

# **Stories of a Surreal Nature**

by

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## Teacher's Pet

Two white clouds settled below the Sun as a small red van drew up beside a 1960s bungalow in Bellvedere Crescent. Two children ran past pulled by a golden labrador. Dave Gardner sighed as he turned the engine off and pulled the key out of the ignition. He ran a hand through his thick brown hair and opened the driver's door.

The electrician headed along a path which split the front garden of the house into two perfect halves. Reaching the door he peered into a large darkened window as he rang the bell. After a moment a dark-haired man in his mid-thirties answered.

“Mr. Leakey?” Dave asked.

“Ah yes! Come in.”

“You wanted an extra socket in the living-room?” Dave asked as he passed the man, who then closed the front-door.

“Yes, in here,” said Leakey striding into a large room at the rear of the property. “So many electrical things these days. Could you put one here please,” he said pointing at a spot on an inner wall.

Dave hammered on the wall with the side of a clenched fist. “No problem, I'll take a spur off one of the other sockets.

Back at the van, Dave grabbed his tool bag and a reel of cable. His mobile beeped, and he skimmed a text before heading back into the house.

After knocking a hole in the chosen spot Dave fed the cable into the foudns of the living-room. He removed a socket from another wall and headed off to find a hatch. In the kitchen he pulled up the lino in a cupboard and prised up the sawn floorboards, then with a torch he lowered himself into the dark.

The electrician crawled through an opening in the foundation-wall of the kitchen into the hallway area and then through an opening into the living-room. He saw the cable dangling in the gloom just where it should be.

Brian Leakey stumbled over the piece of lino discarded in the kitchen and, noticing the open hatch, he retrieved a hammer from a drawer.

“Someone could get hurt with this open,” he said to himself as he hammered the floorboards back into place. He then placed the lino back in the cupboard.

“What the fuck!” Dave shouted on hearing the hammering.

He abandoned the cable and wriggled about then crawled back across the living-room area, through the hall and into the kitchen foundation. Reaching the hatch he battered on the under-side, but couldn't put much strength into it because of the limited space.

With growing panic and claustrophobia he shouted, but bizarrely heard the muffled strains of John Lennon's 'Imagine'.

Above, after tidying up and making sure everything was in place, Leakey had stretched his fingers. Then, sitting at the upright piano in the lounge, he played.

Below, Dave stopped shouting and reached for his mobile. Panic ensued when he couldn't find it in any pocket. He must have absent-mindedly left it in the van after reading the last text.

After what seemed like hours the music stopped. He shouted at the top of his voice while hammering on the floorboards. He crawled around under room after room looking desperately for a way out. An appalling hour later Dave stopped and stared into the darkness of despair; his torch had given up earlier. He turned on his side in disgust. In the foundation's corner he was in lay a heap of rags. He wriggled over hoping that a workman had mistakenly left tools; but as he pulled on the rags, a skull swung round causing him to jerk back. He then felt bony arms in old sleeves. “A body!” He shouted to himself as the terrible consequences of the situation struck him.

“This bastard's done this to somebody else!”

As darkness fell Leakey walked past a front room window and glanced at the electrician's van.

“Oh,” he said as he left the room.

Outside he opened the driver's door and slipped into the seat. He started the engine with the key he had found in the jacket in the living-room. After a drive across town, he parked the van in a street of semi-detached houses, threw the key over a hedge and walked home.

Leakey entered his house and, ignoring the muffled shouts, he went through the routine of checking and re-checking that all the windows were shut. Next, he checked that the front and back door were locked.

Before retiring for the night he checked that all electrical appliances that were supposed to be off were off. Satisfied that everything was locked or off Leakey entered his bedroom and peeled off his clothes. He switched on the small transistor radio on the bedside table and climbed into bed accompanied by the sounds of Brahms.

The next day a blond-haired woman gazed at the Leakey bungalow before heading along the path to the front-door. Dressed in jeans topped by a khaki jerkin she pressed the doorbell. After no response she rapped on the glazed section on the upper door.

A shadow passed by a window.

"I know who you are and what you've done!" Karen Gardener shouted.

The front-door opened slowly, and she pushed it open and walked in.

Leakey gazed at her before closing the door. "What can I help you with...? I remember you... Karen Napier!"

"And I remember you from the High School... always tidying up and being teachers pet."

She watched as a darkness flashed across his eyes and she stepped back. "Where's my Dave?,"

"What... oh, the electrician. He was here yesterday and never showed up today. I need the job finished."

"Well, he never came home last night. His van's in the street, but that's strange because he usually parks it in our driveway. And, he's not answering his mobile."

"I'm sorry, I can't help."

"Look Leakey you'd better not have done anything to Dave!"

"I don't know what you mean," he growled, "you'd better leave."

Karen felt the reassuring shape of the big knife she had slipped into her jeans. Her mind flashed back twenty years to a side street in the centre of town. Two teenage boys were taunting Leakey of being soft and being teachers pet. Suddenly Leakey jumped on them and beat them with such fury that Karen, watching from a close after visiting a friend, had to look away. He eventually left them for dead. She never forgot the demonic look in his eyes as he walked away.

Karen knew she should have phoned the police about Dave been missing, but that's not the way her family did things. "Do you mind if I use your toilet... I can't wait I'm afraid."

"Okay," grunted Leakey pointing toward a door at the end of the corridor.

Sitting on the toilet seat Karen heard a tapping sound. Glancing up at the frosted glass window she expected to see the shape of a bird, but there was nothing there. She pulled up her jeans when she heard a muffled voice calling her name. She realised the tapping had been coming from the pipes of the wash-hand basin. There was someone under the floor: Dave was under the floor.

"Dave, is that you, honey?"

"Karen get out; the guys a nutter! Get the police," came the muffled answer.

She flushed the cistern and strode out of the toilet. Looking around, she ran to the front-door, but it was locked. There was no key in the lock.

"Going somewhere?"

Karen spun round to see Leakey approaching along the hallway. "Why's the door locked? Let me out, now!"

"Tut, tut... Karen," Leakey said shaking his head. "I remember you mocking me with those morons."

"Let me out you mad fuck! Let me out... teachers pet!"

Leakey flew at her and grabbed her around the neck. He threw her back along the hallway.

She screamed as he approached her with threatening, demonic eyes. Muffled shouting and thumping came from below. He lifted her up by the neck.

“Don't hurt me,” she sobbed.

“I'm not going to hurt you. This is what I wanted to do to you all those years ago,” he said as he grabbed her between the legs.

A brief smile passed over her face and she saw her chance as he relaxed; she kicked him in the balls with all her might. As he doubled over she thumped him on the back of the head. Then, with Leakey lying on the floor, she ran into the back room.

Looking around for something suitable to throw through the locked window she heard Leakey growl. He was coming! Rather than face him she did the only thing she could and opened a large, heavy fitted wardrobe door. She closed the door behind her and stumbled through the darkness while pulling out her knife. Karen heard Leakey laugh as he bolted and locked the door. This can't be right, she thought, from outside it looked like a fitted wardrobe, but inside it was another room with no windows. A room which went on into the dark distance. She fell over something making her hold out her hands to restrain the downward motion. Pushing herself up to a crouching position she pulled a lighter from a pocket, and a small bubble of light pierced the dark. She pushed the item over and screamed as she revealed a body or more of a skeleton in a police uniform.

Suddenly there was a crash, and she yelped again.

“Karen,” said a familiar voice.

“Dave, is that you?”

“Over here!”

She ignited her lighter again and headed over in the direction of the voice.

Peering into the gloom she saw the broken end of a floorboard sticking upright.

“This bit of board is rotten. I found a bit of brick and bashed it.”

Karen tugged it as hard as she could and it broke. Dave hit other bits of neighbouring boards. “It's no good!”

“Wait a minute,” she said making her way back to the body. Searching around with one hand she found what she was looking for beside an arm of the corpse.

“This might help!” she said holding up her knife with a serrated edge in the flame's light.

“You're a wonder babe,” said Dave peering through the broken floor.

Karen searched around for electric lights, but finding none she sawed as best she could at the surrounding floorboards. “How d'you know I was here?”

“It's the footsteps. The loudest thing you hear down here are the footsteps.”

After Karen sawed through two boards Dave could squeeze through the gap. He stretched and dusted himself off, then he hugged her.

“What now?” she asked.

They moved through the dark in the direction of the door. Dave toed the skeleton of the policeman as they passed. “That's two bodies!”

“What?”

“There's a skeleton of a workman under the boards.”

“Leakey's been a busy fellow. You would have been the third.”

“Yeah, three we know of Karen!”

Karen held her lighter up, and they found the door in the semi-light. Dave hammered on the door and it swung open. He was about to stride through when Karen pulled him back. “Wait, this could be a trap. Why's he unlocked the door?”

“Oh, come on, let's get out of here!” he said pulling her by the hand.

They crept through the room and peered out into the darkened hallway. “Seems okay, come on” he said striding out into the corridor. The couple crept toward the front-door looking from side to side. To Karen the front-door seemed miles away. Her breathing became erratic.

Finally, they reached the door and Dave was going to put his hand on the handle when a figure appeared and battered him over the head. Karen screamed and tried to run but she was held by a

hand while another put a cloth over her nose and mouth. She entered the dark.

Dave shook her. "Karen wake up!"

She peered into the darkness. "Dave, where are we?"

"Would you believe it? When we were unconscious, that bastard put us under the floorboards."

"Oh, no!" she cried.

And they looked at each other and, despite their situation, they burst out laughing.

Above, Leakey moved around the house dusting and humming.

## Black Crucifix

Northern Italy 1096

The sun pierced the morning mist as four horsemen rode into the town of Piacenza. A regiment of guards stood across the entrance to a Gothic building, spears pointing through a wall of shields. Groups of peasants gathered their bags and scurried away.

One horseman climbed down from his steed and walked toward the regiment. The heavily muscled man wore a white mantle with a red cross over his chain mail.

"I am Godfrey of Flanders I come to talk with Pope Urban II."

The other horsemen dismounted.

"You may enter Godfrey of Flanders, but only you," said the head of the guard.

"Wait here." Godfrey said to his men.

Two guards pushed open heavy wooden doors as Godfrey approached, sword flapping by his side.

The pope sat on an ornate wooden throne at the end of a gloomy hall and raised his head as Godfrey strode toward him. The guards closed the doors and stood either side.

"Your worship," said Godfrey as he kneeled before the pontiff.

"Arise Sir Godfrey."

"I am eager to march on Jerusalem my lord." Godfrey said as he stood.

"I know, but I have a special quest for you, sir."

"And what would that be your worship?"

"A Job for which you will be well rewarded."

"The reward of heavenly entry for my men and myself will suffice. As is the reward for other crusaders."

"Noble, but, although you are Norman, I have need of your... abilities, for which you will be extensively paid."

"I am Roman Catholic and religion comes before patriotism for me! What is this... need, your Eminence?" Godfrey asked as he moved closer.

The pope stroked his chin with his thumb and forefinger of his right hand and grinned. "I need you and your men to use the taking of Jerusalem as a cover to regain an item lost to the Catholic Church for centuries."

"Of this Holy Chalice I have heard."

"I know not if the Chalice is real or not. The item I beg you to acquire is real and has been protected for generations."

"Go on, I will do as you bid."

"The item is an ornamental crucifix which is in the crypt of the Church of St Augustine perhaps protected, perhaps not."

"We risk our lives for an ornament!"

"The item is of vast importance and may well correct the course of human destiny. As I have said, I will well reward you."

"Very well, I will do as you ask. We will leave straight away."

"If you make haste, you will join up with the main crusade east of Constantinople."

"Farewell my lord!" Godfrey said as he bowed and turned to leave.

"Oh, and Sir Godfrey. The colour of the Crucifix... it's black!"

After weeks of riding, stopping only for rest and food, Godfrey and his men passed the Byzantine capital. Then, entering the Holy Land, they approached the tail of the crusading army with Jerusalem now only a few weeks away.

The army was composed of Knights and foot soldiers from many western European countries.

Stories abounded of the sacking and burning of Turkish settlements not under Byzantine control. Bags of jewellery and other items were hidden to be collected on the return journey.

“But surely the reward is entry to heaven,” said Godfrey.

Laughter spread through the ranks of soldiers.

“Not far to our target now, sir,” said a knight with a long red beard as he drew level on his grey mare.

Godfrey gazed at him. “Yes.”

“You have joined us at the right time.”

“I have come with the glory of God to re-take the Holy City.”

“And that is all?” asked the knight.

“Yes of course! What else?”

“Forgive me, sir. I wondered why you turn up so late?”

“As you see sir we are Norman. I thought it better for us to ride most of the journey alone.”

“I see, it's just rumoured that...”

“Rumoured! Rumoured what?”

“Well, there's a supernatural icon hidden in the city and that a powerful and rich dignitary would send some mercenary.”

A sudden cry went up from the front of the army, and the red-bearded knight pulled on the reins and rode forward.

Jerusalem was in sight.

As the screams and yells of battle enveloped the city Godfrey and his men moved, while fighting the defenders, toward the Church of St Augustine. Once inside they slammed the fortified doors and locked them. Dragging pews, and anything else they could move, the men pushed them up against the doors.

“Right, to the crypt!” Godfrey shouted.

They passed through the relative calmness of the nave as the fighting raged on out on the streets. Behind the altar the men descended a wide staircase after opening a heavy dark wood door; Godfrey leading the way with a large, blazing candle.

At the bottom the soldiers filed through an arch and, as their leader held up the candle, they gazed into the dark across many tombs. Then, with dancing shadows, Godfrey led the way along a central aisle to a dark wall at the far end of the crypt. A small door pierced the wall in the gloom at the left-hand side. He held the candle up and read the words chiselled into the block above the doorframe: “If here you enter with a pure heart-eternity is yours. If not turn back for you will be damned.”

The door, which had many axe and hammer marks in the wood, swung open. Godfrey turned to his men. “Ye need not enter if ye wish it not!” He then passed through the arched frame followed by all his men. They entered a land where dark grey clouds covered the sky. The only light came from crimson cracks in the cover and a gold which shone through where the clouds reached for the land. Lightning flashed across the sky followed by rippled thunder.

The men halted as a huge figure with out-stretched wings descended out of the gloom. The figure, the colour of sparkling gold, at length stopped descending and hovered.

“Is this the land of Hades?” Godfrey asked.

“Nay, it's not, for look around there's no River Styx!”

“Then where are we, and who are ye?” Godfrey asked.

“They know this land as the Void. It lies between worlds. I... I am the Archangel Gabriel!”

Godfrey gazed in awe. “Sir, we have come at the request of the earthly pope for an item.”

“You have come for the Black Crucifix; so dangerous a thing I must deliver it in this place. The item is not of this world.”

“A crucifix?”

“Your perception of the shape is of vast importance to you.

“I don't understand?”

“You as a Christian see a cross; other religions would see something special to them.”

“Why here and this time?”

“This is the only door to the Void for humans. This time... because of the chaos now happening in Jerusalem.”

The archangel paused for a moment then continued. “You and your men are pure-hearts, but this...” he held up the crucifix and lightning flashed across the face. “If this gets into dark hands, the horrors of Hell can be released upon the Earth.”

Gabriel raised his other hand and Godfrey rose to the same height. “I give you possession of the Crucifix, and I will put in a safeguard.”

Godfrey accepted and found himself back beside his men. The Archangel and the thunder and lightning had gone. “Well, let's go, we have a long, hazardous journey ahead,” he said turning to leave.

After they passed through the arched frame, the door slammed shut. Outside, the attack of the city was at its height. Godfrey grasped the crucifix and he and his men seemed to be looking at the burning and atrocity from beyond. Realisation that this was wrong passed over him. All men are equal, despite their religion, under one god.

They left the area and travelled northward. All day and for most of the night they wearily rode on. On the second night while the entourage were sitting by a blazing fire a beggarman approached and asked for warmth and food.

“Aye, join us,” said Godfrey.

One soldier gave the man the leg off a fowl roasting on a spit above the fire.

“What is your name, sir?” Godfrey asked.

“I am Linaeus,” he said while chewing.

“I did not think there was much begging to be done in these parts?” Godfrey asked looking around at the empty darkness beyond the light of the fire.

“I am travelling through this land... travelling North.

“Well, ye are welcome to spend as much time by the fire as ye want.”

Later, in the early hours of the morning as the men lay sleeping, Linaeus slowly approached Godfrey. He searched through his belongings.

Godfrey rolled over on to his side. “What is it you need beggarman?”

“The Black Crucifix, where is it?” Linaeus asked in an other-worldly voice as he turned round with flickering crimson eyes.

Godfrey jumped up drawing his sword. “Begone... demon!”

The shout roused his men from their slumber and chaos ensued. Linaeus flew and grabbed Godfrey by the throat-the sword clattering away into the dark. They rose into the night sky and Linaeus asked: “Again, where is the Black Crucifix?”

“It accompanies me in another world. Devised by the Archangel Gabriel; you cannot enter!”

“Do not be so sure... you know not who I am.” Linaeus said as he let Godfrey drop.

Two of his men ran to his aid as the others gawped at the transformed beggar. Godfrey pushed the men aside and staggered to his horse.

“Flee!” He screamed.

The entourage galloped over heathland as Linaeus became a red dragon, and an explosion of flame followed them. Then the beast flew over them and landed in front.

Godfrey pulled on his reins as the steed reared up in fear. His men jumped off their horses and drew their swords as the dragon strode toward them. Two of the group ran at the beast and were roasted alive in a burst of fire. The other three walked toward it swinging their swords and were raised into the air then flung away to their deaths.

“Now Godfrey of Flanders you will give me the Black Crucifix,” said Linaeus back in human-form.

Godfrey looked around; they stood in the Void's land. “Why is this of so importance?” He cried holding up the Black Crucifix.



“Because, with it I will manipulate the human mind. This world is mine and now human-kind will be mine. I will control the masses through desire for materialism. You do not understand what is to come: horseless carriages, pageless books with moving characters and all kinds of fantasia. There will be no time for spiritual matters!”

“How will you control them if they think otherwise?”

“Oh, that's easy... through exploitation and fear!” he said as a burst of flame made Godfrey shield his eyes with his hands. When he lowered them he was back on the heathland standing by his horse without the Black Crucifix.

## Smoke and Mirrors

Tom and Brian strolled along Amsterdam's Huidenstraat on a warm autumnal day. Barges chugged lazily along canals lined with thin trees waving in the breeze.

"Wow, look at this place!" Tom said walking up to an old shop which had a flaking red fascia with Smoke and Mirrors in gold lettering.

World War Two paraphernalia lay beside magic boxes and wands on a red velvet covered display in the window.

"You're not going to get all historical and magical on me are you?" Brian said as he followed and gazed into the window. "I want to see the Red Light District before we need to go back to the conference."

"Pervert! We're not due back till four. Anyway, we know all about the new software they're going to cover. Come on, I'm going in mate."

A bell rang as Tom opened the door and held it for Brian. A man in his sixties with a tartan waistcoat appeared from behind a velvet curtain to the rear of the shop.

"Good day gentlemen."

"Hello," replied Tom

"Anything I can help you with?"

"Just browsing, thankyou."

"Okay... my names Peabody."

The pair gazed at Nazi uniforms, SS flags and various helmets. A large magician's box stood in the corner with the door open.

"This stuff looks so real and fresh." Tom said picking up a newspaper. "Great detail for a replica. Where do you get it from?"

Peabody turned round from tending a display. "Oh, I have my sources."

Tom walked toward the curtain at the back.

"Sorry, that's off limits... I'm afraid," said Peabody walking toward him.

Brian donned a Nazi helmet and, putting an index finger on his top lip, he goose-stepped toward Tom. "You vill do exactly as I say Britisher: Ve are going for a pint," he said in a German accent.

"You're nuts," said Tom laughing.

That evening in a pub on Leidseplein Tom and Brian were sitting in front of a big screen TV watching football. Two pints of ale sat in front of them. Tom leaned toward Brian. "There's something weird about that guy and the shop."

"Will you give it a rest Tom? All I've heard about since this afternoon is that shop!"

A blond-haired girl walked by wearing a low-cut blouse and shorts as Phil Lynott singed 'Parisienne Walkways' over the bar's sound system.

"Now there's something to be interested in," said Brian gazing at the girl.

"You've got a one track mind. And the Red Light District was crap!"

"Yeah... okay!"

"How about coming back to that shop tomorrow? I want to see what's behind the curtain."

The two lads drained their pints.

"Want another?" Brian asked.

"Sure."

At the bar Brian raised his eyebrows as the blond girl walked past with drinks. He was rewarded with a smile. He strode back to the table with a broad grin painted on his face.

"See that... eh! I'm in there."

Tom looked at him with a sorry grimace. "Yeah... right! So, are you coming with me tomorrow or what?"

The next day was bright, small puffy clouds were being blown around the azure sky by the keen

wind. Tom and Brian stood across the road from Smoke and Mirrors.

“Right lets go,” said Tom walking over the road dodging bicycles. He pulled out a bank card as he grabbed the door handle. He pushed it through the space between the frame and the door at the top to prevent the bell ringing.

Inside, Tom moved to the rear and pulled back the curtain. Brian grabbed him by the shoulder. “What are you doing?” he whispered.

Ignoring him, Tom crept through waving for Brian to follow.

“Look Tom...”

Tom pulled Brian behind a large cupboard at the sound of footsteps on the stair at the rear of the room. They watched as Peabody walked by carrying a jacket and a newspaper and disappeared through the curtain.

“Come on,” whispered Tom.

They crept up the stairs; Brian looking anxiously back at the curtain through where Peabody disappeared. At the top they entered a room with an old-style sewing machine in the centre and dummies arranged in various poses around the walls.

“So, he makes the stuff himself! Okay let's go,” said Brian.

“How could he make helmets and print newspapers?”

“Come on, I'm going.”

“Okay... okay!”

They descended into the back-room of the shop now filled with people in old-fashioned clothes.

“What the...?” Brian uttered.

A dark-haired girl with startling blue eyes looked up at them. “Are you with Mr Peabody?”

“Em... yes! Where is he?” Tom replied.

“Why... he's upstairs,” said the girl.

“Oh yes, how silly of me!”

Tom nodded for Brian to follow him. They walked out through the front-shop which had changed into a draper.

“What the hells this?” Brian hissed.

“Beats me,” answered Tom pulling the front-door open.

Out on Huidenstraat there was great excitement in the air as people ran along the street.

“What's happening?” Tom asked a girl

“He's in Museumplein!”

Brian gazed at an old-style Citroen as it cruised along the road. “This is crazy! I mean look at the place: it's like a movie set. And who's he?”

“Yeah, there's something way wrong here. Well, let's go see who he is then Brian.”

The pair followed people into Museumplein as Nazi soldiers in a convoy of armoured cars entered the area ahead of a column of marching soldiers. The crowd cheered as a black Mercedes pulled up beside a raised platform and Adolf Hitler along with other high-ranking Nazis stepped out.

“Jesus Christ!” Tom uttered.

“No... not quite,” said Brian.

Hitler addressed the swastika-waving crowd in German.

“Brian, mate, it seems we've somehow stepped back in time, but... I can't remember reading of Hitler speaking in Amsterdam.

“How are we going to get back?”

“I don't know, let's get back to the shop.”

As they left the square a fair-haired man in a grey jacket and brown cords peeled off from the crowd and followed.

“There you go. We're back in 1940! See the date on that newspaper.” Tom said pointing at a newspaper stand.

“Yeah and look at the headline!”

“Dutch troops surrender. Yeah, well that ties in with the history I remember from school.”

They entered the shop to find Peabody waiting on them.

“Ah gentlemen, you're back. Will you accompany me upstairs please?”

Tom and Brian climbed the stairs after Peabody who entered the room with the sewing machine.

“Why are you here, gentlemen?” asked Peabody as he closed the door.

“Curiosity,” answered Tom.

“Well, I'll overlook that you entered my shop illegally. Now, tell me what do you know of Cosmology?”

Brian grimaced. “Not a lot!”

“You've heard of a parallel universe... yes?”

“A universe similar to ours that can't be entered,” answered Tom.

“Very good. Well, you have just been in another universe-not parallel but a bubble universe.

Tom looked at Brian and shrugged his shoulders. “What's the difference?”

“In a bubble universe things can be the same or different. Sometimes the difference is small other times there's a radical difference.”

“What do you mean just been in?”

“If you go downstairs, you'll find you're back in my shop-in your world.”

“Right, let's go,” Brian said walking toward the door, but he hesitated and looked back at his friend. “Come on, Tom.”

“You go if you like. I'm going to stay and learn more.”

“Ah... shit!” Brian said turning back.

Tom directed his gaze to Peabody. “How did you discover this door to the other world?”

“I'm a retired Maths teacher with an interest in magic from Exeter. I came over here and bought this shop after my wife died. The place had been lying empty for some time.”

“And you found out about its secret?”

“Yes like you, I found when I returned downstairs from this room I was in the past.”

“So, you sold stuff from 1940?” Brian asked.

“Well... yes.”

“So, time is not the only difference between the two worlds?”

“No, there're many subtle differences.”

“Can we go back through sometime?”

“Yes, but I would ask that you tell no-one, because the consequences could be dire if this is made common knowledge. I'm trying to close the door so to speak, but short of demolishing the place there seems to be no way.”

Back in their room in the Marriot Hotel Brian appeared from the en-suite with wet hair and a white towel wrapped round his middle. Tom who was lying on his bed rolled over on to his side and stared at Brian. “The old guy in the shop meant it: we tell no-one.”

“Yeah, yeah I get the picture. Come on, I'm going out as it's our last night in Amsterdam.”

“I'm not going home tomorrow. I phoned Roger at the office and put in for some leave-starting tomorrow.”

“What? You're mad! You're going back through that door aren't you? Well to hell with it, I'm coming too. I'll phone up and say I'm sick or something.”

“Tell'm you've got a dose!” Tom said laughing.

Brian picked up his pillow and threw it at Tom and marched into the en-suite.

At the draper's shop in 1940 the front-door opened and the man who followed Tom and Brian from Museumplein entered. The dark-haired girl appeared from the back-shop.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, I'm looking for two British colleagues of mine. They were in here earlier.”

“Are you associated with Mr Peabody also?”

“Yes.”

“You'll find him upstairs,” she said as she turned to head back, “if you would follow me.”

He followed her into the rear passing the other shop assistants before climbing the steps. At the top of the stairs he entered the room with the sewing machine and the dummies. After finding no-one in the room he descended the stairs into an empty back-shop. He pushed the curtain aside to find Peabody tending to a display.

“Where are the girls? This is not the draper's shop!”

Peabody swung round in surprise. “Oh dear, did you come from upstairs?”

“What is this?”

“You must go back upstairs, at once.”

“Now, why would I want to do that?” growled the man pulling a pistol from inside his jacket.

Peabody stared in horror at the gun. “You're NSB!”

The man grabbed Peabody and hit him over the head with the handle end of the gun.

Maarten De Vries gazed in awe at the traffic and the people outside Smoke and Mirrors. He walked along the street and entered a newsagent.

“My God,” he said to himself as he saw the date on a newspaper.

Later in a bookshop he found a book on World War Two where he was shocked to find that the Russians and the Western Allies defeated the Nazi's.

De Vries re-entered Smoke and Mirrors and hearing a moan he walked through to the rear where he found a semi-conscious Peabody. He grabbed the man by the shoulders and pulled up the top half of his body.. “How am I in the future?”

“You're in another world!” Peabody hissed through clenched teeth.

De Vries gazed upward in thought. “How do I get back?”

“Upstairs... you must go upstairs!”

De Vries pulled out the pistol and shot Peabody, then fled upstairs.

At length Tom and Brian entered the shop.

“Hello... Peabody!” Tom cried.

“Where is he?” Brian asked as they moved through to the back-shop.

“Whoa!” Tom shouted as he pulled back the curtain revealing the body.

Brian crouched by Peabody. “Who could've done this to an old man?”

Tom shrugged his shoulders. “We'd better call the police.” He looked upstairs, “you don't think...?”

“What, that someone came through from the other side and shot Peabody.”

“Lock the front-door Brian we're going upstairs!”

Tom and Brian descended the stairs into the back of the draper's. The dark-haired girl was busy with some clothing.

“Hello, em... what's your name?”

She looked up with a startled expression. “Gisela... my name's Gisela.”

“My name's Tom and this is Brian. Gisela, has there been anyone here looking for either Mr Peabody or us?”

“Yes, there was a man in looking for you. He said he was a colleague, and he worked with Mr Peabody.

“Did you send him upstairs?” Brian asked stepping off the stairs.

“Yes, he was up there for about an hour and a half, then he left without saying a word. Is something wrong?”

“Do you know anything of Mr Peabody's... em, other business?”

“No, we're not allowed up there.”

“I'm not sure what to tell you, perhaps you should contact the police about the man who was up the stairs.” Tom said nodding for Brian to climb the stairs.

“Wait a minute!” Gisela shouted, but they had disappeared into the room at the top of the stairs.

Back in Smoke and Mirrors Tom and Brian descended the stairs.

“Where's the body!” Tom cried.

Brian ran through the front of the shop and looked out of the window-both ways. “We should tell the police!”

“And tell them what? Somebody from another world shot Peabody and, oh yeah, we can't find the body!”

“We'll have to do something!”

“Here's what we're going to do: we're going to put a notice in the window saying closed until further notice. Then, we're going to shut up the shop and get on with our lives.”

“What of his relatives?”

“I don't think there're any here. Look around; this man lived alone.”

At Amsterdam Centraal Railway Station in 1940 Maarten De Vries was marched along a platform by a German Sergeant and four armed guards. A train composed of eight carriages, one armed with a cannon, and two locomotives sat at the platform: the Fuhrersonderzug was ready to leave for Berlin.

“Wait here,” ordered the Sergeant outside one carriage. He opened the door and went in for a moment before reappearing. “Follow me,” he said.

Inside the train they passed compartments with soldiers in until a woman in a grey suit met them. “Okay, Sergeant wait here. Mr De Vries please follow me,” she said.

She knocked on a door before entering a spacious compartment. Adolf Hitler and two other Nazis were sitting in large leather seats.

“Mein Fuhrer this is Mr De Vries,” the woman announced.

“Thank you Karla. So Mr De Vries, you have three minutes before the train leaves.”

“Mein Fuhrer what I'm about to tell you is bizarre but true. It's about the invasion of Russia- Operation Barbarossa!”

“Karla, delay the train for ten minutes.” Hitler ordered.

After the woman left Hitler rose and stared out of the window. “How could you know of Barbarossa?”

“Mein Fuhrer, I have glimpsed a future where the Third Reich are defeated by the Russians and the Western Allies. What you must not do is under-estimate the resilience of the Soviets. You must prepare the glorious armies for the onset of the cruel northern winter.”

Hitler turned and stared De Vries in the eye. “Tell me Mr De Vries if you were me would you believe someone like yourself coming and telling such a preposterous story?”

“Mein Fuhrer I am in earnest. Why would I risk my life coming if it were not true and so very important to the Third Reich!”

“Okay Mr De Vries, I will consider what you have told me.”

“You must also consider the fact that you must send greater fuel and food supplies to front-line troops in Russia.”

Tom and Brian sat at their desks, facing one another, in Wardell IT Solutions in Aberdeen.

“We got to go back to Amsterdam, mate,” said Tom.

“Why, jeez we've only been back a week?”

“We need to find out what happened to the body and find out if that Gisela is okay.”

“Yeah, she was a bit of all right, wasn't she?”

Tom blushed, so he turned and faced out of the window. “She might be in trouble if someone is going between the two worlds.”

“How are we going to swing it?”

Tom turned back. “I'll get that guy Rudi in the Amsterdam office to put in a request for us to go over and check out some hardware problem; he's due me a favour.”

A few days later the pair are walking along Huidenstraat on a dull day.

“I don't know if I want to go in Tom maybe it was a mistake coming back,” said Brian.

“Well, we're here now, and you were keen enough in the pub last night!”

“What if the cops are waiting on somebody coming back?”

“I wouldn't think so. Come on, I want to see what's happening in the other world.”

Tom strode up to the door and pulled out the key which he conveniently took from the back-shop on the last visit. He stuck the key in the lock, but the door was unlocked.

"Jeez," he said over his shoulder as he pushed the door open slightly and stuck his head in. "Someone's been through here recently; the mail's been pushed to one side."

He pushed the door open wider, they both entered and walked through the front-shop. They pushed the curtain aside and entered the back-shop.

"Will we head upstairs?" Tom asked as they both heard the front door open.

"Quick, behind the cupboard-again!" whispered Brian.

The pair watched a fair-haired man in jacket and cords pass and climb the stairs. He suddenly stopped and turned to stare at the cupboard.

"Okay, you can come out now," he said.

Tom and Brian appeared from behind the cupboard as De Vries pulled his pistol from inside his jacket.

"Well, well, what have we here? The two British have returned."

"You killed Peabody!" growled Tom.

"That old fool would never have approved of what I'm doing."

"Which is?" Brian asked.

"Information to aid the National Socialists against the Americans and the Russians... the world!"

De Vries released the safety catch. "Now farewell, gentlemen."

A shot rang out and De Vries fell from the stairs on to the shop floor.

"Gisela!" Tom shouted looking up the stairs to where she stood with both hands gripping a gun.

"Great timing," said a relieved Brian. "But, I thought you weren't allowed upstairs?"

Gisela lowered the gun and descended the stairs. "When Mr Peabody didn't come downstairs and the NSB had gone upstairs again, I became suspicious. I went upstairs and looked behind the door at the top then descended into this... new world!"

"Where did you learn to use a gun?" Tom asked.

Gisela checked the body for a pulse. "I'm in the Dutch Resistance. I asked for information on you, but it came back unknown. The information on him, however, was that he's NSB: a Dutch Nazi."

She checked the pockets of his jacket and found papers. "Now we must return to the drapers or I must. They will miss him," she said toeing the body. She held up the papers. "The German war effort is now relying on these papers on Uranium Refining."

Tom moved toward her. "Hold on, we're coming too."

The threesome climbed the stairs and entered the room at the top, then descended into the draper's shop where the other assistants were waiting.

"It's time I introduced my friends: Johan, Velda and Frederic," she said pointing to each. "All Resistance."

Gisela put the science papers into the coal fire which heated the shop. She turned to her colleagues. "I have killed the NSB traitor. We must prepare; I don't know if the enemy are aware of this place, but we must assume that they are."

Taking Tom and Brian aside, Gisela said: "We must destroy the door between the two worlds."

"How do we do that?" Brian asked.

"I don't know, but it's imperative we find a way. The only reason that the shop hasn't been raided by the Nazis is that a deal must have been struck. But now the NSB man is dead they will come and the consequences are dire!"

"What do you mean exactly?" Tom asked.

"Well the temptation for someone like Hitler to enter your world, and in some way correct where his equivalent went wrong must surely be great."

Brian pursed his lips and looked at Tom. "How about blowing-up the place!"

"Drastic, but I agree," said Gisela.

"But what will happen to the shop in our world?" Tom queried.

"I think as it's in another world nothing will happen. As a precaution, when you return, you could warn people somehow."

"Yes, we could set off the fire alarm."

"Okay, let's do it. I'll contact the Resistance and request explosives. If you would go back; I will contact you before the explosion."

Tom and Brian returned to Smoke and Mirrors.

"So what now?" Brian asked.

"We wait!"

Two hours later the door at the top of the stairs flew open and armed German soldiers stomped down. Tom and Brian ran out of the shop and along Huidenstraat.

After they stopped running they both bent over panting. Brian put a hand on Tom's shoulder. "Shit! Gisela must've been rumbled before she could set the explosives."

"Yeah that buggers-up the whole thing-doesn't it?"

"We gotta tell somebody now, Tom!"

"Can I be of some assistance gentlemen?" asked a voice.

The pair turned to see Peabody step out of the shadows.

"What...? You're supposed to be dead!" Tom uttered.

"I see I have some explaining to do."

Brian stared at him with wild eyes. "No time for that now, there's a squad of Nazi soldiers in the shop!"

"Well there is, and there isn't," said Peabody quite calmly.

"What do you mean?" Tom asked.

Peabody walked. "Let's go to the shop, and I'll explain."

"Are you mad? We can't go there," said Brian as he and Tom reluctantly followed.

"Yes we can; you see I've changed the space/time matrix." Peabody said over his shoulder.

The three men entered the shop and Brian and Tom looked on in amazement as the soldiers appeared not to notice them.

"It's okay they can't see or hear you," said Peabody.

"I don't understand," said Brian.

Tom re-directed his gaze from the soldiers to Peabody. "Who are you... really?"

Peabody smiled and looked up at the ceiling. "I'm an adjuster of time and space; the Guardian of the Gate-an immortal! No, I'm just a magician."

"A magician that deals in World War Two paraphernalia," said Brian, sarcastically.

"I have to eat. The magic business doesn't pay as well as it used too; what... with video games and the like! Now, we must save Gisela."

They climbed the stairs and passed through the doorway. Then, as Peabody re-opened the door, he said: "the same applies down here."

In the back of the drapers Gisela and her associates were being held by an SS officer in a black uniform and several armed soldiers.

At the bottom of the stairs Tom said: "We got to save her!"

"Okay, when I say-now-grab her!" Ordered Peabody. "I'm going to reset the matrix briefly."

After a moment Peabody turned to Brian and Tom. "Now!"

The pair grabbed a shocked Gisela and watched as the Germans searched the room and the front-shop.

"Where did you come from? How did you...? Gisela asked looking at the three men.

"Don't ask," said Tom, smiling.

"Mr Peabody... you're alive!"

"Yes my dear, but we have a problem."

They looked toward the SS officer, who was stomping around the room shouting.

"I fear he wants us to return, or he's going to shoot your friends."

"Oh, you must save them as well," pleaded Gisela.

"I'm afraid we've lost the element of surprise." 16



“Gisela turned to Peabody with alarm in her eyes after watching the SS man point his gun toward Johan. Suddenly they could hear him shouting.

The Nazi turned toward them. “Ah, there you are, so nice of you to join the party. I thought a little coercion would work,” he said—every word dripping with caustic sarcasm. He waved his gun indicating for them to join the others. “Now, let’s all go through to this new world, shall we?”

He pointed his gun up the stairs. “After you.” Then, turning to the soldiers he told them to stay in the drapers.

As the entourage descended into Smoke and Mirrors the soldiers there raised their guns, but they were told to lower them by the Sergeant when he spotted the Gestapo agent at the rear with a pistol. When he reached the back-shop floor, the SS man pointed his gun at Tom and Gisela. “You will accompany me to get the information on Uranium refining which the Dutchman was to deliver to the Third Reich.”

The next day Tom and Gisela entered the huge modern building of Amsterdam Public Library followed by the SS officer, now in plain clothes. After a quick look at the information signs they headed into the Reference Department.

“Find me the book on Uranium refining. And remember, I have your friends at gun-point.” The Nazi whispered to Tom.

Tom looked up Nuclear Physics on the book locator.

“What are those things?” The German asked looking at a row of computers.

“More machines for locating books.”

“Don’t treat me as a fool!”

“Okay, okay, we can gather information from them.”

“By simply typing in a few commands?”

Tom looked at Gisela and shrugged his shoulders. “Look, it won’t tell you how to build an atomic bomb, I think.”

“All we require is to be pointed in the right direction, and our glorious engineers will do the rest. Well, go on then; look up what I want and no tricks,” he said patting the bulge in his jacket.

Tom joined the Library and accessed the internet on a spare computer watched by an entranced Gisela. He printed off what they required under the supervision of the SS man.

Back in the shop Gisela and Tom entered followed by the grinning Nazi. He ordered the soldiers back upstairs, but first they were to line the prisoners up and shoot them.

“Stop!” Shouted a voice, suddenly. “I’m the only one who can change things—shoot me!”

Peabody appeared.

Screams filled the room as the SS officer shot Peabody. He turned toward the prisoners. “Okay, I’m going to show my compassionate side,” he turned toward the soldiers and ordered them to tie-up the prisoners. “We’ll let them rot here!”

The soldiers tied and gagged the friends and followed the SS man upstairs and through the door. When they were gone Peabody stepped out of the shadows

“I have to stop them. I hope I’m not too late!”

Brian and Tom stared wide-eyed at Peabody and then where the body had been.

“How do you do that?” Brian asked as Peabody took off the gags and untied everyone.

“Smoke and mirrors my dear boy... smoke and mirrors. Now I must dash,” he said as he ran up the stairs, opened the door and disappeared.

Gisela looked at Tom, and they ran up the stairs. Then, descending into the drapers they found Peabody shaking his head as he looked among the puzzled Germans. He gazed up at them and then looked back.

“That blasted SS man has escaped!”

“What happened?” Tom asked.

“I trapped them in a time and space bubble, but I wasn’t quick enough; the Nazi got out of the shop before I acted.”

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