International Airport. Soon I was back with Mummy and Daddy.

"We use each other. We all know that. We're not mates. Some dealers are though."

"Why aren't you mates with them? Are you not on the same wavelength?"

"They're not my kind of cool, you know what I mean?"

"And you're not theirs?"

"I'm on a different level of cool, my man. A higher one."

"Do you have a job or is this your job?"

"This is just an extension of my hobby and a way of supporting it, you know?"

"I think I understand."

"They just want the roughest shit. That's not to say they get it."

"I see. So what is your job?"

"I work at Pizza Hut. Don't laugh man, it's a fucking disgrace."

"Oh, is it a satisfying job?"

"It's just what I've got to do."

"What else do you do, apart from buying and selling drugs and working at Pizza Hut?"

"What sort of a question is that? I do my own things, my man."

"Like?"

"Like going to bars and shit. Girls, movies, clubs."

"You do the stuff with your brothers?"

"Heh! Yeah, but I don't call them my brothers."

"Do they do drugs too?"

"Some. Most."

"What would you do if you didn't have any friends?"

"What? I'd be a loner. I don't know... I don't need anyone but—"

"But everybody likes to have brothers right?"

"Not 'brothers'! They're my men, my man! I'm not Ali fucking G."

"Are your men like you?"

"Yeah I suppose."

"Are you happy with your life?"

“I don’t know. Life could always be better but I do alright.”

He splutters the last few words and he has to suddenly brace himself as he’s hit by a violent cough.

We’ve only been walking for a few minutes but we’re so far from the coffee shop of love. Literally, because we’re both fast walkers, and figuratively because we’re far away from those dumb townies and that couple. We’re in a much more serious and gritty environment. As he throws the cigarette butt onto the floor it is almost absorbed by the street. It fits in here.

Groups dominate lives. Getting into them, being part of them, working against the other groups or leeching off them. It’s just basic human nature: it just has good survival value. The formation of efficient social links eases the pain of life. This man has his men, those pikies had their gang. There have always been groups full of people who think they are the same kind of cool and who lead such similar lives that it’s as if they’ve been given the same list of vague precepts. Skinheads, skaters, goths, nerds. People are taught it from when they’re young – at Boy’s Brigade and Die Hitlerjunge and school and work and in families. Perhaps it’s more a society of types than individuals. And you find someone of a compatible type and you mate and you help society on. To keep you sane you can always remember what mother dearest told you: you are the only you. You are unique. Nobody can ever take that away from you.

Could an individual cope? On their own? It’s an angle I’ve been considering. It’d be interesting to see, in *The Insane Game*, whether or not the contestants could take complete solitude if they were subjected to it. It can make people in prisons go nutzoid and people in prisons are tough nutz. A show that was on a few years ago, *Big Brother*, presented the whole importance of groups and different social relationships, but what if no links can be formed? Would that provide for a different kind of entertainment? Would that be entertaining? Breaking a man down into a friendless and crazy mess?

Or would it be more entertaining to get Jack Nicholson to spend a day with the poor guy? He could mash all of his scary, crazy roles into one and stay in character for it all. Maybe he could use a rubber axe. He could definitely use his eyebrows.

“This is my stop, my man.”

“OK. This is the house that you’ve bought with drugs?”

“It’s my flat.”

“That you rent with drugs and pizza?”

“I guess so, man, I guess so. I’ll see you later.”

“Later.”

10a King’s Road. He must live in a segment of this deteriorated terraced building. I get out one of my many scraps of paper and scrawl down the address. I jump an about turn so my toes are pointing back to London’s heart and I get going.

It’s late. The moon has done away with the sun but smoky clouds cover even that dim light up. I can enjoy a spot of one of *my* hobbies, night-walking, or whatever it may be called. I think I shall see if Beardsy is about.

One of the first things I did when I got back to England was open up the letter that I sent to myself, that contained my unspent travel cash. I exchanged it so it was the right

currency and then sent it all off as an anonymous donation to the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

I then asked my dopey parents for more money and booked my next holiday.

9

Whiff of The Homeless

If I were to rate humanity today I'd give it a... three out of ten.

The next place that took my fancy was Switzerland. I'm not sure what was the deciding factor in drawing me to it – the snow, the leather sex, the mountain culture, the neutrality, the Toblerone, the high GDP per capita. They probably all enticed me. They all, and more, served as a break from the African experience. It was an opening of the freezer after a baking in the oven. It was a turn in the poem. Only a slight one though. While the subject matter changed, the tone remained the same. A freezer is, in a way, an oven.

Once I was out of the airport I talked to absolutely nobody in Switzerland. I put on the pretence of the blind deaf-mute. I'd settled with the idea after reading the free pamphlet they offered me as I gave money to the blind charity. There were photographs and descriptions of a number of items supplied by the charity to help the blind and one of the items was my favourite cane. My cane's handle was a little showier than the one pictured but other than that they were identical. In the description there was something about the red stripe indicating hearing impairment as well as visual impairment. Even though that probably wasn't recognised by most people, never mind the Swiss, I thought I'd give it a spin. I've tried to keep up to date ever since with how many red bands and white bands signify what level of disability in what countries and what combinations are in vogue. I use red and white masking tape to alter my cane accordingly.

I spent a lot of time in Switzerland sitting by myself, with my cane and my dark glasses, in small cafes. Thanks to my appearance I didn't have to have any goddamn stupid useless conversations with anybody. Not a single one. I was hardly Billy Talk-A lot in Partridge Land but I assure you I talked less in Switzerland.

Many things could be done involving talking, in The Insane Game. Not talking, talking too much, talking bizarrely or in tongues. Our words allow us humans to be the intelligent life form, or at least say that we are. They make up a healthy part of most normal people's sane lifestyle. A popular way of telling if someone's insane is to hear if they're talking rubbish. Mad rubbish. Can mad rubbish be bombarded against some sane person to make their talk turn irregular too? Is there any value to crazy talk?

I ate a lot of Toblerone and thought a lot of things. After a few months I flew to South America. On the plane there I put away my dark glasses and cane.

Walking towards the centre of London on this chilly autumn evening is very calming, not that I wasn't calm already. I'm cutting my way through and out of these dark, degenerated areas from where some of the many bum-notes of society's symphony are sounded. Scatterings of fallen leaves lie visible under the soft lamp-light at the corners of a few streets, by small trees. I am walking fast into the thin vapour of my breath as my strong legs power my steady stride.

It's getting late and my brain is yawning as it starts to compare freezers with ovens. There are few out on these streets. I keep getting the all-important glance from people I whoosh by. I believe it assesses a few key things as the whoosh occurs: is this somebody I

know? Is this a person I'm attracted to? Is this person a threat? Do they look dangerous? Are they giving me a funny glance? Are they staring for too long or not at all? Why would they do that?

And I glance back at each one and can only guess what the answers whooshing round their heads are. My cognition presents me with rapid-fire answers of its own. Soon after the whoosh I, as them, am alone with these thoughts and the comforting beat of my feet.

I am hopping up some steps. I have to hop up steps, cross bridges and follow confusing signs to get through my dense urban surroundings. So many people. You'd think they were all friends and nobody was alone.

I'm heading back to Oxford Street, where I think Beardsy will be. Beardsy and I go way back. We often philosophise together. He's an academic, with three doctorates, he says.

Housing blocks have become office blocks. The transition was almost seamless. I think I am about five minutes away.

Somebody is approaching me. He flicks his eyes up to meet mine. Whoosh.

To be fair, there aren't just offices. Oh no. There's the odd newsagents, line of shops, that sort of thing. I envisage more and more whooshing because there are more and more people ahead. Soon the whooshing will become selective – then just part of a general stare. It is happening.

Sometimes I think I'm self-conscious. But it's OK. The people in my head say it's all OK and they know what's going on.

South America meant hot again, which was fine. I sampled two or three countries in that continent. None of them were hugely fascinating but I found things to do – things that didn't involve playing deaf and-stroke-or blind. I was lightly astounded by the similarity between the newly observed South Americans and the vast majority of the already examined Europeans and Africans. They weren't aliens. They had largely the same mannerisms and expressions and did roughly the same things as the others. It was as if there'd just been a few adjustments in culture, skin tone, language, setting. There are always misfits, thankfully. If this was a PC game it would have merely been The South American Patch, with an enticing suffix like Tropical Destinies. I tried out the patch, I consumed it, but it didn't outdo the classic, original game in any way.

London's a gem of a level. Now I'm pretty near to where Beardsy usually resides. I'm sure I can smell him from here. Only a few roads to go. I'm approaching an event, trivial as it may be. I'd save the game now, just in case, if I were allowed.

If this were a video game, that is, but it is not. There is to be no saving. Traditional progression does not have that leg to stand on. But I'm not playing this game just the same as how I'd play a video-game. The ambitious geek doesn't just play games and complete the old, used levels over and over again. He doesn't wait idly for the next patch or downloadable scenario either. He creates his own games, his own worlds, or he hacks his way into the classic games and changes the code.

This city is supported by flowing columns of people and vehicles like the ones all around me now. Transporting things from sources to destinations – from roots to flowers – creating beauty and reinforcing its structure as they go. Just like a pretty flower.

People use analogies to make things seem clearer, and prettier.

I can see him. Aw, so dependable. I have to use this public toilet though. I like public toilets, despite the knowledge that I'm laying my dirty buttocks where thousands have done before. They're useful and I often like the smell. I especially like the pump-action taps and the way you have to stamp the water out.

I am at this moment doing my business whilst simultaneously taking my chunky dark glasses from out of my bag and putting them over my eyes. It's got very dark in here all of a sudden.

I've dumped my dark substances though and can now mop myself up. I wonder how many pieces of toilet paper I'll need today. I forgot to start counting so now I'll never know. Quite a lot.

Stand up, zip up, stamp stamp stamp. All is cleaner, lighter, wetter.

Now I can step outside and I'm almost completely sure nobody will notice that I just bespectacled myself up. I stumble and bump into things in the general direction of Beardsy and he is looking very beardy today, earning that name. He is sitting down there, on the pavement, looking very beardy and wise. He's covered in raggy blankets that must be protecting him, along with his beard, from this cold night. A deformed, empty baked bean can lies pathetically by his side.

To Beardsy I am Trevor, or Trev. He is called Beardsy because of his beard and I am called Trevor because that's the name I thought of around a year ago when I first decided to sit down next to him for a rest and a chat.

Nomally I have with me my cane as well as my chunky dark glasses. But I left that at home because I didn't know whether I'd need it or not and already had my swimming gear to pack. I don't think Beardsy will notice or mention it. I'd masking tape up the red stripe because I'm only blind to Beardsy.

"Where's ya sick Rev?"

"My what?"

"Well haven ya goh a... pole hohay, Rev?"

"Oh. I couldn't find it. I think somebody might have stolen it."

He groans. I was wrong, he did notice. It's a little intimidating to sit down on this ground with your back up against the wall, with so many people rushing past. He does it almost constantly though. Among other things he can't do he can't pronounce Ds or Ts.

"I can fine ya a pole if ya wan."

"It's OK Beardsy, I'm getting good at this walking thing."

"I can fine ya pole if ya wan ough. Hair muss be one aroun somewhere."

"I'm sure there is but I've got a splendid one at home."

"Has goo."

"That's very good."

"Goo goo. Wha you been up oo?"

"This and that. I've been working on my project. It's all coming together."

"Ooo. Has goo. Is cole hoday."

"It is, isn't it? It's going to get colder you know Beardsy. You'll want lots of blankets."

"I've goh plenny. My blankees are splenhi... they're... they're goo."

"They're marvellous, I'm sure, but I think you'll need more. Aren't you cold?"

“Yes.”
 “I don’t think you need to be. I’ve got a towel, if you want it. But it’s a bit wet.”
 “Yours. Has yours. No worry. I’m going oo school soon anyway.”
 “Yeah?”
 “Yeah.”
 “What have you got today?”
 “English hohay. An ec-o-no-mics.”
 “English and economics? Some of the finest economists were English.”
 “Ah school. Ah school. English hen economics.”
 “That’s quite a night you’ve got ahead of you.”
 “Yeah.”

Beardsy can’t talk that proficiently, generally. It’s a shame, considering his qualifications.

“Good luck with that. Remember your evaluation, in economics.”
 “I’ve goh English firs. Hen ec-o-no-mics.”
 “That’s good.”
 “Jus keepin up oo ha level.”
 “Just keep up to that level, Beardsy, don’t let it slip away.”

Beardsy has a thing about exams. He likes them and takes at least one every day. He does a whole array of exams – GCSEs, A-Levels, BACs, degree modules, driving theory tests. Of course he doesn’t *actually* do them. He always wants to keep ‘up to the level’. He does them even though he’s passed them all, sometimes on numerous occasions.

He has in his motionless hand a little cup containing little coins. Pennies are thrown in by the walkers. One hit the tinny side just now.

“What’s the point of life, Beardsy?”
 “Ec-o-no-mics first. I will remember my evaluaoon. Jus keepin up oo ha level.”
 “That’s right. In a way, that’s right.”
 “I inn... I inn... I no hear your quession.”
 “I asked, quite unexpectedly, what the point of life was.”
 “Wha is ee?”
 “No, I asked you.”
 “I don know. I’m no ihiot buh I don know. I’ve goh oo revise, for now.”
 “That’s enough on your plate for now?”
 “Plenny. Has enough, ill hinnerhime, I ink.”
 “And who knows what we’ll have on our plates then?”
 “Exacly.”

He smells of vomit. I’m sure that to an extent it’s his vomit that smells of vomit – vomit stuck onto the tassels of his blankets. It’s complemented by equally nasty odours – bad breath, bad beard, sweat, urine, rotten baked beans – all things I’m sure he’s got used to and doesn’t mind.

“I’m sorry Rev – sorry I can noh halk proper. Is gehing worse.”
 “It’s fine Beardsy, I understand you. I don’t say sorry that I’m blind!”

“You’re noh blin ough. I mean you see more han me.”
 “I can see that you’ve not got enough blankets. I know you don’t.”
 “I’m goo an I’m gonna go oo school soon.”
 “For economics and English?”
 “English hen ec-o-no-mics. I ink I’ll oo an speaking exam. For my worse.”
 “Where will you do tha-”
 “- for my speech, I mean. I can noh say wha I ink. Noh really.”
 “Where are you going to take the test Beardsy?”
 “I ont know. I havven look in oo ih yeah. Prolly ah school.”
 “That sounds like a good plan to me.”

I rarely say wha I’m accually hinking when I alk oo Beardsy. I don’t think I ever really tell people *just* what I’m thinking. But then again I’m not sure how many people do.

“Beardsy you don’t have a telephone number do you?”
 “No. You can call ha school if you wan. ”
 “No, I was just wondering. Or a proper address?”
 “Hee-hee! You’re noh anuvva guy from ha council are you?!”
 “Of course I’m not Beardsy! No, I was just wondering.”
 “Oo you have all ha suff? Phone an home?”
 “I have two telephone numbers and two houses.”
 “Has goo.”
 “That’s very... good. One of my houses is very special. It’s all tucked away.”
 “Ooo.”
 “What do you mean?”
 “I jus mean ooo. Jus ooo. Special house.”
 “It is. It’s my favourite house.”
 “I wish I live all ucked away. Always people here, who no care. Wone leh me revise.”
 “You’d be bored, all by yourself.”
 “Prolly. Buh I coo revise. Loss and loss.”
 “You’d get even better grades then.”
 “I geh goo grase now.”
 “I know. I can see that.”

I can see from the corner of my eye that a rich, bearded man in a stylish black suit and satin-finished coat has just dug his hands into his pockets and got out a fifty pence piece which he has bent down to put into Beardsy’s cup. I speak in a random direction.

“What’s your name, kind sir?”
 “Umm.. umm... Reginald Blackerby.”
 You don’t ignore a blind man.
 “You know you’re not meant to give to the beggars, Reginald!”
 “I’m aware. It was just a little change.”
 “How do you know we’re not going to spend it on drugs, Reginald Blackerby?”
 “Well, are you?”
 “No.”
 “There you go then. I have to catch a train.”
 “So do I.”

I'm pushing myself up and moving away from the smelly rags.

"Take care Beardsy."

"An you oo Rev."

"Ta-ta."

"Bye-bye."

Reginald Blackerby has already walked off one way. I now walk off in the other. My desired station is only two minutes walk away. Then there's a convoluted trip home. My stride is back to normal now. I'm out of view of Beardsy and I'm just casually taking my glasses off as if they were sunglasses. A few people notice but nobody really cares.

It was to be from South America to California. Yet another patch. I learnt how to ski – to quite a high standard. I liked it. I could be by myself or with others and just liked the feeling of sliding my way from the top of the world to the bottom. America is even more of a car-culture than here. Everybody has to have a fat wagon. The people were mostly dumb, as I could have guessed. Pizza was good there. My skiing instructor was a nice lady. She said I clung onto her harder than any of her boyfriends ever had before. But she was just after my money, really. The friendliness was essentially phony. She taught me well though. When I was good enough I didn't need her anymore.

I was only in California for two or three months. Then it was back to plain old England and I had practically no plans, yet again. I thought I'd done the whole intrepid explorer thing. In a way it was a time to settle down.

Job, mortgage, wife, kids? So many one-way doors ready for me to open.

This is the station I want. Lots of people are trying to get home – to that place where they can relax and sleep and make love and such. I'm trying to get home. I'm not sure about the love making, but I'm definitely eager to relax and sleep. It has been a long and interesting day. I have a long journey ahead of me.

The commuters are trying to grab themselves magazines and the fastest food they can as they want something to occupy them on their journeys. I'm fine. I can make notes or look out the window or think. I am passing the ticket barriers – sliding my pass through – and am taking a glance at the mammoth billboards placed around the information signs.

PlayStation 3 – Gloriously high resolution Final Fantasy shot – Out this Spring.
Sony.

British Airways. Fly higher, cheaper. Reductions on all our major routes. BA.
Insanity TV. Saturday.

There is my train.

Training to Win

I chose the direction for my life. I chose it while on a train much like the one I've just boarded – an old-style one that you rarely see these days – and it was the direction I'd follow for just over six years. I chose to work in the administration of the British railways. My halcyon epic world adventure days were over. I had been grounded. That party had finished and I had to think about what was good for me in the long-term. I had to have goals and get myself on track for a decent life. I started a nine to five.

I'm the last one to get onto this packed train and I'm being whistled at to close the door. I have to do it manually – literally close the train door *by hand*. I haven't done it in years. It feels much the same as closing any other door. Now this daily exodus can begin and everybody here can be taken home, or wherever else they may be travelling.

There have to be many workers to sort out the train timetables, drivers, routes, etcetera. It all needs to be done because otherwise these tired people wouldn't be taken to their homes or wherever. You can't take that for granted – people have to administer the system. It's a hard fact of life. When I started to work with the railways it was, in a way, gritty and real. Weekly events didn't include visiting Cassie the puma, or masquerading as an invalid, or being tempted to touch native African nipples. I had a desk and piles of sheets and meetings to attend. I wore a black suit and white shirts.

We are on our way and I'm having to stand and balance myself as the carriage rocks solemnly from side to side. Everyone is glum and silent. Some eyes try to keep up with seemingly endless streams of words running in books and newspapers. Others focus on nothing specific. A few people's eyes flick from one person to the next, searching their faces for anything. One elderly woman attempts to whisper something to an even older man. He whispers that he can't hear, she gestures that it doesn't matter, and they return to what they were doing. This carriage is full of people exhausted by the day's demands and deafened by its dreary drone.

I love alliteration. It comes naturally. Words beginning with the same letter are pigeon-holed in the same chunks of brain so they're easily accessed, one after the other – *that* thought lead onto others, some time ago, next to an open air swimming pool in Brazil I believe – the idea that all our thoughts and words are accesses of our memories. We've heard the words and stored them away and rapidly retrieve them whenever they're needed. We just chop up and paste together what we've heard before – drawing strings of words from out of memory stores – and sometimes we think that what we think and say is fantastic and completely original. It's all just edits of what we've heard before. Edits of what we've heard before.

If this is a game then why aren't these people having fun? Maybe it's because they're not playing very well. I guess people can only be said to be playing well if others are said to be playing badly. You've got to have bad guys and bad players, in a video game, so that you can be a good guy and a good player.

I'm not sure if the all-unoriginal-edits argument is sound. In Brazil I got distracted from my musings by a young lady in a classic black bikini who possessed other interesting points worthy of consideration. I suppose the point is that the edits themselves are original. But, then again, everything is reducible to energy. Nothing can be proved. Everything is uncertain and imperfect and may be nothing. There is not necessarily any point to anything at all. But somehow, most people get along with it all quite contentedly anyway.

These people here seem content now – just. They're not having fun, they're not smiling, but they're content.

I broke into railway administration at a pretty low level. I didn't actually have to sell tickets or man the barriers because my degree got me past all of that, but I started off at the lowly position of Ticket Sales Administrator. I organised reports of ticket sales from a number of stations, put everything into files and typed the most juicy pieces of data up onto the computer. Of course I had to go through a period of training first, which lasted 13 weeks, of course. I passed all of my little tests first time. I was a good little worker. I excelled my colleagues, naturally, and was determined to administrate with finesse.

Now and again when I saw the word 'admin' on files on my desk and pondered my status, I wondered whether I'd just live like my father. Working hard and working slowly up the ranks of administration. I pictured myself getting fat and developing a front-bottom and getting married, only to find out my wife preferred front-bottoms that were quite different. More womanly. I didn't really fear that sort of thing becoming my future but it wasn't exactly what I hoped for. Even though I didn't want to risk it, I worked conscientiously on and dug myself deeper into the railroading world, getting my first promotion before I'd even made one friend there.

I worked hard at my jobs because it always felt like the thing to do, for whatever reasons I had. Outside of work I also did, believe it or not, what felt like the things to do. I won't go into the details of everything. I won't describe every single minute of my life, or every obscure activity or habit. You can imagine the sorts of things that I did, surely? Don't you think you know me well enough by now?

I wouldn't like to be completely sussed.

I was promoted to Operational Planning Administration. That was a promotion, trust me. I still did pretty menial work but that was still OK. I was learning a lot about the railway business and that was all very interesting to me. I did a lot of overtime and proved that I was an enthusiastic worker by researching into the job and the industry more than was demanded on my contract. Along with my promotion, I found a cosy little house near my work, far away from my parents, that I took a moderately large mortgage out on. I think I've nearly paid that off now. Living properly in a house by myself was nice. I had the house, the work, the routine. I had my goals and it was all running slowly but smoothly and surely.

This is where I have to say goodbye to this merry bunch and get off the train. Ah, there doesn't seem to be a door handle. I remember – I have to pull down the window and twist the handle that's outside. How special. I used to always have to do that.

"Bye bye, have a good night all of you."

They'll think I'm mad. I'm the only one getting off at this minor station. I have to close the door and everything. I was a bit insincere, I'll admit, I don't really mind if they have good nights, really. But there'd be no harm in it.

I could be schizophrenic. Oh I could be. I know I sound like a proper person, but it's never good to jump to conclusions. Schizophrenic people can talk and think just fine, for varying amounts of time. Some of the people on that train may have been schizophrenic. They probably weren't, but how could I know? And what would it matter if they were?

This train station's one of my favourites. The station building is modern and does what it has to do in an aesthetically pleasing way. Everything's laid out conveniently and there's some nice brick working going on. There are many platforms but rarely many people. It's a good changing station. People don't stay here for long – that must be a factor.

I shan't be here for long for there's my next train. It looks like it's creeping towards me. I wouldn't have thought it's going fast enough to kill me. Well, actually, I am thinking such a thing so evidently I would. Either way, that's fortunate, as sometimes I have to wait for ages for this train. I always find things to occupy my time with but I must say that sleep does rather feel like the thing to do at the moment.

The train seems to be going faster now. It's probably going slower. Number 69, how nice. Sex finds a way of sidling up to all aspects of my life. Maybe it's more the fact that my whole life is viewed from one complicatedly conditioned perspective.

I can see that this is a newer train and I won't have to waste my energies on handle turning and door opening. All of that faff.

It'd be good in *The Insane Game* if they could make a video that lasted for exactly 24 hours, of a train coming towards you, incredibly slowly. And that'd all you'd have to watch for those 24 hours. Sporadic "choo-choo" noises could be sounded, or could just be constantly played. Anything repeated thousands of times, or on the other hand completely taken out of someone's life, could have the desired effect.

The train is by my side now. Its breaks are screeching and its windows and passengers are flying by me, too fast for me to keep up with. It's getting easier. I think that the doors will stop right here.

They don't. I have to take two steps. Somebody has pressed the button and the doors slide open under a great electronic force. A man gets off as I get on. I can read the scrolling words of the information screen. There will be a buffet service available on this trip. That's good. There wasn't one last time.

I was into management pretty quickly. My first management role was as Assistant Manager of Operational Planning Administration for the south-east. It was exceedingly prestigious. I never learnt how to drive a car but if I had, then I probably would have then bought a big one that made a lot of vroom. But why buy a car when trains were being administered so efficiently? By quality workers such as myself. Trains are better than cars in that you can let your thoughts drift without causing yourself to drive into your own death. And when you're lucky you get buffet service.

Telling subordinates what to do didn't come naturally to me and perhaps I didn't assert my authority enough but I got on with my own work well enough to make up for any slack in theirs. All of the guys in our office would go out to the pub on Fridays and I went, well, elsewhere. But like in school, I think I developed comfortable working relationships. A couple called me 'Grandad' because of my hair and the combined irony of the fact that I was quite young to be an assistant manager. I never laughed but I did think it was reasonably funny.

From there I had a number of job opportunities. I could really follow that whole direction thing. Next time I was up for promotion they gave me a choice – a selection of higher paid, more orgasm-inducing administrative-come-management jobs. I could go where I wanted to go.

I was a good worker and I got repeatedly promoted because I cared. Well, I cared very little for the day-to-day demands of the specific jobs, but I cared greatly about my all-important goal.

Caring so much about something leads to you focussing your life on it and mastering it. You become obsessed with it and the results can be wonderful. Most people get obsessed with sexual partners – husbands, wives – the co-creators and nurturers of miniature thems. I chose differently. There will not be anybody to continue the only-just-started Xanoc bloodline, probably. Well, probably, I'll live on in another way, a different way, a way that's aptly more Xanoc.

On being offered an exciting selection of posts, all of which were on a higher railway administration echelon than I'd ever climbed before, I chose to be Project Development Assistant Manager for somewhere near Wales. I continued to work with what must have been seen as a slightly eerie alacrity. Everybody probably thought I derived a lot of job satisfaction from it all and I admit I was very satisfied in what I was doing.

I wrote more letters and numbers and had more impact on British trains and stations than I'd ever had before. Investment schemes, replacements of technology, line extensions and a whole plethora of other thoroughly intriguing infrastructure-enhancing projects passed through me. I analysed, evaluated, argued, concluded with yays, nays and made suggestions of my own. It took an amazing amount of time and paper work to get anything done but things got done and that area of Wales got a slightly improved railway network. And to think that I was a part of that.

When anybody asked me why I was so dedicated to my job, I had a fully prepared answer – for if I could be bothered to say more than something like “it works for me.” Not many people wanted to hear my life story but a few people asked, for want of better things to talk about.

I've always been fascinated by trains. Call me odd. There's a certain honesty and simplicity in their movement, and it's all so efficient. The way you can be just sitting down, relaxing, watching landscapes change subtly or sharply as you zoom through them. You can do whatever you want on them as well. I need to make money somehow and I may as well make it by making trains *even* better, if that's possible! I think life's like a train, in a way. It goes on, from a start to a stop, visiting stations. I think that's like life. So my job's making life better, kind of. That's how I see it. And I'm good at it. I have quite a bit of natural energy as well. When I'm on trains, doing work, I'm working on trains on trains! It's hilarious and fun, like the job.

I reckon the buffet trolley will be here soon. This more modern train has a modern smell to it. I detect a fusion of odours from plastic and heating, with a suspicion of toilet cleaner. There are fewer people and there's more legroom. It's only two more stops.

Other than me there's one man, one woman and one boy on this train. We're all sitting far away from each other – as far away as we could make it. The man is just looking out of the window onto the blackened trees. I wonder what he's thinking, and if he's thinking at all or has just switched off. I wonder if he's telling somebody all about his life.

Perhaps he's got a little guy of his own knocking around up there, in his brain, who's listening and paying great attention to what he's got to say.

The woman is reading a second-hand fashion supplement that she picked off the seat when she came in. She's looking at other women, inside the booklet, who are far more attractive than she'll ever be. Fat lady. There are tips on how she can achieve such beauty and style. She's absorbed. The boy is playing on a Game Boy Advance with one of those looks of complete concentration. Every now and then he makes faces of disgust, as if the game's dealing out some real injustices. He's laid his feet out on the seat in front of him and hums along with the song of the game.

With my free time and overtime I involved myself in structures. I mean, train signals, sign-posting, lighting and all of the other things I could delve deeper into were alright, but they weren't structures. Structures had excited me since Stagmore Fortress from the days of old. Structures were, for me, the icing on the cake. And the cherry and the cream – you've got to love the cream – and then some.

That station I waited at momentarily back there was a 1990s construction which was part of a redevelopment that recognised its role more as a changing station than anything else. People hadn't moved into the town around there. Speed and flexibility – that was the angle they were going for. The large station building that looked like a barn was knocked down and replaced by low-lying, pale-bricked building that was surrounded by low-maintenance plants and fitted with all the latest technology. The design notes said something to the effect of: comfortably modern, aware of both its situation and purpose – nestled into the woodland yet also striking out as an important junction.

I wasn't that into the architecture – its technical terms, its attempts at art, its bewildering plans – but I learnt a lot about the processes of actually getting a station planned and built. Oh I was quite the train station boy. By this time, of course, I was actually getting on a bit, well, getting on into my twenties, and I noticed that nobody paid any attention to my silver hair anymore because it was no longer interesting. Silver hair's only interesting if it's on a kid. It's something to point at and laugh at with better haired friends and, secretly I am sure, be jealous of.

Aside from hair issues, I was also climbing another rung of the figurative, vertical railway track-ladder, enjoying my next and last promotion. I came back from that place near Wales and the 'Assistant' part of my title was scrubbed out, leaving Project Development Manager, for an area not so near to Wales. The area was in fact here-ish and my changeover was taking place at around the same time as that station was being renovated. It was tremendous first-hand experience and really allowed me to break into the train station structural development scene. I worked with the guy who signed off the papers that called for the making of that station. Perhaps in the future I'll have better claims to fame, but if all goes wrong I can fall back on that. And all the time I was here, I was his superior, really.

There's my home.

There, it's gone. I can't see it anymore. It just flashed before me and then we ran away around the bend.

I oversaw the finishing of that comfortably modern station. Just the tidying up, really. I was able to get hold of some names and numbers of various companies, for my own personal use, you know, just in case I wanted to build my own train station or anything.

After a short settling in period following that tidying up, I worked on the first project I'd head – my pet project – and I felt the energy of adventure still tickling away inside my body and brain. Much investigation backed up the decision initially made on a whim, that a small train station had to be built to service a village, the inhabitants of which then had to use cars to get anywhere. It was absolutely necessary. That station *had* to be built. I was so into it. I mean I really admired myself. My direction was being followed and my goal seemed achievable. I was actually succeeding in sorting out my work, my home and my future.

I've never masturbated on a train. I've done it in a train station – you know that – I've done it in plenty of train stations in fact. In one of them I do it on quite a regular basis. Nearly every single day. Maybe doing it on a train is something to try someday, if it ever feels like the thing to do, which it may.

Only a very small station was needed. My plans were to build it on a very minor stretch of railway that ran alongside a road a few hundred metres away from this village. I had educated myself well in the procedure of putting down completely new stations. There was a great deal that had to be taken into consideration – existing tracks, stations, schedules, signals and how they'd change, where the funding, organisation and overseeing would come from. You can't just plonk a building somewhere and hope curious trains turn up. There is no 'build it, and they will come'.

I mean I worked at that solidly for a good number of months before presenting just the concept and preliminary investigation to anybody else. And when I did and I laid down three big files on my superior's desk and told him what the project was, he was impressed. He was surprised to see how much effort I'd put into and said he'd never seen someone so dedicated to their proposal. After reading it all, well, not it all – I wrote so much that he could only really have had time to read the stuff I wrote in bold – he said that the first-stage planning was satisfactory. He said it was just an ickle station and he wasn't really fussed, in not so many words, and that I seemed to have thought of everything so I had the official go ahead. I had many thousands of pounds at my disposal and a hell of a lot of more work to do.

I don't believe it. This train is just pulling up to my stop but I don't want to get off now. It's all wrong. Don't get *me* wrong, I do so want to get home, but this isn't right at all. Where's my buffet trolley? It *said* there's be a buffet trolley. How can I live without that fantastic trolley that I've been waiting for, for this whole train journey?

I swear that I can hear it rattling down the carriage and it's just out of my view. I'm sure they're meant to supply the buffet to everyone on the train between the two stops for a run like that! What a poorly managed service! What kind of people do they employ these days?!

But I've got to look past the buffet trolley. I've got to look past the scrumptious sandwiches that are brought right to my seat – usually. And the fizzed up coke. Maybe a little Danish or two. I've got to see in the long-term. I've got to think of what I've got going for me and where I'm going with my life. I've got to forget about the trolley.

And, perhaps more importantly, I've got to get off the train.

The Game Boy boy is getting off too. He beat me to the door. He'll miss his buffet too, but it looks like he's also conquered his fury. He shouldn't repress it. I think you should deal with your problems. Sure, don't let it get to you, but don't shove it down into

the black market of your mind, where its bought up by your bad brain cells and put to evil use.

I'm not sure if Freud dealt with buffet trolleys. Did they exist in his time? I'm sure they did.

Next time, Mr. Buffet-Trolley, next time.

I'm glad I don't get stressed about such things as the tardiness of buffet trolleys. I'm tempted to say that I never seriously get stressed. It's not a particularly useful thing to do.

This is quite a small station but my one was planned to be even smaller. Really titchy, very functional. I'm walking side by side with this boy. I'm very surprised he got off at this station because I haven't seen many people get off here in my days. This area contains only a few small settlements sprinkled here and there, it's usual for the vast majority of people to travel through it without noticing anything's really here. In all honesty, there isn't a lot.

Now Game Boy boy and I have to part and go our separate ways. He's heading towards the cluster of houses where he probably lives, while I am going in the opposite direction, along this long, empty road that'd make an adequate setting for a horror film scene involving a scared little screaming teen and a shadowy figure following her, panting, with a knife. There aren't any streetlights so I have to rely on the dim illumination of the moon and, in time, my night sight. Right now, if there were ghouls and ghosts about I would not see them.

Before any changes could be made to schedules, before residents could be informed of a new station opening up for their use and before I could actually make trains stop for me and my station, the station had to exist. It had to be built. Though the general area had been decided on and assessed, mostly by me, its exact location and dimensions had to be worked out to the centimetre. I thought that it had to be, like that renovated changing station, pocketed into the woodlands, even more so, and a cosy little spot on the inside of a bend took my fancy. I got a team of surveyors and an architect to check it out with me, to see if everything was good to go and if my ideas could be implemented. That didn't seem to be a problem, as I wasn't asking a lot. The guys had looked over areas with much larger stations and longer platforms in mind. It was going to be a very short platform. A few jokes were thrown about whether the station had to be built at all because it wouldn't be used by many people – jokes that turned into polite questions – but they knew who was paying them and my assurances were enough to silence them.

Piping, electricity and phone connection plans had to be made. The station was going to be small but not shabby, coming complete with heating and one toilet cubicle – with hot and cold running water. I wanted the inside to be basically two rooms with a door and a counter between them, though there wouldn't have been enough business to warrant a full time station worker, so ticket machines would have to be used. It was actually a little ludicrous that a station was being built bang in the middle of nowhere but I'd argued the case for a more personal, low-key station and I'd got all the necessary permission.

While all of this was going on I was still doing my other work and showing my superiors, who I rarely saw because there weren't all that many of them by then, that I was continuing to work at the highest level. See, my little project had become a bit of a joke and a slight embarrassment to the guy who gave me the thumbs up. Not to me. I don't get embarrassed. To me it had always been obvious that the station was going to be a little used thing. That had never been the point. But it wasn't as if they actually cared much about it

and it wasn't as if they didn't have enough other work to get stuck into it, to forget about Xanoc's just under mediocre plans for a very minor station. I thought it was all going swimmingly. I mean it wasn't going swimmingly in an unoriginal and ordinary way. It was more like the swimming I do with my weird stroke. So I was happy.

And when the architects and plumbers and electricians and builders came in and did their business and I paid them for it, they were happy too.

It was going to be a nice station.

If I followed this road and turned left down a little path a few miles on I'd get to my house. But I like to cut across the woods and that's just what I'm doing now. It's quicker and even scarier. Who's creeping around, behind the trees? Are they waiting for me? Are they going to poke my eyes out with twigs and suffocate me by stuffing frogs down my throat? Or perhaps a more tried and tested form of murder?

It's that darkness thing again. There isn't anything different about this wood than in daytime, on a bright and fresh spring's day when I could be strolling with my pony-tailed wife and my cute kids. Different things are going through my mind though. That's the difference. I've watched movies, I've read books and I've got my natural human defences and I *know* that this is meant to be spooky. And you *know* that this is meant to be spooky.

An owl hoots.

I can see very little. My night sight is taking time to kick in and the moon's glow has always been feeble. The area is thick with trees and the ground I'm stepping on is a shaggy carpet made up of many mouldy things, soft with layers of leaves that I'm sure I'd think were wonderfully coloured if I could see them. I keep walking into branches and roots. I'm a good walker but I can't walk through trees.

But *actually*, a killer could be living in these woods. I know that few people venture out here. It would be a good hideaway, if you wouldn't mind sleeping in rotting leaves. You'd have to keep a knife by your side when you slept, so that if you were woken up by some alarming noise you could stab out and protect yourself. Maybe satisfy your unappreciated appetite.

It'd be funny to come across a serial killer or somebody of that sort, right now. We could just bump into each other, say 'I'm terribly sorry, didn't see you there' and 'cold night isn't it?' and try to feel our ways away.

I've got a torch at home but it ruins the atmosphere. It literally destroys the darkness when the darkness hasn't done anything wrong.

So the construction got underway. Bulldozers, men with hard hats – just what you'd imagine. I'd still be working in my office, on my desk and on my computer most of the time but I went to the site to see how things were coming along every few days and was often amazed at how busy they all were, doing my work for me. Though it was a commonplace project and the work was below them, they really went at it. It was a bit crazy how all that building was going on for a station that could never be a real industrial success. Other than them and their equipment, the only sign of civilisation they could see around them was the railway tracks that were quickly eaten up by trees in both directions. I'd made it so that the platform was as bendy as it was allowed to be, by whatever standards and regulations there were at the time. As short as well, obviously.

In 4 months the station building was built. The concrete ground had long been laid down. Everything was wired up. The platform had *nearly* been finished. All there was left to do was lay down 3 more sections of platform. The last pieces of the puzzle. Each

section was a huge concrete construct and they just needed to be slotted into their foundations. Then my station would be complete.

But, oh no! The sections were not to be found! There appeared to have been a bit of a booboo. The material for 3 fewer sections than were needed had been ordered. We really couldn't have lost them, they were pretty damn easy to spot. Oh no. And it was my problem. I was the one who hadn't ordered enough material. I thought it was just as well seeing as we did only scrape under our budget anyway, but we really needed those 3 sections of platform. It was an error on my part that was going to be very hard to clear up. I really should have checked it all. I thought I was the unfaltering expert at it, but I really could have checked it and changed it. All work had come to a halt.

Because I'd already used up my entire budget on the materials and labour, that severely lacked 3 platform sections, I had to ask for more money. They, the railway people, were already fed up with the whole project because of its weak aims and the fact it was incredibly unlikely to be profitable. I suggested we get surveyors in to check everything and make sure it was all still fine so the last bit of cash could be justified and the station would actually be finished. They reluctantly said yes, that it sounded like a good idea, and left it to me. Whenever I talked about the project with them they frowned profusely, eager to see the end of the development.

I called a surveyor in. I knew that we needed to have surveyors at the end of the construction to tick all his boxes and label the station as safe and that it really wasn't necessary to have another check. But, what the hell. It felt like the thing to do.

Then a second wave hit our boat. Higher than the last. Word came from the surveyor that it wasn't satisfactory. The site was not satisfactory. The same surveyors as before, who then said it was fine for the construction to go ahead, informed us that the ground left was not suitable for the 3 platform sections that we'd have to put there. He also recommended that we invested in a steel support for another section of the platform, as its structure could have deteriorated left in the current state. That wasn't needed but was definitely recommended. A second surveyors made roughly the same decisions. It was not good good, good to go.

Once again I had to talk to the frowning supervisors. This time though, their frowns dug deeper and their words matched their frowns. No way Eugene. It's too much bother. Not more money paid into that silly station. The project was derailed. My station would never be finished. The choo-choo trains would choo-choo past for evermore.

Black has turned into different shades of grey. I'm sure this could be metaphorical. When I was new to this world everything was black – shrouded in mystery – and I stumbled along, not knowing my way. Now I've experienced this world and I can see everything as what it is. But it's all greyscale, that classic criticism of our lives that it's all just different shades of grey. And the woods stretch on, presenting unexciting nuances of grey – the enduring homogeneity of the Homo sapiens, of humanity. And somewhere in these woods of ours we'll all find our killer and fall, adding to the piles of decomposing matter under future generations' feet.

A bleak, grey view. Perhaps there's some truth in that hastily prepared metaphor. Yet these woods don't go on and on. They lead to things. Also, occasionally I can see a shape that still is mysterious and black. Some other things are shiny white.

Besides, this wood isn't all grey. That's just caused by the poor supply of light. My grey surroundings, when seen clearly in the day, become beautiful. Endless variations of hue, contrast, colour fill our vision. The whole rainbow and more. Maybe it all just seems

greyscale if you don't bother to wait for the sun to come up. You don't see the real – the whole picture. You see grey faces and not the colourful minds behind. You see grey behaviour because you don't pay attention to the beauty of the thoughts guiding it. Maybe it's because you like to think you're the most colourful thing in your world.

Anyway, as my station failed so did my career. I wasn't sacked but I was shamed. I had toyed with ideas from above my station. How could I have possibly continued to work side by side my railway brethren with such a failure scrawled all over me and my reputation? I didn't want to simply hang my head and slide down the ladder I'd raced my way up because I didn't think I could stand anymore of the ecstasy of train station administration. I had to resign and really had to fight back the tears. They gave me a month to sort out loose ends and mop up after my latest project. That suited me fine. I still had my direction to follow. That hadn't been forgotten – it'd never been forgotten and was lurking around my mind just as much then as ever before.

I took advantage of the mess the whole railway industry was in, what with the aftermath of privatisation and changes of ownership, to reach the goal that I'd been working towards for all that time – that was to make a train station my home. That was it. That was *the* goal. I wanted to live in a train station.

I filled out forms and edited documents from the new station file and it was remarkably easy. I hadn't thought the final sprint would be that easy. The state of the industry was just a convenient by-product of something that I was always sure of and had relied on throughout my precious scheme – that nobody cared.

Nobody had cared enough to look through the whole, lengthy, initial investigation I presented about why a train station should have been built where I outlined. Nobody cared enough to see that nobody wanted a train station there!

Nobody cared enough to check up on the letter from the surveyors that said the site wasn't satisfactory, that I drafted, or the letter from the second surveyors, that I also drafted.

The railway authorities didn't really care what was to be done with an incomplete train station so it was left boarded up and nobody noticed when I slightly modified legal papers that dealt with it, destroyed others and ultimately stole the property rights. All while I was in charge of changes to management and ownership of the railways for the area.

Passengers don't really care enough about all the buildings they see on their journeys to enquire about an insignificant, boarded up station that is only visible for about 10 seconds on the few trips that pass it. Once or twice some really curious and bored people might have said 'what's that?' – 'I don't know love', but I doubt much more.

Engineers and railway maintenance workers don't care about a building like the one that's now my house. It's not in their contract – it's not their problem. If they were to check the records for the place, which would be far too annoying a process to do in practice, hidden deep within four or so pages of technical small print is the info that it's owned privately by a Mr. Eugene Xanoc.

Furthermore, nobody cared about Eugene Xanoc. Eugene Xanoc, former Project Development Manager, administered everything satisfactorily and managed the region's stations just as well as they deserved. Oh, once he tried to build a new station but that fell through.

And I didn't care enough about train station management to properly look after my area's trains and develop the network with any beneficial projects of my own. That's not what I was in it for – I was in it for my train station. Call me crazy. I realised fairly early on

in my administrative years how hard it would be hard to entirely delete the records of an existing train station, to shred the documents and try to convince everyone it wasn't actually there. I only had the direction to begin with and had no idea of how I was going to follow it. I had to look out for openings and it all worked out in the end.

I didn't care enough about money or status or families or mortgages or conformity or everything else that ties people down to their jobs to not use it. That's not to say I didn't work to my contract, because I did, but I was definitely not working to rule.

There it is. My home. That's my stop. I can hear a train approaching so I have to wait here in the grey trees until I can make the final steps. We don't want people getting suspicious.

Somebody has to notice it properly at some point. It would be amazing if it could go undiscovered for an eternity.

It looks as if somebody tried to make a train station and gave up halfway through – after realising it was in the middle of nowhere, probably. But I did finish it. People would think it were a failed signal box if it weren't for one of those station name signs that stands proudly, albeit mostly blank, by my door. It's not blank though. In a size 7 Microsoft Word font, in bold in the top right hand corner, there is written: 'My house. Eugene Xanoc'. I'd wager no one other than me has ever seen it.

The train is passing, its passengers oblivious to me and my directions.

It won't even really matter if people find out. So what? I haven't committed *that* much crime. It'd be quite amusing to see their reactions. It won't really matter soon anyway. It won't matter what anyone finds out about me, to me at least, after tomorrow.

Before then, I don't see why people would check up on things like this. And why not? Because, I'd suppose, it's not really seen as human nature to secretly build train stations. And why? Why did I build a train station? I'll be honest with you. There was no rational reason. I just wanted to live in a train station.

The train's gone so I can come out from hiding.

There was no real, solid, rational reason. How embarrassing. It was all for nothing but a little idea I had, that it'd be nice to live in a train station. All those years of work now tinged by a rather pathetic conclusion.

Well, everyone else works. I worked. I worked and lived much like many other people. That was for over six years of my life – but many people work for much longer. They live and work, like me. They don't work with crazy schemes in mind though. After all the working they settle down and look at how OK their lives and work were, while I, I live in a train station.

Perhaps I'm not the only one. I guess I shouldn't presume everything is in greyscale. Perhaps there are hundreds of people living secretly in train stations.

Technically it's not, well, a train station, because no trains use it as a station. But, apart from myself, nobody has corrected me on it yet. No train does stop here. No trains stop at the station 'My house. Eugene Xanoc.' Funny how nobody's ever asked for tickets to it.

Nearly there.

And what was to be my direction from there? First, as a little reward to myself, I dyed my hair black for a summer – the only summer I've ever done such a scandalous thing – and worked as a holiday postman in a large University city. Trust me, it was a worthy reward and a very pleasant holiday of sorts.

Then, I just closed my eyes, spun around and pointed, so to speak. And by chance the new direction was something that definitely felt like the thing to do.

I had learnt that I could do anything I wanted to, within some reason. I'm not saying anybody could, just that *I* could, because I'm great, basically, at the things I want to do. I knew I could accomplish special, wacky things if I tried the hardest I possibly could and was thoroughly devoted.

That's what I am now and this is what I'm doing now – I'm collecting the names and addresses of people who I am going to kill. Quite randomly selected people. I can hide in my train station by day and kill by night. Just for the fun of it.

Right now I'm using the only key there is to this building and walking into my home, which is one of my two houses.

Here is a loaf of bread. Two slices of bread will soon become toast and too slices of toast will soon become my bedtime snack – my cold toast.

11

Not Just a Lot of Jizz

Me, killing people. Not really, of course. I'm not sure if that's what you'd expect. I don't know if I really know *you*. I don't know if I ever will.

But in a way that'd be too predictable, easy, below me. I've considered casual murder – I think most people do – just not for very long. It'd be too messy, mean and ultimately unrewarding. There's no harm in considering it though. It won't kill you or anybody else. I like to consider a good spread of things. Even the insane.

My home. What a palace. To strangers this might seem like a squatter's jumble but it's taken me well over a year to collect the twigs and assemble this nest.

I have to lock the door.

Somehow I got a double bed in. Not that I'll share it with anyone, it's just for me. And as for the general sense of disorder, it is just a *sense* of disorder and would only seem a terrible mess to strangers, who don't pop round here all that often anyway. I know exactly where nearly every item I've brought here is. I can find anything with the aid of my memory and the glow of the three lamps, shaded, that I always put on. When I'm here my abode is constantly mood-lit so that I can do my things and nobody's the wiser. It's like the opposite of 'the lights are on but nobody's In'. I'm like anti-crazy.

I didn't particularly want to go on a killing rampage but I wanted to do *something* and that's where this new direction came in. A new idea, a new burning – or at least simmering – passion. As a matter of fact it was more an old flame that I wanted to relight, a silly flame but a bright and warming one nonetheless. It was an idea I'd had in my mind from my youth. I didn't turn to it because it was the best idea ever, or because it'd make me famous, but more because I'd always thought it was just a fancy – an in-joke just for me and nobody else. It was something that could never come to fruition, not in the *real* world at least. Only in the confines of my quaint and mischievous mind. In that way it was like the train station scheme. There was a short period of time for which I thought that living in a train station was ridiculous and unachievable, but look at me now. I mean what's the point of doing things you know you can do? There are plenty of people around to do that. I had decided to go crazy, remember, and that didn't just translate as living next to a railway line.

Bread slices slide perfectly into the toaster. I shall warm my hands up on the bready air.

There are my two suitcases, already packed. One is for tomorrow and the other is for whenever. I hope I haven't forgotten anything. I don't think I have.

All of the windows are boarded up, from the inside. I could put proper lights on if I wanted to risk it but there's no point. All of these windows have names. This one I'm facing is called Proctor. He doesn't do much. Next to him is Sheila. She's quite lazy and quiet. When she does say things, they're awfully laconic. On the other side are Robert Hippory and Daniel Edgemaster. They're probably up to something right now, behind my back. It's all futile because they don't move either. Their lives are so pained.

"Did you hear that, guys?"

What am I talking about? They don't listen in to what's said in my mind.
"Never mind."

I want to look up the word 'insane' in my Oxford Minidictionary. I've looked it up before but I just want to check, I can't remember this edition's entry, word for word.

I can't see it though. My dictionary is one of the few things, actually maybe the only thing, that I can rarely find here. It's always the same problem – I think of a word that I simply must look up, can't remember where I put the damn thing, spend ages searching for it and then after I've absorbed my information I follow some related tangent and put the thing down... somewhere, effectively losing it again.

There it is, the scallywag, hiding with its hands over its head, just trying to squeeze itself into an abyss.

Insane. Insist. Inhospitable. Intolerable. Jackpot. Intolerant. Intermediary. Insure. Inspectorate. Inquisitive. Insane.

Not sane, mad. Extremely foolish.

Sane means having a sound mind, not mad; sensible and practical. I know that one off by heart, not that anybody's heart actually remembers anything.

I could keep looking things up and make long branches of definitions and semantics. What's 'mad', what's 'sound mind', and 'sensible' and 'practical' etcetera? And what do the words that define them mean? And who says? And so what?

Someone who's in a state of heavy, merry insobriety can be 'extremely foolish', but they're not deemed to be insane. They could be called 'crazy!' between the chuckles of mates but nobody would phone up the asylum to tell them they've got someone who isn't quite there. They're fun. Constantly pissed – really pissed – that might seem 'mad'. Alcoholics sometimes come close but they're usually hardened to it and have learnt, at least slightly, how to cope with reality while under the effect. It's novice drinkers who get the best glimpse at something else – the feeling of being 'gone' – where to? While they're wherever there is, here they're rendered extremely foolish and are far from sensible and practical. So many people striving for that short-term sense of insanity.

Most people would probably disagree with that term though because there's nothing abnormal about drunkenness. And it's not ill so it's not insane. It's hard to *actually* define these things like sanity. There are blurred lines everywhere and some day, perhaps, someone will cry in true Planet of The Apes fashion, 'Oh no! This world was crazy all along!'

But that person would probably be in a hospital anyway. There, there, it's all OK.

Onto more important matters, the toast has popped up. I can't throw it all in now though, I must lay the bread to the side. I could try that fridge thing – putting the toast into the fridge. That'd be super indulgent. No, not today, later someday. I wonder if I'll ever have another chance. Well, not today.

I have an urge to wash my teeth and do all of those nightly activities that my mother made sure I always did, but I've got to plan ahead. This toast contains starch, which is turned into sugar. The teeth brushing must wait until I've finished my snack. I can do it straight after and just brush off all the lumpy bits that will be stuck in the holes of and gaps between my teeth. I have it all sorted.

I hope my schemes don't mean I'm not whimsical. It's not that I'm scared about people telling me off for not letting whims carry me through every day. I mean I do like to think I let little ideas guide me but what about things like the over-half-a-decade train station direction and my recent endeavours? Surely I can't be following both sets loyally. Ah, but those master projects originated as silly whims and it's just that my attention hasn't waned, I've kept true to them. I think I still do things on impulse. I'm not an attention seeker, really. I like who I am. I think I can be sure of that.

Whimful... is that a word? Where's my dictionary?

I can't believe it, I've lost it again! Always the same. I just forgot about it once the definition had sparked off an interesting enough digression. Where is it? There are fewer hiding places here than there usually are because so much is in suitcases.

That's it – the Minidictionary is on top of one of the suitcases.

Whimful. Woolen. Whenever. Whimper. Whimsical. No Whimful. I thought I'd made it up. Probably just sounds like wilful. They're slightly related, I guess, I mean they *would* be if the word 'whimful' actually existed.

This all started off as a zany idea and I followed it up quite recently, about one and a half years ago, on a whim. Even though it'd take less time than the train station affair it was far more ambitious and slightly less conventionally pointless.

While the cooling toast lies alluringly on a plate, a few metres away, I'm taking off all of my clothes. This reminds me, I mustn't forget my blind-man's apparel. The chunky black glasses and my trusty cane need to be put into this suitcase. I'll do it now. I have no idea when or where or if I'll use them again. Certainly not for some time.

Now I'm back to my sink and my mirror and I'm topless. I'm next to where the ticket desk would be if this were a fully functioning station. I took out the door between the main room and the toilets because I have plenty of privacy anyway. I don't have a shower or a bath because getting one put in here may look a little suspect and besides, I can wash as merrily as I please in my larger, more conventional house. That's obviously still my address on every form and record about me. This is simply listed somewhere as my property, but I view it as my home.

Off come the trousers. Hello kinky. Right sock, left sock. When will I get to wash these socks and pants? Pants off. I catch them on my feet on the way down and flick them up, into my hands. I'll throw them in a corner and maybe one day I'll wash them. My watch is laid to the side.

I hunger for cold toast.

All I can see in the mirror is myself and my station walls as my background. What have I become? How much of *me* is that thing I see in front of me? How will people judge me, just by my physical appearance? Do I look eccentric? Does my natural bone structure suggest a slight weirdness? It's obvious that I'm no dummy. My brain isn't pulsating but it's taking up all the space it's been allocated and seems to be asking for a little more. The silver hair is now a sign of my maturity, funny considering I've had it since the end of primary school.

I'll tell you what I'm doing. I'm going to put on my little show. I'm producing The Insane Game. It's *actually* happening. Tomorrow, in fact, it's kicking off. We're really going to see if we can turn people insane.

When I'm telling you about this I'll also be turning the handle of the door to my pleasure. Squeezing it, twisting it. Don't worry, you won't feel a thing.

I know it probably sounds far-fetched and absurd, that such a TV show could be put on, but that's the world we live in. The one I live in at least. I thank my determination and my luck, most of all. When I was about 6 years old I think I read in a book something about how, if you believe something *so* much, it comes true. The philosophy surrounding that statement could be discussed by academics for hours, or dismissed by an older kid in a few seconds, but I've often remembered that. I don't think that you can believe something into being but, well, you can damn well try your hardest at actually making it real. My fresh train station acquisition gave me confidence and I had enough money in the bank to take a long break and look into The Insane Game. I don't mean more 'What if?'s – my mind was overflowing with them already – I mean trying to find out whether or not it had a chance of being put on.

Turning somebody insane is doing serious damage – that was a concern. I never worried about it being an entertaining enough concept. Those two things went hand in hand because if something's dangerous enough to be on the border between allowed and disallowed, it'll be watched. If I could get it onto TV then there would be the problem of complainers. There'd be people who'd say:

Oh no, not causing insanity, and oh, I don't want to be put through anything to do with insanity and all that nasty mental illness thing. It's all around me. It's all around me but I don't want it on my TV.

And that's the thing – it was, and still is, the fashion. Mental illness is all the rage. Depression, manic depression, schizophrenia, Tourette's, obsessive compulsive disorders, and the rest of the gang – they're all more prevalent in the Western World now than ever before. Maybe because this modern world makes us go mad, maybe because we've got more doctors and more labels to throw around.

We're all going crazy. So it was getting more and more coverage in the media, and films were often dealing with psychological problems and abnormalities. The most exciting topic of them all is the old classic, insanity. Every time I saw another film out that dealt with it or anything of that kind, thoughts and hopes about *The Insane Game* were ignited in my mind – the *Primal Fears* and the *One Flew Over the Cuckoo Nest*'s, the *Fight Clubs* and the *A Beautiful Mind*s, the *Low Down on Eric Burzzerbys* and the *Split Feelings*s. Most of the films were already books and based on real stories but people craved *seeing* the characters who acted bizarrely and the fascinating stories that blossomed from their lack of sanity.

I knew that if I did anything, it'd have to have at least a little of that Hollywood sheen so that it looked light and not too severe. Radical but not harmful. Another weapon against complainers that we – whoever we would be – could arm ourselves with, was the argument that the show would actually be beneficial. Though mental illness was becoming in many ways popular, there was obviously still a certain stigma attached to it. A prime-time show like *The Insane Game* would make it more talked about and less of a taboo. Also, though this was very tenuous, it would go to prove that mental disorders were caused by society – society's fault, not the fault of the individual – and it was up to society to deal with it. I mean we wouldn't mention that a University experimental investigation could do that without the public outcry.

I'm not sure if I put forward the idea that insanity might not be a negative thing as such anyway. More of an enlightenment. I didn't think that'd be at all accepted.

Luckily, the state of the television industry couldn't really have been better. It was just crying out for something like *The Insane Game*. Those psychologically themed movies, numerous documentaries about the brain, and a whole new genre of massively appealing TV game shows based loosely around social psychology were making psychology even more popular than it already was. *Big Brother* was the nation gripper. That was when I first realised just how many oodles of attention those kind of shows could get i.e. oodles and oodles. Following that, production companies were trying to push the boundaries of Reality TV out in any corners that they could find. Isolation and real characters, the basic formula that worked so well for *Big Brother*, was played with in shows like *Castaway* and *Survivor*, that also threw in what many saw *Big Brother* as lacking – things to do. A few others, for example *Temptation Island*, went for the sex angle. There were revivals of controversial experiments such as Stanley Milgram's and Phil Zimbardo's. Some people realised that these shows weren't presenting reality at all and tried to sort that out. I wouldn't say that *The Insane Game* is reality, but perhaps that's the point.

Whole new waves of shows that in my opinion have far less potential than The Insane Game were, and are, being tried out on the public. While I was seriously considering working on The Insane Game I had to keep checking newspapers and TV-industry magazines to make sure that my idea hadn't been thought up by someone who was slightly faster than me and would be my nemesis. They're trying out everything now and though it may seem as if I'm jumping on the bandwagon, I know and you know that I was sprinting out in front of it before it was going anywhere. Only a few years before, but still, enough for me to know for certain I'm not a copycat. The show most like The Insane Game was, of course, *Solitary Confinement*, which was seen to be quite lame. And there was *Shattered* – I mean that really took insomnia entertainment to new levels. People get kicks out of sleep deprivation; people love the kicks they get from it all.

The bandwagon's even more heavily laden now than when I started looking into it. Reality TV is going crazy. Never mind the series sequels, recent new offerings like *War of the Words*, *Schoolyard* and *The Real Big Brother* have intruded more into lives than some people are happy about, but it goes on, because the majority of people can't get enough.

At the same time, everything else is getting crazier. The mind is being increasingly explored, along with the problems associated with it, in books, video game, magazines and TV shows other than game shows. It's a crazy craze. Every week it seems there's news of yet another celebrity who's booked themselves into a hospital, not able to cope in the real world, diagnosed with the latest trendy condition. Just this year the psychology degree at university took over from law as being the most popular, meaning we're training up more mind-readers than anything else. Best-seller lists are nowadays always overrun by mentality orientated novels. Games have come a long way on from 'Sanity Metres' and bad guys who weren't really there. Now the more mature video-game experiences often deal with characters going mad, treating them and trying to build up the strength values of the mind. And, again, more films like *Minds Ablaze* do well at the box office.

I've got all excited, both physically and about The Insane Game and about how the time is ripe. Almost too ripe – too ripe so that The Insane Game would be unoriginal, expected, unwanted, but I don't think so. I think there's still room for it.

However, back then when I got likewise excited by how the show could be glamorous and capture, and captivate, the spirit of society, much more important was the nagging feeling that it'd be completely illegal. We didn't, and we still don't, live in a futuristic, game show environment where you can do things like televise executions. Sure we can joke about it, but we can't actually do it. We can box and wrestle for the amusement of others though.

It's definitely against the law to inflict harm on somebody and psychologically damage them. Anything to do with the mind is less clear-cut because of the uncertain nature of it. But you couldn't just turn somebody insane for fun and get money from it. TV shows find ways of getting around legal problems like this though. A tried and tested way was to get contestants to sign a contract, signing away all the necessary rights. Like how in *Big Brother*, rights to privacy had to be done away with. So, someone whispered into my brain, why not just get people to waive their rights to sanity?

Do people even *have* a right to sanity? And some rights can't just be signed away, which is always the subject of much debate with topics like Euthanasia. For well over two months I researched into these matters to try to find a way for my game to be legal. On the first day though I found out something that that was delightfully useful – that the terms

‘sane’ and ‘insane’ are legal, not medical, terms. Though psychiatrists do diagnose people as, that famous phrase, clinically insane, it’s often for use in a trial, or else is a slightly different, psychiatric term. A rubber stamp with ‘Insane’ carved into it is not standard issue for psychiatrists.

I saw the general confusion surrounding the terms ‘sane’ and ‘insane’ as a good thing, for The Insane Game. It’s far more complex than The Oxford Minidictionary lets on. It would be much easier to fiddle things if I could use the definitions that suited the game. I read a lot about the law and insanity and definitions. I read British legislation like the vintage ‘Trial of Lunatics Acts, 1883, Acquittal, from Trial, on Grounds of Insanity; Mental Health Acts 1983 and 2003; Criminal Procedure Acts like 1991, Insanity and Unfitness to Plead. They were all great reads. Classification systems like the latest ‘International Standard Classification of Diseases, Injuries and Causes of Death’ and ‘Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders’ also had to be perused.

Somehow I even found myself reading the 16th Chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita, among many other things, which loosely states somewhere how it’s hard to make the distinction between sane and insane. It’s quite a very subjective thing. This idea was backed up by more recent work from people like David Rosenhan and Thomas Szasz. Just what is insane? There are online Sanity Tests that can tell you, after one minute of ticking answers to questions, whether or not you’re insane.

Yes: You are –insane- Do you want to invite friend to test?

Psychiatrists disagree and make mistakes and everyone has a slightly different idea about what is sane and what’s insane.

A problem arose from that. It wasn’t a large one, just that the original plan – that I devised while walking at night in Edinburgh – was to have a team of psychiatrists on board to diagnose the person in The Insane Game, insane. Especially in such an artificial situation there’d be disagreement about diagnosis, but the serendipity of it all was that I then had a much better plan – telephone-voting. Sure we could have psychiatrists available as well, like there were going to be psychologists to explain what was going on, but the actual diagnosis would be done by the viewers. And that’s roughly how it is going to work. The public literally has to phone up and answer the question: ‘Do you think this person is insane?’

I know that I could open this door anytime but I’m not pushing the sticky handle too hard.

After all my research I had enough material to argue that, essentially, people don’t have a right to sanity per se anyway. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everybody has a right to health etcetera, but never is a right to sanity stipulated.

But then could someone waive it away? Eventually, and this was actually only a few months ago, with the help of a few solicitors, I devised a contract for everyone who was going to be on the show to sign. It basically says that they agree to be put under extraordinary pressures and that they waive their right to privacy. Insanity and sanity aren’t mentioned in it, other than in the names of the parties. That was needed.

Of course, crucially, they’ll be able to leave the show at anytime. There is a large red button with the words ‘Let me Out!’ printed clearly on it, that will stop anything that’s going on and allow the contestant to leave. Also, if any mental harm is done then the production company will pay for the psychiatry and whatnot to nurse it better – let’s forget about irreparable damage – so all in all it’s not that dangerous. Seeing as so many people are

becoming mentally ill anyway, will it really matter if one or two more are, in the name of good television? And it's their own fault and responsibility – they're the ones who want the £50,000 cash prize! They'll also get that joy of experience that I always thought it'd be.

This is good exercise, for one arm at least.

It took me around three quarters of a year to get all of the details like that sorted out and written down, just like the plans for my train station, ready to be presented to somebody who could take The Insane Game somewhere. Hopefully, onto TV. As an advert now says:

1 Contestant.
7 Thinkers
Few Rules.
How Will They Push Him?
And How Far Will He Go?
Insanity TV.

Though I still call it 'The Insane Game', technically it's called 'Insanity TV'. They thought it was a cosier title and a good play on 'Reality TV'. They suggested Insani-TV but that really was going too far.

This was soon after I pitched the idea to the production company that I thought suited it best. I had it all written down, but I explained it to her – Marsha Yobritz – and it was the first time I'd ever told anyone anything about it. The workings of the game are pretty much the same now as they were back then, that's another three quarters of a year ago.

Each Contestant will be in a locked room for three weeks, starting on a Monday and finishing on a Sunday. What day does a week actually start on? Any? I wonder if it's noted for legal purposes anywhere. Anyway, the room is surrounded by screens, microphones, speakers and video recorders. There's even a smell-producing machine. Slits and flaps in the walls allow for small objects to be chucked into the mix and the door can be opened from the outside so that people and larger items can enter. A completely private toilet is connected by a door on the opposite side of the room, and the Contestant is allocated a certain number of minutes they can be in there every day.

Monday is one Thinker's turn to think up ways of theoretically trying to turn the Contestant insane. Tuesday is another's. They can prepare for it for three days before hand and they get the whole 24 hours. If they want to advise each other and share ideas, that's possible, but there's always one Thinker who makes the decisions for the day. This repeats for another three weeks.

Anything within reason is allowed. The Thinkers have plenty of freedom because of the contracts and because it's a late night show that's mostly edited – each day's show is an hour. They're not allowed to actually touch the Contestants in any way, though they can get them to interact with things or people. It'll be interesting to see what they can come up with. The hope is that they'll all approach it from different, original angles and work as a team to ultimately turn the person insane or force them to leave. They could turn it into a test of endurance, or intelligence, or numerous other things. It may not answer the question of whether or not you can turn somebody insane, but I must say that I'm much more excited by the prospects of the game now, than I was while walking in Edinburgh, when it was just my mind's joke. I've become that teensy bit obsessed.

The Contestant has that emergency button that they can press. Voting happens on the Wednesday, the Friday and the Sunday. If the person makes it all the way sane, they get a cheque for £50,000. If they press that button, then one of the Thinkers, chosen randomly, takes their place and if they can then last it to Sunday, they win £25,000. If the button is pressed again, it goes down to £10,000.

If the Contestant is voted as being Insane, or the team of Psychiatrists agree the person is dangerously ill, the guy is sent to the Doctors to be sorted out and documentaries are shown about the reality of mental illnesses, and then a Thinker takes over. It's corny but it probably will never come to that.

35% of supernormal profit goes to a selection of mental illness charities.

I said all of this in a calm and serious tone and then gestured that I was finished. We were in a nice, new, pastel-coloured office that smelt distinctly of disinfectant. She took her time to think up her reply. She was a young, black-haired, Jewish looking woman, with a bit of a moustache. I was waiting for either a laugh or a scowl.

I got the scowl, but then:

“Would we need to have these takes off our profit?”

I insisted on that clause, along with one other. She thought a little more, a little more. I went away. She phoned me. She said ‘yes’ and I smiled and laughed and within a week we were deep into discussing the particulars of the project. I was the creator and a producer, she was the Executive Producer. They had lapped me up, just like the guys from the railways, and I was going to make my game.

The door is beginning to open... it's open... open... close. A smidgen of bliss. Hands off the handle, the handle shrinks back. I'll have to wash this away.

To tell you the truth, I'm not sure if the show will turn out to be as compelling as I envisaged. It's going to have a certain fluffiness that it didn't have when it was only in my mind. It might be more of a popularity contest – people will vote anybody odd as being ‘insane’. Anybody who lies outside the central bulk of the normal distribution curves for personality. I mean that's all insanity is, really, the very light slopes of the normal curve, faraway from that majestic centre that represents the normal, sane people. The people lying right next to the axis are most probably wrong and could well be insane.

It'll be stopped, somehow, before anything distressing is televised. There's never going to be anything like somebody being tortured. That's why I actually doubt anybody will be transformed into a loon and why it's it'll be a slightly different show than the one I had thought up.

There's already been a planned response to this flaw in the show, and for that matter the rest of the show, in the form of comedy sketches. Before we've even started! I was informed that *The Chris Cross Show* have already filmed several Mickey-take sketches and was able to get a sneak peek. The first uses the set of *Call My Bluff*, renamed *Right Minded*, where celebrities including the real Sandy Toksvig have to decide whether a person is actually crazy or is just pretending. With hilarious, satirical consequences. Of course really it's *all* pretending and *Insanity TV* is the butt of the joke.

Then there's a follow-up sketch where they've got a room just like our one and the aim of the game is to last a day without getting the ‘shit beaten out of you’. The imitation

Thinkers take their time to carefully consider how to approach the task, then all rush in there and beat the guy up. Then you see recordings of people saying why they voted as they did, saying it was a hard decision etcetera. Instead of saying 'Let Me Out!' on the emergency button, it says 'Boost Our Ratings!' They've done it very well. I'm glad they did it and I'm sure it was very easy for them to come up with the comedy, considering the amount the show gives them to ridicule. I'd thank them if I weren't a recluse.

There's been a fair amount of outrage and complaining in the papers, already, and Panorama is, coincidentally, soon going to air a show about the terrible effects of mental illness on individuals and families. Many articles are being written on Reality TV as well. One magazine asked me for an interview and I was tempted but I suppose I was too shy in the end. Marsha said that was fine, we've done plenty of advertisement anyway and the hype is impressive. After all, the host's Danny Blaze. Come on, Danny Blaze. The only person to win two high-class Reality TV game shows in a year. Apparently he makes the guys go 'true' and the girls go 'woo'. So they say.

I get the feeling that my life's become a bit of a farce. I'm not sure how long it's been this way. I don't particularly want it to change.

Mad. Mad – I wonder what the Minidictionary says under 'mad'.

Where is it? Oh, I don't know. Once again.

Forget about that, where's my toast?

Here it is. My finger reports that it's cold enough. I think I'll sleep naked tonight. I'll eat this while on the toilet, if only to be consistently daring. There's a little window in the toilet that's the only one not boarded up. The light's blocked by the wall above the door. I can stand on my toilet and look at people go by and they have no idea I'm here. All I see are trains though. About one train comes every half an hour. It doesn't make for fabulous viewing.

I wonder if Insanity TV will actually be successful, in the regular sense. Do you think so? It should be and it shouldn't be. Technically, it shouldn't exist. Maybe it doesn't, maybe it's just the latest evolution of a game that's been playing in my mind for a very long time. And so what if it is? It's not my *raison d'être*, but it's worked for me. None of my friends are happier than me. Of course, I don't have any friends, but that's nit-picking.

Toast can make a man happy.

It also causes plaque. My teeth must be serviced. If things like this didn't feel like the things to do, what then? What a mess we'd be in. You know everybody does the things that feel like the things to do. It's just that my things are weird. Not brushing teeth – brushing teeth is perfectly normal, quotidian. It sounds like trains. That's OK, it's meant to. There I am, foaming at the mouth. I hope the toast doesn't think I'm ashamed of it.

Everything has to be spat out though. That was that.

Time to tuck myself in. Good night Proctor, Sheila, Robert Hippory, Daniel Edgemaster.

I'm not going to kill those people who I found today – I'm going to make them famous. Tomorrow will be a big day.

God bless me. Sleep, sleep, sleep.

Supposed Darkness

The centre of the cake is the tip of the iceberg. My father's taking a piece and showing it to the world. I eat the cake because somebody's got to do it. The cake's swirling into circles and Daddy is swirling too. Into something that's huge and vacuous and high above a large planet.

The planet's armed with missiles, ready to fire. It's firing at the waterfalls. Of course! They've got us now. I don't know if I can leave her though. She's crying and she doesn't know what to do. She's on an Intercom. The planet armed with the massive missiles is almost laughing at us. Only a few seconds left, there can't be many more.

There are many umbrellas falling up, from inside the waterfall. Many, many umbrellas going and going, never circling. Never ever circling. Some people are saying they're circling but they're not. Waft of homosexuality. The camera's zooming in on the umbrellas that are going but never circling and I've clung on. Somebody's got to do it, I'm saying to the umbrella, who couldn't care less. He's never circling.

Red and yellow and with a black handle. The umbrella's trying its hardest not to circle. We've fallen onto a grassy plain and there are wild animals all around. There's a gang of panthers, selling drugs to each other. Oblivious to our umbrellas. Are they my umbrellas? I've got to buy the drugs because somebody's got to do it! There are five thousand six hundred and forty eight umbrellas before us. I think I counted. Missiles are coming towards us, from the planet, homed in on us and ready to destroy our bodies and minds. The panthers don't even realise it. Fools! I'm not aware of the umbrellas sometimes. How come I can see them now? I don't know if they're on my side. The missiles are closer! I can't believe it! If only we had the waterfall.

Am I dead? I wish I had more umbrellas. Burger bars are in the air but they're not real, they're tricking me. They're not though. There's a glimmer of euphoria behind them. I feel comforted and warm. I don't even hunger for a burger. I'll have one, but in time. I mean, somebody's got to do it, but not now. The burgers are covered by hundreds and thousands that are still being sprinkled liberally. Gosh, I didn't know it, we're within the watery walls of a waterfall. I don't know where those missiles went. Everywhere I look I see gushing, glistening water. Maybe I should have an umbrella.

Flashes of sex. Discreetly done, like in the movies. Third-person, blanket covering most up. She's been so kind to me. A snapshot of a stain.

A woman in a flowery petticoat and fluffy hair, holding a red and yellow and black handled umbrella. Wood house out in the country, with paint flaking off and that's me, doing the washing up. Soap's getting everywhere and an umbrella is coming out of the tap. I've got to take it. Somebody's got to do it. Soap's even more everywhere.

I sit in a rocking chair made out of arrows. I'm resting. My eyebrows and only my eyebrows are full of soap. She's waiting on me. She's the same woman as was scared by the missiles. They didn't get us!

Everything's getting brighter and brighter. My chair's shaking and makes loads of noise. It's made of bars.

What am I doing in this chair? I've got to get up. But I don't know why I was even here in the first place. It's all falling away from me. I can't see very far. I'm drifting back, but back to where? Light, rattling noise, feeling of tiredness. Excitement though.

I've got to get up. The show. My vision is predictably bleary. I can't remember what I dreamt about. A woman, a house. I don't have a clue.

I can't sleep in, it makes me nauseous. Up I get. I've got to force the strength back into me. I remember, I'm naked. Just as well. I've got to put on the lights. Somebody's got to do it.

13

On The Rails to Somewhere

What a face. I wonder how many times the wind had to change direction before *that* face could dumbly stare like it's staring at me now. What a fat nose and what squidgy, bulging eyes. How it lollops and flops about. This face of sorts of mine often greets me in the morning and says from somewhere deep beneath its sprawling, wiry moustache:

"Good morning."

"Good morning, chap."

"Shall we get up?"

"If we want."

And up 'we' may rise. Only I get to see this face staring though. And even I only see it when I take the time to squash my penis against my stomach and poke a little life into it. Now we – it looks like he, though it's probably me – are rising and soon the face I'll see will be a gangly, snouted caricature of Pinocchio. A beast of a face.

I'll leave him to it.

My real face, which most people get their first ideas about me from, is something else. I am looking into the eyes of the posing man on the other side of the mirror, at his hardened, handsome, hunky face. I'm sure he makes the girls go 'woo'. It's the face of a blind man one minute, a firebrand the next. That guy's so hot he needs cooling down.

Splash, the water cleans.

I can handle multitasking. While one hand splashes water over my face and body to generally clean, the other brushes my teeth. What a compulsive teeth brusher I am. My mouth feels too cemented for me to have any breakfast, though I was considering a few pieces of bread with margarine. I don't always have to make my bread hard and chewy before I can consume it.

It's too late for that now anyway. The deed is done. The mint is in my mouth. Nothing else is going in there for a long time. Except water. I like the taste of minty tap water.

Water's dripping everywhere. Maybe I wasn't as talented as I thought.

Now that my teeth are done, I can use that hand to cup tap water that I can gulp down. That's my breakfast juice.

I now have enough water on me to towel off. I'm a little dubious about just how clean this process actually gets me. I don't think I smell. I don't believe in soap. It's too slippery – the symbolism is far too obvious to ignore.

I can get clothed. Society forces me to, really. Well, that and the chill of autumn mornings. I think I'm OK to leave. Wow, that was pretty quick.

Goodbye, window buddies. Oh, don't all scream goodbye at once. I'll take this suitcase because it's got in it all I need for the launch. The last train passed here fifteen minutes ago, half waking me up, so there won't be one outside for a while. There won't be a soul in sight, I bet. There never has been, at this time. I had to wait here for one hour once, when there was a graffiti 'artist' tagging the rails outside. I watched him from the toilet window as he laboured over the little mark of identity he was spraying onto the world.

There's nobody here. The sun sees me though. It's rising gloriously behind the trees, sending slices of amber around their trunks and shining yellow halos around their leaves. As I'm closing and locking the door behind me, I can see once again the thin wisps of misty vapour coming from out of my lips. My spirit slipping away into the ether – my tap water riding my minty fresh breath.

The guy's tag is still there. 'Skaz'. I wonder why he chose this spot. Possibly because there's absolutely no competition for floor space. Why didn't he do my home? I would have thought it's the ideal victim. Maybe it's invisible to all but me. Somehow I must have carried out my project even more successfully than I planned.

The current project is going fine. My collecting of information on possible participants for The Insane Game has been more than OK and proved fun to do. They don't have the slightest idea, at the moment, what they may be a part of. Later today they will.

We're working on the London show now, as all of the members of public will be from London. Only about a third of the people who I've gathered information on will actually make it into the show. One third won't be allowed to, legally, or won't want to, and another third won't be interesting or attractive enough. There are 7 places as Thinkers and obviously only one as Contestant, though we think we've already found somebody who could make a good Contestant.

We'll be recording everyone's reactions from each very first contact and then we'll follow their individual stories, some of them for the full three weeks of the show.

I'm deep into the woods, back to roughly where I thought it'd be fun to bump into a serial killer.

The birds are singing. Except, the birds here don't sing, they beep. But it's a pretty beep so it's all good. I suppose they've got a lot to beep their hearts out about as this woodland setting has all the energy allowed by a morning calm. What with the sunlight sprayed liberally here and there that's glowing off silvered barks and sparkling in a few puddles. The ground underfoot is soggy than last night – it must have rained again – and the sludgy mud is hidden beneath the splendid red, rich browns and fading yellows of the leaves I trampled over last night, and tread through now. There are still many leaves on the trees though I'm sure they're now very weakly connected to their trees and will glide down through this crisp air whenever they please.

The odd squirrel scurries between trees. They're the early ones. They must be delivering newspapers. Maybe they're collecting nuts for the killer.

Sometimes I've wished I *was* selecting this pick n' mix of people so that I could kill them all in some marvellous way. Or something of that kind. Something epic and timeless, while shocking and original. But what would be epic about killing a dozen people? It wouldn't be that hard. Push here, yank there. And there have been many psycho serial killers before. I mean real whackos. That's old hat. Not to mention pointless, though I wouldn't necessarily object to that.

So, that's me – a TV producer, not even an executive, with a slightly weird history and a slightly ambiguous mentality. That's it?

What if there was no point to it? What if I was just surreptitiously collecting information on people for no reason whatsoever? Just for the hell of it? For the buzz.

Or what if I was just confused, or thought that their names were anagrams of the precious answers to everything? What if I was going nowhere right now – just finding more names. You can never have enough names. Finding random names until my time is done.

What then? Would *that* be more worthwhile?

I'm going to make a show and that's not *it*. That's not my life and that's not me. There might not even be a show there, who knows? Maybe it really is another one of these tragic, 'he made it all up!' cases. There's no show. It never left my mind, it only ran around a bit and got itself all worked up.

But would *that* be better? If I enjoyed it, more than most people enjoyed their lives, wouldn't that still be worth it? Even if I was a fucking nutter? What if maybe, maybe, maybe. What if maybe. Maybe. So many maybes.

I can still do the epic, the timeless, the original and the shocking. I'll have my opportunities. I have my show and my years ahead of me. I have my funny little style. Oh there'll be plenty of opportunity. Plenty of maybes.

I can just see the road from here. No cars, as per usual.

Train. It's the sound of a train – I'm sure I can hear a train approaching from behind. I'm not scared it's going to hit me or anything, it's just I might as well get on it. It's a bit early but I won't stick to my principles, that I don't really have, and walk, because I may as well get on it. I want to be at the studio in good time.

I haven't jogged for a while. I have to keep my case balanced and mind I don't slip in the mud. I'd look like a klutz – falling over all by myself. I'll easily make it though. Lucky I've got a travelcard as otherwise I'd either have to be a journey-thief or wait half an hour for the next train.

I'll beat rush hour this way. Though a carriage packed to the brim with irritable businessmen has its joys. There are a few people sitting down – the ones who woke as early as the squirrels and Eugene.

I'm attempting to stamp the mud and leaves off my shoes, but to little avail. Oh well. This train isn't posh enough to be carpeted and it won't matter.

As I'm getting in and sitting down, I'm observing who I'm sharing these seats with. Most people do it, I've noticed, though a fair amount of people are too drained in the mornings to do such demanding things. There's a twenty-something man in a suit who's listening to voices that are shouting at him, through a vulgarly loud Walkman. His eyes are closed. He doesn't rock with the rhythm of the music, as emphasised as it is. A wizened man sits with a wizened woman who wears bifocal glasses attached to her ears by a purple

thread. They're devouring news from their broadsheets. I'd guess they do it every weekday. Could be married or friends. Three middle-class men in black suits and plain red and blue and green ties – one, not three, on each man – have claimed the central seating area as their own.

I've sat down on one seat of a hitherto empty two-seater. I can slump down and protect myself from viewing their many petty battles of looks and gestures – I can see at once that they're all loving their roles as stereotypical businessmen – but I'm strong enough to handle them. Besides, I couldn't really avoid the buzzwords and terrible simple jokes of the business chat that's streaming from out of their mouths in a flat monotone. It's a bit like a lullaby in that I'm sure it could send me to sleep, only it'd likely give me nightmares. I haven't actually had a nightmare for ages.

They could be producers. Judging by their behaviour and appearance, I mean, not by the specific content of their drivel.

"You know the Allshare took an astonishing dive."

"Yup, I knew."

"I knew."

"I mean it was much more considerable as a percentage than the 100."

"What a surprise!"

"I know it was hardly unforeseen."

"No, I think it's quite right to be alarmed. The tracker funds will fall- "

"It'll be very comparable to the fall in GTI."

"Obviously. I'll tell the board. They won't be happy."

"Are they ever?"

"Christ no but I'm not certain about an appropriate response."

"Don't you think you could sell your assets in Real?"

"I'd use a hefty chunk of the stocks."

"I'll talk it over with James at lunch."

"Yup, that'll probably be best. He's got a way of dealing with these horrors."

"Yes. He has."

I've been very impressed by the ways the sun's shone recently. Its latest trick is to light up the whole windowpane – I know not its name – so the thousands of flecks of smudgy dirt resemble, in a way, stars on a cloudless night. It's more of an inversion, in fact. The effect keeps flickering on and off as trees split up the sunlight as they love to do.

"Have you chosen your secretary yet?"

"Nope. I've been inspecting their CVs since last Friday."

"Really? You're just spending lots of time on it to show off?"

"Yes, quite. No, it's a rather close call."

"I'd go for Tanya if I were in your shoes."

"Tanya?"

"Tanya Woodgate. Yes, Jim, I hear she has *spectacular* tits."

"Never mind tits Trev, apparently she has a great *fanny*."

"How in God's name would you know such a thing?"

"Jake Peasley from Investcore said such a thing Friday night in the Coast."

I was wrong. They're not just talking monotonously and soullessly about their geeky finance jobs. They're talking monotonously and soullessly about their geeky finance jobs, tits and fannies. I suppose it's a slight improvement.

"Yes, yes, but of course not."

"You're not going to pick Tanya then?"

"Oh no, no, not seriously. Come on, how would I bed her anyway?"

"And what would Ashley say about it?"

"And yes, there's that small matter of my wife!"

As hard as I try, which to be fair isn't very hard at all, I can't get images of genitalia from popping up in my mind many times a day. Everything's a dick or a fanny. Maybe it's just a condition of living in this modern, human, sexual world.

The talk of tits and fannies is a bit of spice which nights out and drinking bring these men. They need it. I'd think they were educated at single-sex private schools and are friends with guys who are much more chums or associates than lads. They still giggle at sex if they haven't got investor profiles to think about. Don't we all?

I don't know how, but maybe in The Insane Game they would do something to do with the genitals.

Tanya Woodgate. I may as well write down her name. There's no harm in putting her on the list. I won't mention that, apparently, according to someone down at Investcore, she's got a great fanny.

She could use it to make someone insane with desire. Or something.

We're at the changing station and, just as the epithet suggests, we are all changing. Not like metamorphosis, not like accepting new attitudes towards life. We're just getting on a different train. It's already there. The second efficient relay of the day. We don't have to rush because it knows we're here and it'll wait. I've done this change over a hundred times – way over – I mean I don't actually count. It's never once waited until the first train's pulled in and then closed the doors and shouted, "Ahh!" Such a nice and considerate train.

But shouldn't we feel sorry for that last train? We're all betraying it and casting it off. Soon it'll chug along with maybe five or six people still loyal to it. It'll never be a London train. Never. But then again, on the positive side, it is only a train. It's not Thomas the Tank Engine or any of his mates. It's just a train.

And there it goes.

And here we go on our divergent path. You know that train wasn't all that great. It was another one that seriously lacked a buffet service. It didn't tease me though. I'd think my mouth's ready for food now.

Tragically it appears I've got onto a different carriage to the City investors. The wrinkleys and the Walkman man are still with me though, and we've joined with a gaggle of schoolgirls. They must be going to school early, or having a crazy time in the city centre before their school day. I'm not sure if I would have appreciated going to school in the centre of London as much as where I did. My walks would have been through the dirty, durable, noisy, vibrant, distracting and alive streets of London. It would have been different. I could have found a sanctuary somewhere, when it wasn't what I wanted. I wouldn't be *me* though, would I? I'd be someone else. I definitely wouldn't be Eugene Xanoc. But then, the Willy Richards who I was wouldn't have lived somewhere different because then he

wouldn't be *him*. I've walked through an infinite number of sliding doors to be who I am and so has everybody else.

They're obviously excited and keen for something. Maybe it is just school and this is what they're like everyday. One's kneeling on the seat, pulling on her piggy tails. As if she's trying to milk them. Another is moving her knees in circles in a very hyper fashion. There'd be something very sexual in it if it weren't a girl who must be about ten years old. That's not to say it wouldn't seem very sexual to some.

They all talk in cute and conventionally sweet girly voices.

"Mrs. Granger is better though... the best. Mrs. Granger's the best."

"She's not! Mr. Philips is much nicer. He's gave us sweets when we gave right answers!"

"They were lollipops!"

"They were! Mine was red but in the pot was yellow and green and blue and... and..."

"And purple!"

"Yeah!"

"But he's still not as good as Mrs. Granger. She's well kind and has really pretty hair."

"I want hair like Mrs. Grangerses when I grow up. I'm going to brush it loads."

"I already do."

"I *mean* I already do – I brush it three times a day – never stopping for five minutes."

"I don't think you'll get your hair as nice and pretty as Mrs. Granger's though."

"Don't be mean. *My* hair is very pretty. That's what my mum says."

"It's what every mum tells their daughters though."

"Oh... Oh, no, my mum really meant it."

I don't think these girls are actually from London. They speak too pleasantly. They're a bit young to be unattended though, I'd say, as a concerned member of the public.

As this is the fast service we're just rushing past many minor stations. At every platform there's a similar sight. This one we're going past now, it's the same – ten or so men and women in suits standing spread out over the length of the platform, mostly looking tired and apathetic. Some have briefcases and some have umbrellas by their sides. They might as well be asleep. I've heard that you can sleep with your eyes open and you can also sleep standing up. Perhaps that's what they're doing. That'd actually be scary if people regularly did it. You could pass people in the street and not notice that they're sleeping until you hear coming from them an ugly snore.

These people aren't sleeping though.

"Excuse me. Umm... excuse me sir."

She's talking to me. I'm not reacting. I'm looking out of the window. I don't know if it's force of habit or what. Probably what.

"Excuse me, silver-haired man."

It is silver. She's so right. But I'm not flinching. There's plenty to look at outside the window.

"Why aren't you turning around, sir?"

"Don't talk to strangers, Alice!"

"It's OK!"

"It's not! You're not suppose to talk to strangers!"

"But I just wanted to ask where my mum is!"

"She went to the toilet! She told us all, idiot, and she said behave and you so haven't."

"I have!"

"I'm telling."

"Oh, don't. But... why isn't this man turning around?"

Why, indeed? In a mirror I can see the translucent image of a little girl, and me.

"I was just daydreaming. Sorry."

"OK. Do you know where Sue is? She's my mother."

I don't answer.

"She's in the toilet, idiot!"

"Oh yeah, sorry. Sorry for disturbing your day-dream mister man."

"That's fine."

I'll get back to my daydream. Wait, I wasn't actually daydreaming! I feel so short-changed.

Sue's come back from the toilet. Nobody's telling tales about talking to strangers though.

"Mum?"

"Yes, Laura?"

"Who's in control of the whole entire world?"

"Well... no one is in control of the *whole* world but the Prime Minister is in control of England."

"Isn't that Tony Bl-"

"No, wait! I mean, God's in control of the whole world. He looks after us all."

"Is Tony Blair God then?"

"No, he's just a person! God is more powerful than everybody else in the world."

"Put together?"

"Yes. But God wants us to make our own decisions for ourselves."

"Why does Tony Blair make decisions for us then?"

"He just helps us so that we have hospitals and schools and fight crime."

"Just him? All on his own?"

"No, he has a lot of help. All of the people in the newspapers adults read try to help."

"Like in the newspapers those old people are reading?"

"Yes, but don't point."

The people in the newspapers think they're in control. But then, the people who make the newspapers think that *they*'re in control. And the people who read the newspapers like to that *they* are the ones who are in control. Never mind God.

What are these entities all controlling though? The whole entire world? Really?

Laura looks confused. She'll probably learn to ignore questions like some of the ones she just raised, which is maybe for the best, maybe not. Questions aren't only asked for the sake of perfect answers.

We've arrived at another platform. Nobody's waiting for a train with their briefcases and umbrellas though because this is it – Victoria.

Am I an early morning commuter?

I would have tried to get Laura's full name if she wasn't so young. Obviously she can't be in late-night Reality TV shows. I felt like trying that with one of the laddy nine year olds from the swimming pool as well. But they were nine, about.

She'd probably be very attractive when she's older. I'm sure that they don't talk about hair and nice teachers when they're with the boys, but then again she probably isn't the sort who wears a padded bra and thong at that age.

People are getting up, ready to leave this wagon. I can stay seated for a while. It's only a matter of seconds and I'm early anyway.

You know this is the first show that's going to go on TV, that I'm producing. The other producers better be able to cope without me though, just in case. Just in case I do something crazy. Who knows?

Sue's trying to keep control of her girls. Laura's eager and fidgety again. It's probably a big day out in The City for them. Sue looks stressed and is having to keep the girls back from breaking loose and raging through the streets of London. There are so many things festering in London that she must be worried about – and so many weirdos.

I don't think the other girls told Sue about the Laura-and-me affair. She doesn't need to know.

The guy with the personal music machine is edging his way forward, showing off his silvery skater chain and smart black trousers to the elderly couple who are frantically scanning the last few pages of their newspapers for anything essential.

They're getting up now. I'm sure they'd love to open the door before the train stops and just let it hang there, like the old days, but they can't. Electronics are there for our safety.

People from the adjoining seating area are also jostling for good exit positions. And they're off.

I can just sit here. I wonder if they'd ever chuck me off. I once thought it'd be possible to live, as a tramp, on trains and in railways. I'm sure it wouldn't be that hard if you knew the timetables and roughly when they checked tickets and such. But, then, if you were intelligent enough to work such things out, you wouldn't be a tramp, would you? Or maybe that's being a little harsh on tramps. After all, my friend Beardsy is highly qualified.

I should get off though. How could I live with looking silly?

Sue, Laura and the other girls are disappearing into the tense mass of suits, umbrellas, briefcases, newspapers and bodies. I can't see them anymore.

I could have got Sue's name and number. I may never see her again.

I've got to go with the flow, to an extent. If you've got to get somewhere, you've usually got to.

I think I'll get myself a baguette. I don't know what filling I want. I'll let him choose.

Oh, it's not a him. It's a lady. A black lady – not that that matters! Though I'm sure there are very good economic explanations.

"What would you like?"

"A baguette – you choose which one."

"What? Which one, sorry? I can't hear you."

"You choose."

"What? Which one?"

"You choose."

"What? Me choose? I don't know, what kind of thing do you like?"

“Anything. You choose.”
“Well... I don’t know... Chicken Tikka?”
“If that’s what you want to pick.”
“Is that what you... want?”
“It’ll do, I suppose.”
“Anything else, sir?”
“I don’t know, do you think I want anything else?”
“I really don’t know, sir.”
“Then no, that’ll be fine.”
“Three pounds twenty please.”
“Thank you.”

A man standing next to me is looking at me as if I’m terribly odd. He looks terribly odd. He’s got a wiry black moustache. He resembles my penis and accoutrements. That’s odd – a guy walking around with your member on his face. I mean it’s not a spitting image but it’s enough to make me think this. He’s got big bushy eyebrows as well. He could sweat loads and my testicles wouldn’t sting a bit.

I don’t usually meddle with strangers so openly. People get so confused by anything unconventional.

The baguette she chose is good though.

The teenage boys standing next to me seem to be enjoying a fairly unconventional conversation over their baguettes. They’re talking loudly and pretentiously. I guess it’s OK. I could be seen as being pretentious. But I don’t exhibit it so blatantly over baguettes.

“You know I love tuna sandwiches.”
“I can understand that.”
“Yep. Why’s that then?”
“Oh, I’ve loved things before.”
“And you like tuna do you?”
“No. Not at all.”
“Then surely it must be hard for you to understand me liking specifically tuna.”
“I cope.”
“And you understand just what it’s like to love tuna sandwiches?”
“It takes a terrific amount of mental fortitude.”
“But you cope?”
“I cope.”

They probably talk like this interminably.

Their faces are well boned and speckled on the bottoms with the result of two or so days of not shaving. One’s hair must be sickly sticky with wax and the other’s is in an easy, almost natural side-parting.

They’re looking at the PlayStation 3 advert. But who’s got the more impressive advert – Sony, or us?

Insanity TV. Saturday.

We incorporated a number of psychological mind-trick sort of things into the graphics in the background, to catch people out and make them go, “Ooo! Look at that! Ain’t it weird?” It puts the game graphics to shame.

Saturday's show will be the setting up, going over of the concept and getting in touch with the participants.

I still don't feel like a producer. I'm not sure if I want to be contained in that niche. Shh, don't tell them.

"That man who just got a Croissant – his moustache hair looked like pubes."

"Nice. Beast. Do you reckon they pull out easily, like pubes?"

"They must. Why else would they look like them? There's no other practical purpose."

"Are you going to watch that Insanity TV?"

"You know it. We're watching it around Jed's, I think."

"Are we?"

"Apparently."

"That should be good. I'll get lots of crisps."

"For who? Only you eat the kind of crisps that you get."

"Then who do you think I'll get the crisps for?"

"Someone who eats too many crisps that stink of shit."

"Maybe. I'm not going to say who I'm getting them for."

"I'll presume."

I'll leave them to it. I'll leave them all to it.

He says, cackling.

I'm going the same way as the odd-looking man.

A long time ago I looked through the keyhole of my mother's bedroom, where I knew she was having sex with her lesbian friend. I must have been intrigued. I could only guess what the moving shapes I could see in the tiny peephole were. Then I looked around and saw the hallway was dark and thought I could get a better view if I just opened the door and had a look. So I did, and what I saw was interesting. I was too young and related to get turned on and too old for it not to be quite a spectacle. I didn't outstay my welcome though and went to bed in about a minute.

I'm licking yoghurt from off of my fingers. It was a good choice of a baguette. How much choice do people have in their lives, and how much is decided or controlled by other people and society? Everything's *affected* by it all, surely. You can look at everything and you can go on forever – ad nauseam – why did she choose this Chicken Tikka baguette? Would I be thinking the same things if she hadn't?

You can try to do that if you like. I'll be happy finishing my breakfast.

Silly Questions and Silly Answers

Multipurpose bright red. That's my second favourite colour. The light blue of water in a white bath that makes you think 'why is that blue?' – that's my favourite colour. After the blue-that-makes-you-think-why-it's blue, this is my favourite.

The odd man with my penis for a face is leading me to The Underground and I'm not objecting.

Above the entrance to The Tube is an advert that, like thousands of sales signs and "fun" consumer-enticing marketing campaigns, employs a bright and bold red to communicate its message. The evoked images and feelings of blood, love, fire, warning, passion, brake lights, tomatoes – whatever – aren't being manipulated to push some new product here though. This is negative campaigning at its "moral" best. An organisation – it doesn't say which, how modest – has actually paid for this electronic billboard spot and won't get profits back from it. An invisible hand of capitalism has been chopped off and here, hovering in controversy above me, is the cuddly and cute but dejected face of a baby lamb.

The baby lamb has been blown up to appear to be a very big lamb indeed and it's large and unusual enough to make nearly all passers-by look up and be caught by his – or her – hugely emotive expression. Human eyes don't connect for too long with the helpless and confused eyes of the hairy photo-shoot model, because that red draws them away and onto the text that it writes out on the lamb's ribbed side.

Love me tender.

When I first saw this advert I was impressed by its style and its simplicity. There's no "Only £x!" tag, no branding, no explanation other than the obvious. And it's a nice red. Above all, it's a nice red.

I've lost that man. Maybe I shouldn't spend so long considering quirks of life. I lose people before I can become friends with them. Now I'm surrounded by hundreds of people – none of whom I could really say I know.

But do I really want to know any of them?

It'd be interesting if I knew *all* of them. My brain might overheat at the sheer amount of recognition that'd be going on. It's probably best I don't trouble it with such things.

I couldn't be properly friends with all of them. There'd be too little compassion and attention to go around. They'd all starve on little crumbs of bread and measly tears of fish because, let's face the brutal facts, I'm not Jesus. I'd end up seeming a fake or superficial friend to everyone. Besides, I can't particularly see myself as everybody's friend.

Three of my fingers are stroking the wall of the stairway while I'm following the long procession of my friends down to the hot and dirty, flesh-sorting pits of The Underground.

The wall is scratchy rough and shallowly ridged by posters, notices and, beneath them, tiles. Stepping a little to the left, my other hand, reaching round the handle of my case, feels the cool and smooth metal of the central railings.

And, only momentarily surprising me, a lump of wet chewing gum. I can wipe the stranger's saliva off on the lower bits of railings and – I may as well – my trousers. I'm very slightly tempted to take the chewing gum for myself. I think it'd be better for everyone if I just buy myself a pack at this kiosk. Then I can go and make ten sticky surprises of my own *and* my breath won't smell of Indian anymore.

The crisp packets feel fresh. I think I'm just sensing that because I've learnt to associate foil wrapping with freshness. Bursting with flavour.

"Thirty six p."

The packet of gum feels tight and efficient, somehow. My change is warm. It's a cheap metal that's been passed between many sweaty hands. Trouser pockets are soft and cosy. Is that a sexual thing? Probably not. As for the gum, touching the gum with my fingers tells me nothing. It's just a small bit of white. Only in my mouth does it have any use. It's almost a necessity for so many people. All my friends.

And as I unleash the chemicals of the small bit of white I feel that in a way I'm taking one of their many drugs, in one of their simplest forms, and binding myself to them in yet another way. This is society, right here, trying to engulf me.

My breath probably smells better.

I've got to sort of iron out the creases and folds in my ticket because it's come all shabby in my sexual pocket and it won't fit through the barrier like this.

The barrier is covered in robust plastic that doesn't feel like anything much.

My ticket was good, flat and normal enough to work. I'm in.

The rubber sides of the escalator are solid but soft. I'm walking down, not content in letting it take me. It's not as if I've been tired out from walking a long way. I'm making light contact with trench coats and briefcases, umbrellas and trousers. They all feel like they're made from the same kind of fabric. I know it's not the same material but it's just all the same sort of thing. The people too. If I were touchy-feely enough to touch all the people, or even, with some difficulty, touch their minds, I might think a similar thing. I wonder how I'd feel.

I'm making my way to the platform and dragging a finger along the tiled wall as I go. It's just nice to touch things sometimes and be literally in touch with the world around you. When I was a baby I had to suck and touch everything, I think I remember, or maybe I just think that because that's what I see all babies do.

I'm not decided on whether it's a good thing to question my own thoughts or not.

I've come to where I want to be on the platform so I can cease the wall touching. The tip of my finger is a smudgy grey. I'm sure the dirt will rub back off onto the world, in time.

This platform is crowded. Hundreds of people packed onto a slice of concrete, amidst countless other slabs of concrete, standing by a void. They – we – are all waiting for something – the same thing – that we know will soon fill this void and eat us up and spit us out at more useful locations. Many people here stare the void dead in the eye, or rather at adverts that confine it.

There's a big, shiny car.

Slightly bigger, slightly shinier, slightly faster and slightly cheaper than the last.

That's what it *could* say, but of course it doesn't. If it were for Insanity TV, it could say something like: Drive Yourself Crazy.

But of course it doesn't. It just says: Introducing the New Ford Mondeo...

The next advert along is a colourful collage of sliced fruit that's all dripping with juices and freshness into bottles of 'Yum-Juice'. They've designed it to make our mouths water, but so much so that we can probably drink our own saliva and don't need the juice! I'm sure it's all fruit from The Cape.

The oranges look the most attractive. There's one giant orange that looks the ripest of the ripe and the sweetest of the sweet. Never mind Yum-Juice, I may just have to get myself an orange that resembles that one when I'm above ground. Advertising has had its unintended effect.

Sales of oranges may increase three-fold, prices may soar and a new orange-driven world may soon be what we live in.

But that won't happen. Not everybody's like me. They don't all do the same things because they're all their own people and they're all unique. Some will prefer pears, some bananas, others even – perhaps – mangoes.

It's that scary rattling noise. The train's here. It stops. We all get on. So many people but I don't particularly feel like critically analysing their behaviour – it just doesn't feel like the thing to do. I'll just stand and sway with the tide.

I've never told anybody even half of what I've told you. Not even my best friends.

If anybody were to look at me now, they wouldn't think a thing. I look roughly the same as everyone else here – it's all the same theme. He's got grey hair. So what? So do other people. He's got a case. So what? Most people here do. He's dressed similarly and unspectacularly.

Only, there *isn't* anybody looking at me now. They're not paying great attention to anything, possibly because there isn't anything worth paying great attention to. That or they're just not looking very hard.

So many things that felt like the thing to do and so many things I thought were odd and unique and special. But look at me now – you dozy denizens of this place – look at how close to you I am. Or rather, don't. Because you really can't be arsed.

Did I become you or have you all always been like me? Or are we still different and can I still view you from a justifiably superior perspective? What? No replies? How predictable. How transparent.

This bar feels like a very, very impressive penis. I don't know how it does, or why it does, but it really does. I'm thinking that maybe I could set it up with my pocket but, dare I say, it'd just be a wild physical thing.

I didn't need to get the Tube. I could have walked; I have the time. I'll definitely get off early so that I can stroll a little. I should get off in two stops time for optimum strolling opportunity.

Wouldn't it be good if, in The Insane Game, they tried to make the guy go crazy by building up a mock Tube train and making him ride on it for days on end, stopping at a hundred fictional stations, a journey that seemed to never end?

No, it'd probably be distinctly pants.

I wonder if this will actually make for good TV. It could do. The ten live minutes a show should be interesting, shocking, disturbing, amusing and ultimately entertaining. We'll put on a good show.

There's my reflection in the black window again, for everybody to view. I like who I am. I honestly do. I'm not saying that anybody else would like me but that's never really been here nor there to me. I'm here, and look, I'm there.

I'll get off here then.

I have to employ a bit of gentle pushing and shoving to free myself from this network of perfume and sweat drenched bodies. I'd like to distance myself from them. I'm not actually like them. I know that they're not mindless replicates and that they're just living their lives out in ways that will maximise their happiness and that they all do the things that feel like the things to do, to them. Nonetheless, I'd like to distance myself from them.

And in respect to that goal, the symbolism of this walking out and away is sound. But it won't be if I keep coming back. The negative symbolism, every time I joined them and all of the time I was with them, would cancel it out.

Everybody could be like me and we'd never know. We'd all think we were supremely individual and cuts above the rest when really we'd be no more and no less than the rest – the same cut.

That's not how it is though. I'm Eugene Xanoc. I'm mildly schizophrenic, debatably, and I have a penchant for cold toast, definitely. I mean that makes a difference. And that's just the start. This is all just the start.

I'm on my way up now. I can rub against the paraphernalia of the people once again, this time on the way up though.

It's that same fabric again. The fabric of society.

Don't worry, I'm not letting that depress me or anything. It didn't on the way down. It's never depressed me. It's good to think you're special and everybody around you is less interesting and more predictable than you. It's fun. Only, you actually *do* have to be special.

My fingers flow with the many mini canyons cut into the coarse, cold stone of the wall. Moving my fingers up or down, in defiance of the natural current, causes the wall to be read as bumpier and rougher through the altered sensation. It's the same wall and in the grand scheme of things it doesn't matter a jot if I wave up and down, or zig-zag, or just trail away.

I'm getting a few funny looks.

I'm just touching a wall.

I see oranges. Is this destiny? This will turn out to be quite a day of fruit.

“Oy, oy! Fouroranges here for a quid!”

What a place to sell oranges, just outside the doors of the station. It *must* be destiny. Fororange – I'd like that word. It should be a word. Maybe it is a word. I'll check my Oxford Minidictionary at some point. Perhaps I'll find the editor's joke. Once I thought it'd be nice if a dictionary editor put in two fictional words that appealed to him, like I might put in for example fororange and brephasis. They'd only be defined as each other. Fororange

would mean brephasis, braphasis fororange. That'd be the only meaning they had. Only a lucky few would randomly come across the words in the dictionary and if they looked the words up they'd just find each other and be caught in an infinite loop of fororange.

Perhaps a quarter of the words in the dictionary are actually pairs like that! What a crazy thought.

But the orange seller looks scurvy and the oranges could well have just fallen off the back of a lorry. He'll probably sell as many oranges as he can before he's chucked off the patch by some authority or another. There'll be more time for oranges, I'm sure, time for oranges that are less green.

A quid. What a functional, powerful, popular thing. This is all made from it – many, many of it. They recently opened an everything-for-a-pound shop called '!! £££! Super! £££!!!' down this side road. I always associate it with this wafting smell of burning flesh that steams out of this dirty but expensive quasi-Chinese eatery, 'We Have Ways of Making You Pork'.

I can't resist – not the pork, but getting people. The sample's too biased – there are too many poor people. I'll look a bit more upmarket. There are rich seams of suited City workers exiting the station, playing out the same route they take everyday. I'll catch two.

Pound shops always seem out of place in London to me. Everything's meant to cost five times as much, surely. I know what I want though and the whole shopping list will come in at only two quid. There's such a plenitude of random, obscure items. Penguins holding mugs... balloons shaped like horseshoes... mallets... maps of Russia... pirate's gold. Most of it's being overlooked by the few scattered people who are shuffling up the aisles, scanning the shelves probably for some essential thing like selotape or envelopes. Unfortunately I too am seeking banal things but I've got a lot of love for the horrendously odd.

What's this? It's a foot, apparently. What's the use? It's just a foot, no? I've got no qualms about putting hand to foot and seeing what it does. Does it do anything? It's a life-size, or near enough, foot that's cut off at the ankle and it's just standing on the palm of my hand. It's fairly elastic and pink and studded with small bits of plastic. Is this modern art? A work of modern, poor-man's art, right here? No, wait, there's a switch. Silly me, it was between the little and second littlest toes all along. Let's see what this does then.

What a treat! The plastic studs are lights and they're flashing in some lovely sequence and the foot is somehow singing a terrible beepy tune. It's like Jingle Bells or something famous like that, but I can't put my finger, or toe, on what it is. Completely out of time with the lights though. It's like the foot's holding a party for itself for no readily apparently reason and I've chanced myself a ticket. I know it's purely tacky but it's made me smile.

Some school kids are laughing. I mean they're laughing at me. I'm a grown-up smiling at a flashing musical foot.

I'm sad.

I'll buy the foot as well. That'll make it three quid. I can afford that – I'm a producer and show creator. It's practically a necessity.

What about a little consolation prize as well? How beautiful. Four quid, that's fine.

Where are the clipboards? I need one of those. Not one that sings and sparkles or anything, just a clipboard. There's a wad of paper that I also need, I'll have that. 100 sheets.

And here's a clipboard. It's flimsy but it's perfect.

The foot's still going. I'll turn it off and save the party atmosphere for later.

It's an almost non-stop party outside though. One of those parties where you know nobody, the only parties that I really attend, and everyone has their own agenda and their own idea of fun. Coupling, drinking, eating and love affairs with cars that lay down the bass and honk incessantly to make sure everyone's in the party spirit.

It's one big party and one that I never got invited to. But here I am, dancing away to the beep of my magical feet, eager to socialise.

I'll get more people for my party, my Insane Game. I won't do it for the show, I'll do it just for me. It feels like – you know. I've already got plenty of information on people but I want to get more and make my little interruptions to this big party.

Firstly, 99 sheets of paper can go straight into the bin because I'll only need one. There, now the remaining piece can be placed conveniently on the clipboard and my biro will complete the set. I can look the part. I can look many parts and thus I can play many games.

It's my go. A large proportion of the people here would ignore me and rush and brush past me. Also, I want a nice, rich, middle-aged person, or even better a couple. I see a pair of people who are chatting and laughing light-heartedly, obviously happy enough in each other's company to forget about what must be done, for a while. They'll do.

I'll need to cross the road and that means getting past traffic. Cars make up a formidable force and they could kill me in an instant, as they often do. They're so important, it'd be worth it. It *is* worth it. They won't get me though because I'm too clever for them and too fast. And I've got the little green man on my side.

I am early so I can safely treat myself to another one of these. Here they are.

"Erm, could I just have you for one minute, you happy pigeon pair?"

"Erm, yes, I suppose. I mean... what is this for?"

"Yes, sorry, I work for a local newspaper, I'm doing a survey on happily married couples."

"Oh."

"I mean I presume you're happily... happily married?"

"Yes, yes very much so."

"You definitely looked it! Yes, now there's a one in ten chance of winning a model new orange Ford car if you just answer a few quick questions."

"An orange car?"

"Yes – it's just something to do with our sponsors."

"Oh OK, yes, sure, that's –"

"Yes, yes dear, that's fine isn't it?"

"Yes."

"OK. Well I'll just have to take your names and phone numbers – one will do in fact."

"Yep – Joe Cajno, 020 8456 765."

"Excellent, that's fine, now just answer these questions as well as you can please, thanks."

That's the job done, as it were. These two seem to be just what I expected them to be. They appear to be dull, rich and very used to each other.

The woman's very hairy. There's hair everywhere – all over her face. I'm sure it really shouldn't be there. It's such a shame it so often is.

"OK, so firstly, why did you marry?"

"Well, we –"

"- We were in love! We met each other at University, in the final year –"

“- It was a funny old thing – he came to fix my toilet one day-”

“- because I fancied her! And, well, her brain was broken – drain! Drain was broken!”

“Cheeky!”

“Naughty me! And it was just a pretty smooth run after that really and now, gosh, many years have gone by!”

“Is that the kind of thing that you want?”

“Yeah, that’s fine, I’ll try to keep up!”

Women shouldn’t have moustaches. I’m not saying they should be punished or anything but, well, it doesn’t seem right. But then, so what? So I just don’t feel attracted to this middle-aged lady. She’s hairy and happy.

“Are you a happily married couple?”

“Yes.”

“Yes!”

“They’re confident answers! Excellent good.”

Everybody has hair everywhere except for their eyes and the palms of their hands and feet and so on. But there’s hair and there’s *hair*. There are the proper, tiny tiny layers of softness and then there’s *this*.

“Do you still have sex?”

“It’s none of your busine-”

“Yes.”

“Speak for yourself!”

“Erm! Let’s see, I’ll leave that one as unanswered shall I?”

“Oh, go on then.”

“What, put it as a yes?”

“Yes... and it’s still good!”

I’m sure it might be, if he can get past the forest that must be down there. Maybe it really does it for him.

“What’s important to you as a couple?”

“Apart from the sex you mean?”

“I think we’re just generally happy together, isn’t it?”

“We know each other and we can talk to each other. To me, that’s most important.”

“Absolutely, that goes for me as well.”

Joe’s very hairy as well. Lots of men are. I think that’s the point, that it’s a man’s thing. That much is obvious, really. They’re both such hairy beasts though. Like bears in suits.

“And as individuals? What’s important to you as individuals?”

“My job’s very important to me. And my music. My art as well.”

“Not *his* art, just art he likes to look at! That he wishes he could do! The house and garden are very important to me, stereotype lady as I am!”

“Yes but really, I mean, *we* are very important to each other.”

“Oh yeah, each other, of course.”

Shaved bears in suits. We’re all shaved bears in suits, in a way. I mean, not bears specifically or specifically shaved, but still, animals. With hair and lust and craving meat and such. We like to think we’re better than all the other animals, but maybe every animal thinks they’re better in some way. Maybe shaved bears in suits think that *they* are the rulers of the earth. Oh look, we do.

“Right, nearly there. Would you say that you’re happily settled individuals?”

“Yes, yes I think so. We’re pretty comfortably settled really, yeah, I’d say so.”

“And I’d agree! Me, I mean – I am a pretty settled individual.”

“Fine, so penultimate question – why do you love each other?”

“That’s quite a big question!”

“I’m sure I’d give you a thousand answers if I was drunk!”

“You need to be drunk before you can tell me why you love me? Cheeky!”

“No, in all seriousness, she’s perfectly lovely and I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

“Aw look, he can be sweet! And he is sweet and that’s one of the many things I love about him. He’s also caring and funny and, you know, just my Joey. My cuddly little Joey.”

“There, there, you don’t have to so blatantly call me fat!”

“Cuddly! It’s lovely. He’s lovely and that’s why I’m love with him and have been for so long.”

Actually, maybe I can slip in another question. Could I ask:

Do you think you could turn somebody insane?

Oh why bother? This isn’t for work; it’s for me. I’ll just finish it up.

“What do you prefer: satsumas, oranges, tangerines or clementines?”

“Umm, what’s the difference?”

“Don’t ask me... it’s just the question we got from the sponsors.”

“Oranges, I guess.”

“Yeah, oranges, they’re quite nice.”

“Thanks! That’s the survey all done then, thanks a lot for your time and honesty.”

“That’s OK, it was a bit of fun! Better than the usual, boring surveys most people do.”

“Thanks. And, just because you’re a lovely happily married couple, you can have this.”

It’s a single red fabric rose that I bought in ‘!! £££ ! Super ! £££ !!!’

“Just in case you don’t win the model car, a little consolation prize in advance.”

“How lovely! Is it real?”

“Yes, real plastic. Don’t worry, that’s not from the sponsors, that’s just from me.”

“Well that’s very kind of you, thank you.”

“Thanks.”

“Have a good day then.”

“You too! Good luck with more surveys!”

“Thanks, bye.”

That was that then. There go the bear lady and her boring husband. I wonder how many minutes, days or weeks it’ll be before they throw the rose into a bin.

On with my journey. It's just necessary for me to walk in one big straight line for a few minutes and then I'll be there.

I'm trailing my hand against whatever makes up this city that I'm walking through – glass of shop-fronts, bricks, concrete, signs, posters, cars and even the less sensitive parts of people. Is this just my natural urge to find things that are tangible? Things that I can relate to. Or is it just for my senses? The sense of touch and the sense of being unusual.

On a poster in a music shop here, that's my third favourite colour – camp pink. Unashamed of what it is, unaffected by being called gay and girly and childish. It's the colour I used to colour myself in as when I was a child, before I realised my skin was actually more like grey. It looks tasty, loving and sweet, which can't be bad.

The world is filled in with such exquisite colours, really.

I want to be filled in with pretty colours. I hope I am but I can make sure. I've definitely got the finest colours on my palette. All I need is a big, thick, bristly paintbrush. A metaphorical one, of course. Otherwise I'd look raving mad and I'd be all wet and sticky and when I had a bath I'd just be that greyish pink again.

Thinking Outside of the Box

Here I am. There lies the door of the simple producer. This is where my directions have led me; where my many things that have felt like the things to do have taken me. This is where I've come all by myself. Oh, it may seem like it's just a job, but it's more than that to me. And I'll merrily and unashamedly put the door onto a pedestal of powerful symbolism and significance, just as I aggrandise the ever present Eugene.

It's like a hole. Not a black hole and not a particularly big hole but a hole dug just for me. I hope that when I jump down it I'll find myself in a cavern of golden treasure yet there's the slightest chance I could fall to a doom. Yes, a horizontal hole, that's surely it.

It's like a box. Pandora's Box? That's a possibility. Or, it's like the ribbon on a gift box that contains a present I've got for myself. I might love the present and play gleefully with it or have to smile and make it seem like I like it. I'd have to put on a show. I'm definitely going to have to put on a show.

It's like the opening crack of a cave full of monsters who don't interest me and aren't my favourite friends. I've got to join in the monsters' party games until I can open up my present – that's linking different strains of symbolism, that is. That's allowed.

It's the title of a first chapter that forces me to re-evaluate all that has come before as just a prologue that's only helped insofar as it's hinted at the potential and the style of this – of me. Perhaps that's exaggerating a tad. Perhaps it is just a job and perhaps it is, as I am, nothing to get poetical about.

But maybe it's a cracked hole in a ribboned box of a title. Just maybe, that's exactly what it is.

I'll put it once more that perhaps this job and what's past this door are just in my head – like so many things. My mind's mere prattle without purpose.

I can't enter through there now, not with so much hype heaped around it. I'll walk around the block. In fact, I'll wander aimlessly for a while, Caulfield-style, around the block. My thoughts will inevitably digress and the hype of the door, that certainly *is* all in my head, will dissipate.

I can find a prostitute and then tell her to piss off, without having sex, or something. Do I do things that are that heroic?

In a way, the niggling thing isn't just how phoney so much is; it's how real it is. How horribly, disappointingly real. Everything's far too obvious and disillusionment is all too easy to harbour. There aren't enough good pretences, actors or shows. Things make too much sense. Whenever things *don't* make sense they're usually frowned and moped upon.

What's the point in frowning? It's ugly. Almost as ugly as hairy women. Don't people want more than lives that are little more than those of East Enders characters? I don't understand people. Well, maybe I understand them all too well. It all seems rather lacking in ingenuity on the whole.

What if this was ingenious? Would that be ironic? Regardless, nobody's going to turn around and say "Eugene, you genius!" Not only because nobody knows me, but also

because most people hate to think they're normal. Don't get me wrong, they love being normal, they hate being weird, but not *that* normal. And a little weird, hating to be weirdly normal, but not *that* weird. And original, sure, original and unique and special but never *that* unique or *that* special. I think you see my point. What is *that* though?

And is all this beside the, or an, ultimate point? That is, what the hell am I talking about? And who the hell am I talking to and does anybody care at all? And could *you* answer those questions? These questions? Don't you think I'm schizophrenic? Don't you? Won't you play my little game?

I'm sure I'm having a lot more fun than Holden ever did. Well, to be fair he was depressed and all, and everything killed him, but still.

A 90 degrees turn to the left.

I haven't seen my parents for ages. I assume my father's still an administrator and my mother's still a lesbian. I'm not much of a family man. I don't write sentimental or even just informational letters to them. Every season or so I get a ring or I make a call and we three say that everything's OK. I don't feel comfortable telling people about myself and they already know plenty, or at least they did. I haven't got much of a yearning to be exposed, sussed and analysed. I know that may sound ridiculous considering this context but this is different and things will be different.

I don't keep up simple but honest relationships with family members or with anyone. I've regarded that kind of communication as too facile and too dull for me. That's not just an arbitrary stand against conformity. Sometimes though I think that perhaps it's similar to how when I was at school there was a chapter in my maths textbook that I dismissed as easy and below me. When those questions actually came up in the test I got nearly every one of them wrong and realised that I didn't understand the concepts the least bit. I don't think it *is* like that but when a hundred baboons wail in unison all they can hear are they own wails and I don't want to just be able to hear my own wails, I want to be able to know I'm wailing at something for a reason.

When we talk on the phone we don't chew the fat. There's a strict telecommunications diet. When I was little I used to chew on the fat of my dad's right hand thumb. There was enough to really dig my teeth into. He would giggle and then make sure the giggle was more of a manly chuckle and manoeuvre his digit so it was like a little catching game for me. I can't remember what it tasted like. I can't remember if I tasted.

We definitely don't do that anymore. Maybe I should phone him up one day and just say, "Hey, Daddy, can I suck on your thumb again? Just for old time's sake?" Would he actually be really happy if I did that? Isn't that a little sick? What's sick? I'd do it if I wanted to but I have no appetite for my father's thumb fat. So much has changed.

I know that I used to want to get it all in my mouth. Complete envelopment of that thumb. I never settled for half measures. I never will. I believe in my potential and I will get whole thumbs into my mouth, I'm sure of it.

My mum's probably still banging some broad. I suppose they go that old still. That's fine by me. As parents go, mine were definitely above par. They still are because of how they respect how I am. It's not like I've said it or told them, like I've told you, but they've just known, or just haven't cared. I don't think it's that they just haven't cared. It was a fun house.

Children have great fun. When I was at secondary school I liked just watching the stupid little gimps doing their silly little things. It gives me a little pleasure to see even littler ones running around climbing frames and pointing at things they didn't know existed. Of

course that's not *sexual* pleasure – but in a way it is. It's the only inkling of really wanting to have sex to have children that I've had. I mean maybe I want to shove my thumb against some little rascal's milk teeth. I don't. But children can do anything you damn well want and they can be however you want. You can catch them before they run off cliffs. Or you can teach them what you think is right. You can get them to love having whole hands in their mouths. They'll be the future. I'll be the future too though, perhaps not for as long, but long enough. There are many children and many fathers and maybe too little to speak of in-between.

Am I a devoted misanthrope? I suppose, though I wouldn't put it in those words, despite the fact that I just did. That frame of mind has its uses and anyway, ignorance is an idiot's bliss. I can't ignore the drivel that escapes from people's mouths as they spit away any of the raw potential that maybe they all have. Nor can I ignore the followed grooves, the tireless copying, the doing of the same things from place to place, time to time, again and again. People don't dance their own dances. They're content to listen to the same track as everyone around them, in their own little groups, and plod along, following each other in blind congas, stamping away contentedly, crying whenever they're not in line.

When I see another human being I look into their eyes and do not see a soul but one input device of an arty animal machine.

Well, I don't hate everyone *that* much. It's just a bit of fun.

Do people dance their own dances? History is speckled with sparkling examples of wonderful eccentrics and triumphs of originality. Life isn't bad, on the whole, and that goodness must spring from somewhere. I just think that most people are pretty poor. In answer to my own question, what the hell am I talking about? – Is this a hell that I'm talking about? Really? These poor idiots' ignorance is bliss, that's already well established, and it's a lovely farce for all of us enlightened – me, at the very least – to enjoy.

It's probably that I've never really been bothered to try to get to know other people. It's like when I'm swimming my idiosyncrasy of a stroke. I'll displace the waves for my own gain. As precious as the water is, I don't care all that much for it and I'll roll and splash and enjoy myself. That is exactly what I'll continue to do.

And who's going to stop me?

Feels a bit like I'm on a precipice. Only, there are great drops all around me – it's more like I'm on the pinnacle of a very steep mountain and I'm looking down on everybody else, detached, observing, unable to join them. It's not that I'm scared but I don't know what'll happen when I fall.

Soon I'll fall though. I'll leap on top of them and see if a bouncy castle softens my fall. Or I'll splat. Either way.

Life's a game.

That's what a torn and faded poster reads, reiterating Nintendo's message, stamped with a purple cube. Nintendo were not the first to cotton on. That slogan's just an edit, or a copy, of what people have said and thought before. In that way it doesn't perfectly reinforce the emphasis they've always put on innovation and fun but both the message and the emphasis are in their own ways nice.

Perhaps Nintendo should have been the sponsors of The Insane Game. It would have been a bit too risky for them. The games they like people to play are a lot safer and more contained.

If I were a video game hero, what'd my special power be? I'd like to be changeable, amorphous, a proper social chameleon. I'd take lessons from my adversaries, like Kirby, but better. I'd be the big boss as well as the hero. And nobody would expect me – I'd always seem harmless and charming and I'd stun the other inhabitants of the game world in a growing assortment of different ways.

But why wait until I'm made into a video game hero?

There are too many fat goombas around.

Another 90 degrees turn to the left.

We needed someone with similarities to a fresh game character for the contestant in 'The Insane Game, or Insanity TV, or whatever. They needed to have simple, or ideally no, ties to the outside world so that their spirit of adventure could manifest itself in a purely entertaining way. A game hero can't quit the quest a few dungeons or castles in, and go home to see Mummy and Daddy or Wifey and call it a day. A game hero can't have relationships with people from outside of the game that complicate the matter and make the morality of the game a lot more questionable when the character's slain or turned insane. It needs to be a fair test and a fun game.

There's another advertisement. It's a bit newer.

I've got a confession to make. Once, I tried to keep a chicken in my station house. It didn't work out. I couldn't properly domesticate it. I had to set it free and let it fend for itself in the wild. It could well have got run over by a train. Also, I'm not going to produce this show, not really. But don't worry, it wasn't all a lie.

If people are around people they care about then they also care about how they appear to them. To somebody they will probably never see again in their lives, they may act a bit differently, maybe.

Well, I don't care about anybody so why should I care about what they think of me? Everybody in my life is just a stranger who I shall never see again and whose opinion of me matters infinitely little to me.

I do frequent a few towns and shops and I've remembered faces from some times before but they're still all strangers to me. I don't care what they think of me and to an extent they don't influence me and hence I am purely *me*.

I come pretty close to being a lone soul and perhaps I should take part in 'The Insane Game.

Insanity TV.

Can we make the show's creator go whacko?

Watch *the* show of the year. Soon.

'This shall be my game. I'm already here and there and soon I shall be everywhere. I'm quite serious. It's fantastic if fantastical.

Yes, I'm the contestant of the London show of 'The Insane Game. These people whose numbers and addresses I've been collecting – they're just going to think up the ideas. They're just the brains behind the brain bullying and it's my brain. I'm going to be the poor shrimp who's picked on. It'll all be me. I'll play my Insane Game, that game I thought up in a dark night somewhere in Edinburgh.

That's another reason why that doorway deserves so much consideration. I'm not coming out for a long time. And who's to say I'll come out the same? Sane? Well, who's to say I'm going in sane?

Doctors – lots of doctors. That's who. 4 qualified psychiatrists to be specific – that's who told me I was sane after ticking their little boxes and having our little chats. All in the name of a fair test of course. The actual psychology of the show is very sketchy but they've got to make it appear solid and relatively safe.

To me they blithely referred to the processes as 'sanity checks'.

Do I feel happy in most social situations? Do I often feel very confused? Do I crave to be by myself and away from all other people? Do I ever see things that aren't really there? Do I get easily agitated? Do I do this, do I do that – basically, am I crazy? I answered all of the questions accordingly, as in not strictly and wholly truthfully, and tried to present myself as a model of sanity. I passed with flying colours. And so I can say that technically I'm not schizophrenic and that I've got the documents to prove it. I'm not mad, they say.

If I can pretend to be sane then perhaps there's nothing wrong with me at all. Don't you have to be pretty sane to act sane? I don't know what they would have found if I answered from the bottom of my heart. That probably wouldn't have been as much fun. They would have quickly seen that I wasn't the blankest of canvases and something would have to have been done. Thankfully they think I'm a nice blank canvas with a clear face and a brain of tough putty.

They'll phone my parents in a few days' time. That should be entertaining in itself.

Am I crazy? Is my mentality abnormal? In some areas of economics 'abnormal' means the same as 'supernormal'. I think most people would like to be abnormal, if it meant that they were super.

In a way I'm super. But I can be perfectly normal – not that normal is in any way perfect. And that's how I've been able to make it onto TV and how I've got my own little show and my own ten live minutes a day. I'm not going on there as a freak who entices people to tune in by being disgusting or talented in some obscure, useless way, or being great at making people laugh at me. I'm not going on there as me, I mean I haven't been introduced as me. I'm going on as a normal person with little deviation from the mean. I wonder if that's what people will think when they actually see me.

That won't stop me trying to assert my individuality, my identity – just trying to be *me*.

If you think about it, obviously I'm going to be in The Insane Game. I mean one of the reasons I'm telling you – of all people – this, is just in case.

It was a condition that was decided on right back in the first few meetings about Insanity TV. Funnily enough, when I suggested that I'd sacrifice myself for the cause of the programme the producers were almost as enthusiastic as myself. They were concerned about the bias the first show would have – a system made by me, testing me. But they saw the advantages. It's small beans to a company organising such an epic event, but still, I'm not going to win any money. That would be just slightly unfair, wouldn't it? We agreed that this is more of a testing of the waters, illustrating that we're not just sadistic profiteers. Once I've shown that there's joy to be had with Insanity TV the contestants will all come flocking, I'm sure. My aims aren't all that altruistic though. Don't forget that this is my game and this is my mind.

In general people don't think it's going to be a sombre, disturbing affair anyway. Me offering myself won't be seen as an act of masochism. Perhaps greedy self-indulgence, but definitely not masochism. It'll be more of a challenge than a damning and all too real assault on the senses. Some see the potential as seeing how much a human can cope with, along with how much the Thinkers can think up. It's a challenge. And when people read the title 'Insanity TV' they don't primarily think of mental illness, oh no, they think of insane as in crazy as in exciting.

I can play my baby ocarina in front of everyone. If I've still got my marbles.

A 90 degrees turn to the left. I continue turning and turning in the rigid unwidening gyre. This rough beast slouches on. I'll hang my head.

I can see my silly feet keeping to their trampling rhythm, progressing over the pavement and leading me on. The floor, void of thought, a product of so many things, just takes it. Timewise, ahead and behind, multitudes of feet have walked over this same ground and all I can offer are my humble two. They do much the same as the countless rest.

Dark greys, light greys and just grey greys make up the first impression that's achieved through uninterested glances. Does it deserve more respect for its subtleties? The freckles of soft filter tubes, white heads of pummelled, flattened, forgotten chewing gums and a dishevelled sprinkling of fragments of shiny stone. Its cracked trench matrix that helps drain away the splashy tears of horrible days. Brimming with dirty dust sediment, scraps of ripped wrappings and hairs.

Conflict between struggling types of concrete mixes is all too evident. Where two utility supplies collide. A segment that's in the shape of a unicorn's horn divides two such antagonistic patches. Pale chalk markings that mean something to some people have been scratched onto the mini peaks of the millimetre high mountain range on the surface. Lines of paint add more lasting informational and artistic effect. You can see where the gloppy paint has dripped over the lines and into random splatterings that have been fine to leave just as they are.

Uprisings of moss lurk in some wide crevices where they live off our rich and nutritious discarded cells and by-products of our actions. Happily, soggily soft.

Real-time lighting is present. Everything's shadows and everything's gentle reflections of light accentuate the theme of greyness. On this cloudy day my shadow does little.

A card Starbucks drinking cup and plastic top and plastic straw lie idle, no longer all connected, on an island of set concrete that supports a rusted pole which must hold up some notice about parking rules or something. A few drops of fantastically named, exotic coffee are grudgingly accompanied by a few drops of rainwater on the horizontal bottom of the cup, where they'll stay until the cup is kicked, which won't be long.

I want to see an ant roaming this landscape but though there may be millions doing it now, I doubt my wish will come true.

Instead, I see a pathetic green graffiti tag, which must be someone's attempt to claim a slab of curb as their own. Everybody wants to be famous. Well.

A few smudged shopping labels lie stuck to the ground, complete with colourful sales petals, zebra stripes and gangs of indistinguishable digits. The material of the brick mixture they're stuck to seems like a Christmas pudding that can't taste nice at all. Grimy desert after grimy desert, laid in fairly regular patterns, the contributions of many grannies and mother-types who want the party to go swimmingly and for everybody to have jolly good times.

Receipts, shards of glass and various sides of a tattered cigarette box sit up against the wall as flowery weeds. Doorways are introduced by concrete slabs textured uniformly and dully, that nestle into the fabric or mosaic or collage or whatever you want to call what is fundamentally and essentially a pavement.

My feet cycle on, tread on, eating up and excreting out the back a street that I will probably never walk down again.

Will I miss this world? I can stomach not tasting it in for bits of time, but what about this starvation? I won't particularly miss the big things like the buildings or the mountains, or the medium sized things like the people – the mean pikies, the stupid elderly, the wailing babies – or the cars, or even the small things like doughnuts or singing feet, or even the *tiny* things like eyes or peas or leaves. They may give me peas and I might be able to see my own eyes in a mirror or something, but I mean the rest of that stuff won't be there, with me. I don't think I'll miss all of that stuff, but I might slightly miss my experience and sense of it all. Not only not being able to talk to strangers, and poke normality from all directions, and all those impetuous activities, but I might miss how I think about it all. The scorn, the symbolism, the silliness. How will I feel about that?

I think I can take three weeks but what about longer? It could be a lot longer, maybe.

I say it as if I'm not going to get out of this game – as if I'm going to die. I could do. I could do that to myself – what with 10 live and unedited minutes a day and an audience of millions. Televised suicide. Maybe. I mean that's one of my many maybes isn't it? It'd certainly disrupt, shock, change perspectives, draw attention, and all that. Would that be a fitting end? But that's the thing – it wouldn't just be *an* end, it'd be *the* end of me. Probably, who knows, but probably. I'm not sure if it would actually achieve, well, anything.

It'd be a bit like being a teenager and ejaculating onto my mother's bed sheets. Sure it'd be exciting and daring and dramatic, but the post-ejaculation change-around of calm and rationality and disgust would be inevitable. Only, in the real case, there wouldn't be any calm after the come. There'd be death. And another stain on a sheet that's probably already sticky enough.

But I don't know. It depends how I feel.

Or what if I just won't experience the world in the same way again? What if I think the pavement's a custard trifle, trains are verbs, the world bounces around inside a jam jar, and my doctors are my brothers? Or perhaps more realistically, if I take it all in with a tormented psyche and a mind that's too muddled to pick out the things, or anything, that I like to feel?

I like the way I experience the world. I'm such an ungrateful little git.

Will the world miss me? Who's me? The world doesn't even know me. But soon, it won't be able to miss me – I'll be on the TV every weekday for three weeks. Prime time and ripe for psychological studies, big and small. However I am, I'd like to be a case study in the University syllabus somewhere. I could have some term named after me, like The Xanoc Complex, or Eugene's Complaint, or the EX-Syndrome or something.

Or I could just be The Annoying, Boring Bastard and the show is canned and they'll replace it with some Sitcom repeats. Will my newly found friends and I be compulsive viewing?

I take another turn to the left.

Maybe I can tell everybody what I think about everything. I wonder what I do think about *everything*.

This won't just be me spitting my mind out to all who care to hear though. This is people trying to make me insane. That's the premise. It's not just my general monologue – I've nearly done *that* one.

That's how recently I've been dealing with the common torrent of feelings – emotions, responses, instincts, convictions – that have been scrambling over each other to get picked and linked up with suitable words from my sorted store.

It's happening always, and it's not just in my head – it's in every head. If you look close enough you can see the swirling vapours of feelings condense into thoughts and occasionally freeze into spoken words.

And I've been relaying the results at various stages of the process to you. You've been a good listener. You've said little, but you're been a good listener.

I mean this is what goes on with any conversation, any thought collection, any internal monologue or friendship. Only I like to do it odd. That's my way. But you've been here throughout. And I'll always remember you, and you'll always remember me.

As long as we're still sane.

Even, maybe, if we're not.

Tearless Friends and Forever Goodbyes

Here I am. There lies the door. It follows all of the classic door conventions. It has a handle, it's rectangular, it's wooden. It's painted black.

It's just a door.

Why am I doing this? I don't mean this think talking – I mean this game. It's crazy. Importantly, to me, it's a betrayal of my treasured anonymity. The observer will become the observed. By millions. From the shadows and straight to under the spotlight. But pah, there'll be plenty of places where the inhabitants won't have seen *Insanity TV* and I've thought about this one. That's why, back at my station retreat, there waits another suitcase and a little rectangular slip of paper, with the words '*Cape Town International Airport*' in black capitals. Bought for a day in just over three weeks' time. Lying next to my passport and my intention to return to my special Partridge Land where I can live contentedly in my sunny shadows, once more.

The original idea of The Insane Game included that mega-cash-prize for the volunteer if he or she maintained their sanity by the end of the 3 weeks – and the volunteers of the future will get that incentive. But I wouldn't get that I wouldn't be doing this for that hefty wad.

The thing is, I tried to go crazy. So many futile but fun attempts. I had to face it; I needed help.

It's what I'd decided to do all those years ago.

Plus, it feels like the thing to do, still.

And the think talking? What about this, then? *Why* am I telling you all of this – all about me and my life – and why should I presume you're so bloody interested? Is this just an opportunity created by myself, for me to show off?

I suppose I've been doing it because, and I'll sing my chorus, it feels like the thing to do. I thought that at least one person in this world other than me should know about me, if for nothing else just because I'm exceptionally egotistical. And you seemed random a person enough.

Otherwise if I go insane so much will be lost forever.

I like the way it's happened. I'm sure if I got to know you I'd dislike you for some reason so it's best if I don't. But ha! Who *are* you? Who's to say you're not just a character in my mind? That Eugene Xanoc, the capricious creator extraordinaire, doing it again? Well, you should know that, really.

But what are you but the product of a diseased lump of brain matter and the figment of an over-enthusiastic imagination? That I've decorated and grown proud of. One of my more successful attempts at having something here to keep me company, born and bred purely in my head. Though why would your homely cells, my bit of brain or soul or whatever, need to be called diseased? What's wrong with it? What's wrong with

you? I've never had a friend – it's something I always say to myself and something that sounds special and obtusely impressive – but when I think outloud-ish to you, the thought keeps surfacing. I don't know. I don't know.

But I've been explaining myself to you nonetheless. Even if you are but a little person who walks and talks and thinks, in my mind – a random person, in my mind, just myself, who knows? Mind plays tricks.

I'll walk to the door.

I shouldn't be rude though – pointing the finger and all. Who am *I* to suggest that *you* are not real? Maybe I'm not real!

It's just a standard door.

Of all my time, perhaps now is when a tear of joy or sadness or something should come, but one doesn't.

This should be fun.

An End