

## Tales

### Dog

A small space-craft appears, unnoticed, in Epping Forest

### Chickencarnation

Nat is becoming increasingly unsettled in his job at Smyth's Chicken Products

### The Panto-Horse End

A deadly fart leads to an accident that changes the course of Marion's life

### The Katbels Fishing Community

Seig decides to find out what lies beyond the Neverline

### Rabbit Fur Hat

A hat-centered love story

### The Writer

A cautionary tale about remembering to back stuff up . . .

## DOG



“How exactly am I supposed to bury a spaceship without so much as a spoon?”

*They* said I would land somewhere safe . . .

I said spaceship; more a small, sleek pod – just enough space for one human-to-be. A human who is now rattling with cold . . . is that a good description? The language insertion is operating wildly now. I feel like a dictionary.

Anyway, enough standing under these dripping leaves. Shelter seems like a good idea, and, as I seem to have outgrown the pod (someone didn’t do their calculations too well), that is not an option. And it smells. It can wait for its burial.

This movableness I appear to have grown is quite effective – with the splaying things at the end – feet. Language information is feeding ever faster: feet, cold, very cold, wet, miserable. Light is leaving the sky through the tree canopy.

### *Dwelling*

At the edge of the tree-land I see a construction made from slices of tree – fence, and beyond, a building. I scramble over, drop to the other side and find a small house made of more tree with a door which is slightly open. I go in. The temperature feels fractionally warmer than outside. There are primitive things made of metal and wood, containers holding small trees and a heap of scratchy material. I crawl into the pile, assimilate what I have already seen and thought, and shut down.

## *Woman*

I leave shutdown to find all my new extremities taut with cold. The door to the dwelling is fully open and something – human? is staring at me with an open mouth and almost round eyes; an emotion of uncomfortableness, I imagine.

Sitting up, my head meets with something it shouldn't. A new sensation flickers and I search for a word that will sooth.

“Damnation.”

The person has stopped the round-eyed expression and has adopted one of suspicion.

“Who are you? And why are you here?”

I try out a hovering sentence.

“Actually, I'm afraid I don't know – to both questions.”

I stand up and the scratchy cloths fall to the floor. The person's expression changes again. He or she is staring at the top of my legs. Looking down, I see a sort of soft tube. I jump back, brushing at the thing but it appears to be attached. I look up abruptly and hit my head again.

Fluid seems to be seeping. I put a hand up and feel warmth, stickiness – blood.

The woman, I now see her to be, is shedding a layer. She passes it to me.

“I think you'd better come into the house. That might need looking at.”

After sinking my upper limbs into the garment, I follow her up a path and into a warm interior.

The cold leaf smell and smaller dwelling odour have been replaced by something appealing. A new sensation joins the others – hunger. I sit on a chair and watch her bring things to the table.

There are disturbing gaps in my word knowledge. I now harbour a catalogue of all periodic table elements, and could tell you anything about the molecular structure of cabbage but I don't know what it was I spent the night in.

“The construction where I was in shutdown, I mean asleep – what is its name?”

She looks slightly amused: “The shed. Not actually my shed – my aunt's. I've been house-sitting for her.”

She dips a cloth into a bowl of water, delicately wipes around my wound and repeats the action. The water has become pink. She makes concerned noises as she investigates further.

“Can't see enough – you do have a lot of hair! Bloody power cut. It might as well be night – it's so dark today. That's why I was in the shed – trying to find candles.”

“Power cut?”

“Third one this week. I'll be glad to get back to civilisation.”

“Where is civilisation?”

Even in the half light I see her smile: “Did you bang your head before banging it in the shed?”

As I'm about to attempt an answer, the room is filled with light. Clicks and beeps resound, and my discoverer steps back.

"Good grief!"

"Sorry?"

"You, I mean . . . wow."

Her eyes have taken on the round shape again.

"What about me?" I ask.

### *Before the pod*

I think, in order to make sense of this for any future reader, I will go back to the point where I had arrived, late as usual, for the 'general galaxy issues' meeting.

I had drifted into the main room and had glanced unenthusiastically at the Oid, on which, suspended in blackness, was the subject of heated discussion – a blotchy, bluish planet.

Feeling delicate, after one too many enhancement attachments the evening before, I had opted for a comfortable oval shape incorporating one extendable limb with which to gesticulate, and jot a few things down if my memory bank failed me.

The throbbing cube chairing the meeting had voiced its indignation over the fact that I was late again. The exact translation is impossible but here is a rough Earth-speak attempt.

"Nice of you to join us, Arp."

"Sorry . . . the traffic was awful."

It had spun back towards to the screen and shot out an icy-looking tentacle that jabbed at the planet in question.

"As I was saying, this particular oxy-sphere is becoming increasingly unstable. The other one in Sector Bezzer is fine – same climatic conditions, same flora, fauna – more or less."

The semi-melted Falp seated next to him sucked back her escaping folds, became solid and addressed him.

"More or less?"

"Well, it's this Man Thing."

"Is it airborne, or waterlife?"

"Neither . . . although it does make a dalliance into both those elements *and* has managed to mess them up too."

"So, it lives on the landscape with the other fauna?"

The cube hesitated and turned towards a delicate spiral of particles. Her voice, unbearably sweet, zinged around the walls.

"Not so much lives with, more . . . lords it over, if you like. The balance was fairly agreeable some meta-years back – small groups of them, living *with* the other species. There was a certain amount of eating of other beasts, but I think you could say that was all part of the food chain you might find on such an orb."

The resonant tones of a minor black hole glowering next to the cube broke the conversation.

“Do we *really* have to worry about this? I mean, on a scale of things it’s hardly a problem is it?”

The cube responded: “Well, normally, perhaps not but *if* the new weaponry we have detected becomes overused – they’ve done a few pot shots here and there over the years – there is a danger of planetary discourse.”

The hole groaned: “Can’t we just annihilate the Man Thing?”

The Falp bristled: “As a selection of the highest intelligence in the galaxy, no, we cannot just *annihilate* them. They must be studied – at close proximity so we can find a solution. We need to send a member to insinuate themselves and gather information.

A silence followed while their collective vision elements gathered upon my ovalesque person.

### *Kitchen*

Jumping back from these recollections I look at the woman. She has said something and I missed it.

“Sorry, I was a frightfully long way (literally) away.”

She gazes at my face with an expression I cannot interpret.

“I said, would you like a cup of tea?”

“I don’t know. Is it good?”

She laughs: “You must have come from outa-space. How can you not know about tea?”

I try the muscles in my face and produce what I think is a smile. She pulls her breath in at this and then lets it out slowly, smiling herself.

“I’ll put the kettle on, then.”

While she fills the afore-mentioned object with water and puts it on a primitive, flamed heater I look about me.

“So this is a kitchen from the 2010s?”

She turns from spooning black dust into a pot. The skin above her eyes is pleated – no, furrowed.

“I think it’s about time you told me where you came from.”

A well-timed word drifts into my head: “Do you have something called amnesia here?”

“You mean in Britain, or the world generally?”

“Oh, either or both, I think.”

“Yes . . . we do. Why? Do you imagine that’s what happened to you?”

“Well, quite possibly although I can’t remember anything, so I don’t know.”

She puts two vessels down on the table.

“I don’t suppose you know if you take sugar?”

My head twists a little, side-to-side. Sub-conscious communication actions are beginning to operate.

“Do you – take sugar?” I ask.

She does the same: “No. I think it’s better without. And have a Jaffa cake”

### *Dog*

I am about to experience an Earth mode of transport, and am feeling anxious about the pod, and the fact I haven’t buried it. We drank quite a lot of tea, which I did like, and then the woman – Ruby, announced that she was going to have to get back to something called London.

She has found me clothing from her aunt’s dead mate, and I am standing at the kitchen door, now covered in reconstituted animal hair and cotton, none of which fits too well, myself being, as she has pointed out, very tall.

Ruby appears to be distracted. I wonder if I can help.

“I could stay here, if that would be of assistance?”

She stops wiping a wooden surface and peers at me.

“What, my aunt returning this afternoon to find I have left her a six foot nine, pale orange, afro-haired man with no memory. I don’t think that would help . . . you could walk Dog though.”

“Dog?”

“Yes, not the most inspiring name. He’s quite harmless though.”

I stare back at her: “Your aunt lives with the deity that many humans worship?”

A series of loud, abrasive sounds partly obliterate my question. Ruby turns towards the noise.

“Here he is. Dog, meet . . . look, we really do have to find you a name . . . Jez? Just for now?”

“That would be agreeable,” I say, bending down to touch Dog. It shrinks back, teeth showing, a low rumbling coming from somewhere inside. I’d imagined this mystical figure to be larger, more impressive to look at.

Ruby is handing me something.

“Here, take the lead. He doesn’t look too happy about you – and watch him if he sees other dogs.”

“There are others?”

“Sometimes. Just keep the lead tight. See you back here in fifteen minutes?”

I walk back down the squishy pathway, and this time pass through the indicated gate. How long is fifteen minutes? My new brain seems to still have gaps – like this dog-deity business. He is pulling me along, stopping to inhale every now and then, and lifting a hairy, white leg to shoot forth a jet of steaming water. Something lowish down in my body informs me I should be doing the same.

I tie Dog to a tree, fumble in my lower clothing, get the tube out and . . . yes, a similar stream. It feels good.

As I put the tube back, a twink of light from within the surrounding bushes reminds me of the pod's landing place. I leave Dog and investigate. The pod is as was: semi-covered in leaves. Heaving open the hatch, I collect the information condensing block and communication sphere, put them in a pocket, and reclose the hatch. I must have been space-numb to have left these items.

I break dead wood, lay branches over the pod and scuff as much debris on to it as possible. Dog is shouting again. Fifteen minutes must have passed by now.

### Car

We are moving along something called the M11 with many other cars; when I say moving, I mean creeping forward at the speed of an exhausted Parp-slug. I look over at Ruby.

"Is this habitual for this mode of transportation?"

She laughs: "Did you fall through some time warp from Jane Austen's day?"

I nearly tell her but I can feel tension in this box. She is late for a gathering, no, a meeting. Maybe later when the sun goes – if I'm still with her.

"Where do you live in . . . London?"

"Highgate – in a top floor flat. It's small but has wonderful views."

My new system tries out anxiety. It works. *They* hadn't actually specified what and how I would do anything, and the fact that I seem to look unlike anyone else doesn't allow for anonymity. I noticed, while gazing out at the passing landscape, my reflection: a cloud of white hair and eyes the colour of Illantrus Nine's principle water. Even in this traffic stagnation people are staring at me.

Ruby unexpectedly puts out a hand and takes mine.

"Hey. Don't worry, I won't just dump you in the Archway Road and drive off."

I feel water in my eyes: "Are you all like this? I refer to being obliging."

"No, my dear afro spaceman. We are not."

I enter shutdown for a while, lulled by the gentle stop-start motion then wake to find we are in an area of chaos: milling humans, dilapidated buildings and hundreds of vehicles.

"Oh . . . what happened?"

She looks at me with surprise: "Nothing, we've just hit rush-hour."

"Rush-hour?"

The gaps in my knowledge bank are becoming infuriating. Then I remember an operating cube informing me that the fairly recent probe sent to Earth had malfunctioned, only retaining scattered details. The probe sent before had functioned correctly but its visitation had been in Earth's year of 1795 . . . speed-learning the current mode of speech is obviously a priority.

She moves the car around a corner and we are in a road of almost identical dwellings: tall, made of yellowish oblong blocks, each with a wall and smudge of plantage.

Cars border the road. She stops at a space smaller than the car and somehow wedges it in.

“Here we are – home.”

### *View*

Her personal dwelling space is, as she mentioned, small, but full of things that make me want to stay here forever; things made by human hand and things that smell delicious, like this small cake she fabricated herself and I am about to eat.

We sit at a table and look out over grey shining slate, skinny metal receivers of some sort, birds and rain clouds edged in golden light. The distant spikes of the tallest constructions remind me of satin-reeds on the waterspan, one of the better memories of my earlier life.

“What are you thinking about, Jez?” Ruby asks.

I consider the amnesia idea.

“Just dwelling on the fact that memory indeed escapes me.” I say, and bite into the cake. “This is quite delectable.”

She looks at her wrist where a small clock is tied.

“I have to go.”

“Where will you go?”

“To Covent Garden – a meeting with Acock, Smyth and Persimmon.”

This sounds idyllic: “Is it a grand garden – something created by Capability Brown?”

She grimaces: “God, no. And *they*, A.S.P, are an advertising agency. Look, I’ll explain later. There’s food in the fridge, books . . . TV, bath, computer – it’s on. Bye . . . sorry, must go, back at about four.”

I stare at the door as it closes and wonder at the feeling that is enveloping me: warm, a sort of longing. Her face sits in my mind.

### *Books*

Words contained within paper: they are everywhere in this abode. I have sat on all forms of seating absorbing words by the page. There is the computer to investigate still but I like these things of paper.

Leaving the books, I explore.

Her kitchen is small. The fridge hums; I join in. The sound makes my nose itch. Inside the fridge, the temperature feels familiar. I get in – partly, shut my eyes and recall a black snow storm from when I was a hatchling.

I eat a bit of everything and close the door again. I should speak with the computer; learn as much as possible before Ruby returns.

Sitting down at her desk, I lift the computer’s lid. The screen yawns into life. Even without touching the keys I feel a throbbing knowledge leaking out towards me. I



close my eyes and place my hands around the metal body. Language and images, historical facts, land masses, food, animals . . . it's streaking into my structure. I feel as if I am filling up, to drown internally. Enough! I slap the lid down again, retire to the sofa and shutdown.

### *Bath*

It seems this body does not regulate temperature during shutdown. I am cold on re-animation and stand up unsteadily, thinking of warm, liquid immersion, something I did enjoy, before the pod time.

I walk stiffly to the bathroom. The elevated pool feels cold to my touch, colder even than my hands. Looking up to the small window, I see white flecks falling and accumulating. They gradually block out the grey above.

I turn the metal wheels and water appears: hot from one, cold from the other.

As I soak, my mind works, piecing together the desired current language, geography, Earth science and Earth history. There are still gaps; I see them as locked boxes. One of the boxes has a label: Religion. Maybe Ruby will know about this as her aunt lives with Dog.

The skin on my fingers has become baggy. Maybe I should get out from the water; the skin layer might eventually part from the bones. It is good in here though. Relaxing is the word that presents itself. Musical notes form in my mind. I think of an orchestra and start to sing.

### *Voice*

I like this so much that I stand and try out all the modulations, tones and possibilities. Jars and bottles rattle. The water surface undulates against my legs.

As I reach the top note that I can see – blue with shimmering edges – the bathroom door opens. Ruby stands with the open-mouthed expression again. She has dropped her bag. Tears run.

I stop the singing and the sound continues, flailing itself against the tiles.

Taking a cloth from a pile, I step out and wrap my lower half.

“Forgive me, did my phonic experiment alarm you?”

She says nothing but steps forward, even lunges; grasps me and fastens her mouth to mine. Hot colour swarms in my head. My tongue dances in her mouth as her hands slide over my wet skin.

She pulls away suddenly: “Oh . . . I don't know quite what happened. Sorry.”

I think about this gift: “So, that was a kiss?”

“It was . . . but I don’t usually go about seizing and kissing people – well, at least not without knowing them for a while.”

I pull her back to me: “Would you mind if we did it again?”

## Sex

Incredible. Odd that the tube has two functions. Most races I have encountered have separate protuberances: one for excreting waste fluids and the other for seed projectiles.

Anyway – who gives a space-poop. It was more exciting than illegally driving a Nizzarp around the edge of an infinity crater. And we did it three times.

Ruby’s bedroom is a nest constructed of books; even the lamp on my side sits on books instead of furniture.

I prop myself up on the hinge in my arm and look at her.

“Have you read all of these books?”

She smiles contentedly: “All, yes.”

“Are any of them penned by yourself?”

“There, that small tower-block of spiral bound papers. My scripts . . . waiting.”

“Waiting?”

“For someone to discover them – a film director, or TV producer, amateur theatre, anything. Anything to get me away from copywriting.”

The word elbow distracts me for a moment. I store it then ask what copy is.

She looks sad, all the glowingness extinguished.

“I’m good at it. Give me a tin of beans and I can write copy like poetry – hook people into buying. It pays well and I’m rather trapped. That’s where I was this afternoon, talking about sanitary towels with three people devoid of irony.”

I feel confused: “Why do people need to be told about beans or sanitary towels?”

“They don’t but that’s how it is – too many companies making stuff and shouting about it. Here, I’ll find you an example.”

Ruby locates a black, oblong thing and points it to a small televisual device set amongst books on the wall opposite. It wakes.

“There,” she says, gesturing to a series of images featuring a grinning family looking at food.

“So, they don’t actually want to eat this . . . string?” I ask.

“Spaghetti – they might, but they are being paid to look happy, to promote the company’s product.”

The next advert features a woman putting a plate of food on her kitchen floor. I sit up and exclaim as a small, hairy white dog appears and starts to eat.

“That’s Dog!”

“A dog.”

“No, Dog, at your aunt’s house.”

“There’s lots of dogs like that.”

“Indeed?”

I am silent for a moment trying to analyse the information in one of the, now, semi-unlocked boxes.

Ruby strokes my arm: “You have a problem with dogs?”

“I thought there was only *one* Dog. The one that humans worship.”

She laughs again but this time raucously until tears run.

I feel a new emotion: a sort of seething cloud in my head.

She notices: “Sorry. I think you’ve got some wires crossed.”

“Wires?”

“Figure of speech. No, I think you mean, God.” She shuffles out of bed, finds a book and hands it to me: “Have a look at this and I’ll make some tea.”

The book, *World Religions*, is fat with pages but after perusing its contents I still feel bewildered, not about the dog confusion, just . . . everything else.

Ruby returns with tea and gets back into the bed.

“Clearer?”

“No. Why, if humans can send, albeit, primitive vessels into their outer dimensions, why do they believe in something that cannot exist? – this heaven, above the sphere.”

She sips her tea and looks at me as if she is reappraising the amnesia excuse.

“Not everyone believes in God, or gods, Jez.”

“And yourself?” I ask.

“I’m probably a pagan if anything – a gazer at the stars, a humble wonderer.”

Gently taking her cup, I put it down on the table then push the wave of dark hair from her face. I kiss her and wonder whether now would be a good time to announce the truth.

As I’m about to embark on my story, a mass of booming noises emanate from the still-illuminated television. I sit back and observe a ruined cityscape, smoke, people running.

“What is this?”

Ruby sighs: “One of the many wars in the world.”

I think of the interplanetary conflict I witnessed for stellar years; the fighting over rare minerals.

“Are they wars over resources?”

“Some, but most, like this one, are about religious beliefs.”

“Humans will destroy each other over stories that were created hundreds of your Earth years in the past?”

“Yes. Stupid isn’t it. Would you like to go for a curry?”

### *Curry*

We sit in a dark red room that smells of something not unlike Capaddrian flowers that bloom once every four galactic years.

I have eaten oily, delicious brown food that makes water run from my eyes, and drunk a long glass of Kingfisher beer which has made my limbs feel soft and disconnected.

“So, small birds are distilled to make this drink?”

Ruby snorts into her ‘lassi’. “No, that’s just the brand name. Beer is made from hops or wheat.”

People are staring at me again, and, having observed myself in the shop windows as we walked here, I can imagine why. I don’t know if the effecto-spiral who put together my earthly blueprint was deranged, tired or malicious but from my observations so far, no one else is nearly seven-foot tall with pale orange skin and turquoise eyes.

The beer is fuzzifying my mind. I could tell her . . . now, as she peruses the menu for sweet things. But supposing she is frightened, runs away, has me locked in a sanatorium.

She looks up at me: “Jez, have you ever eaten kulfi?”

“No. Will I like it?”

She nods and asks the hovering, red-clad waiter for two of whatever they are.

A worrying thought appears in my head: the monetary system of this place, London, and, the remuneration for this food.

“Ruby? What form will the honorarium be for these vitals?”

She stares at me as glass bowls are set before us.

“Sorry?”

I try a new phrase that occurs to me.

“What’s the damage likely to be?”

“Oh, about twenty-five quid.”

“You know I don’t possess any . . . quids.”

“I assumed so, since you were naked in my aunt’s shed and carrying no form of bag.”

I feel it is time to tell her. But as I search for words, she asks me a question.

“About your voice – in the bathroom. How did you learn? . . . I mean, I’ve never heard singing like that.”

I opt for the amnesia again, for the moment.

“I don’t know how I know.”

She is silent, kulfi slipping from her spoon, halfway to her mouth. She puts the spoon down.

“I’ve an idea how you could get by – more than get by.”

### *Office*

It is the next day – Tuesday. I sit in a sleek office that contains no books, just large photographs on the walls of A.S.P’s advertising conquests. Ruby has gone to talk to a person about my voice and I am engrossed in examining the construction of one of

my new shoes. We went to two shops before coming here as she said I really could not walk about dressed in her Aunt's dead husband's clothing anymore.

"Jez!"

I look up to see a bearded man dressed in a pale grey suit striding towards me. I slip my shoe back on and stand up. I wonder whether to kiss him or not.

He puts out a hand: "Sean. Hi there. Ruby has told me about your remarkable voice . . . of course we can't promise anything, but, follow me."

This room is full of more pictures: advert film stills, he informs me. Ruby sits at a table, a small smile on her face as a tall, angry-looking woman walks into the room.

"Can this be quick please, Sean. I've a casting at eleven." She notices me and steps back a little, eyes wide, sculpted eyebrows raised.

Sean positions a metal thing in front of me.

"He won't need a microphone," says Ruby.

They wait. I replay a song in my head that I heard on her kitchen radio. When it is stocked I sing it. The effect is interesting. Sean heads towards the door then turns before disappearing.

"Don't go away!"

The woman stares at me, tears running. I wonder if she is going to lunge over and kiss me, like Ruby had done.

### *Magazines*

She didn't kiss me, although I could tell she wanted to.

An Earth month has passed and many things have happened. I have sat in other rooms with microphones, undertaken interviews with over-enthusiastic people, been driven about in absurd cars, and have met persons called 'celebrities'.

Today, I am sitting in a restaurant, having eaten lobster, and now talking to someone from 'Hi There!', magazine.

Interviews are peculiar as sticking with my amnesia story leaves little to tell other than sexual adventures with Ruby (of which I do not elude to) and what I like eating.

The woman, Chelsea, is pink-faced and red-lipped with a large, mostly revealed, breast area. I find it difficult to concentrate as she is radiating lust towards me.

"So . . . Jez. I would like you to tell our readers a little about yourself."

I wonder for a moment what her reaction would be if I described my dwelling on the ice-flats, or the landscape viewed from the back of a multi-winged Vraateg, but opt for the usual.

"Well, Chelsea, I can't tell you a great deal. As your readers may know I suffer from amnesia. However, the last few days have been . . . enlightening, and I do know that London has some excellent eating establishments."

She looks at her tablet and taps keys.

"Your height must be challenging, Jez. Where do you get your suits made?"

I recall the elderly tailor in Savile row measuring my legs and exclaiming that my mother must have been a giraffe.

“Johnsons.”

“Excellent. And your hair – is it naturally that colour?”

“Yes.”

She appears a little flustered, maybe due to my monosyllabic responses. I try to help.

“Do you want to know about my tube?”

“I’m sorry, Jez?”

“My penis.”

She shuts the tablet off and stands up.

“I think we could continue the interview after your photo session. I’ll see you at the studio.”

The waiter brings me coffee and I sit feeling confused. As part of my research I have examined a great deal of magazines. Apart from the ones about fishing and house interiors, most seem to be concerned with sex or related subjects, especially the screaming pink ones with titles such as ‘No Way!’ and WTF’!

It is the evening of the same day and I have been invited to appear on ‘Secret Singer’, although, according to Ruby, this is mostly publicity for the company that I seem to have adhered myself to, (a mistake with a biro and a very overbearing man). The premise of the show is to judge someone by their voice alone.

I stand on a stage, the backs of three space-station type chairs before me and a hushed audience beyond.

I run Ruby’s suggested song through my mind and commence. Again, the effect is interesting.

The space chairs spin around. Three over-dressed people are on their feet, the audience following. I sing to the end and am enveloped by hysteria.

## *News*

I hear Ruby’s voice.

“Wakey, wakey, Jez. There’s coffee by the bed.”

Something terrible has happened to my head, and the rest of me.

“Think you had a bit too much champagne,” she says, gently.

I sit up slowly and look at the stack of paper she has placed on the bed.

“What is this?”

“Newspapers. You’re in every one – on the front page.”

Unfolding them, I stare at the photos of me surrounded by women, cameras and famous faces.

“Seems as if you’ve become a celebrity.”

“But I don’t want to be one.”

Ruby clicks on the television. I am on every station.

She turns it off and passes me the coffee.

“I don’t think you have a choice, Jez. By the way, that agent you signed with – he rang earlier and you are on The People Place, tonight.”

“The what?”

### *Chat show*

It is too warm here. I wait at the back of a stage set while people throng about. They ask questions; many ask me to sign my name on bits of paper. A woman with a clipboard gestures to a white sofa on the set.

“You’re on, Jez.”

The sound from the audience is similar to a Haaas storm. I feel close to screaming.

The slick-haired host stands up.

“Jez! Here he is, friends. A first for British TV – on The People Place!”

He shakes my hand and I read the seizure waiting in the wings of his heart chambers. Sweat stands out on his beige makeup. I wonder if I should tell him. He’s talking though: fast, manically. I’ve lost the trail already. I sit and the crowd calm a little.

“So, Jez . . . the world at your feet! After one song! How do you feel?”

This is a good question. *How do I feel?*

“Overwhelmed, Mikey.”

“Understandable, Jez, quite understandable . . . so of course we need to hear more of your diamond voice, as the papers are calling it, but first, can I appease our wonderful audience with a few questions?”

“Certainly, Mikey.”

“I understand you have no memory of before you found yourself in Epping Forest?”

“Nothing, no.”

The sweat is beading faster on his brow.

“OK. Let’s turn to the present. The big news is that you have been asked to sing for the upcoming premier of Galactic War Three. This must be a great honour?”

This is news unknown to me. Had we got it wrong . . .

I forget where I am: “Your race has advanced to interplanetary conflict?”

There is silence then Mikey begins to laugh: “Wow – stellar sense of humour as well as the voice!”

Laughter fills the hall. I feel other questions burning but a strident sound streaks into the theatre and a panel illuminates above us, words flashing: 'People ask *the* people'

"Our viewers' question time, Jez. Is that OK?"

"Certainly."

I listen to the questions and answer until the room becomes a blur of heat and colour. I stand up abruptly and the screen snaps off.

"Mikey?"

"Jez?"

"Can I make some enquiries – observations, perhaps?"

He looks slightly alarmed but steadies his features into a smile.

"Of course, Jez."

I think of all the questions in my mind; one comes to the forefront.

"This planet is en route to oblivion. Why would anyone want to know about something so infinitesimally insignificant as my underwear brand?"

Again he laughs. I cannot tell if it's a genuine laugh or if he is scared. Perhaps they will take me away, incarcerate me, but I feel compelled to say more.

"When you are outside this sphere, looking down onto the land between the oceans, there are no borders. Why do you need to differentiate, hate, kill each other because of ancient stories? You are animals - mammals, and nothing more."

Mikey is staring up at me. I wonder if I should sing.

The audience stirs, the combined mutterings as loud as an ice tempest. I turn and run.

### *Silence*

The cameras' blaze still flashes in my head. The taxi person, responding well to a stack of quids, had driven me fast back to the flat, where I now sit by the window, finally connected to the communication sphere after many days of trying.

"But can you do it? Yes, I know about the cost issues . . . but someone miscalculated my growth size. No, there's no way I can get back in that pod."

Silence.

"Come on . . . I've all the information docked. Please?"

Tinny music.

"Oh, thank the Majestic Spiral! So, when?"

Silence

". . . Fifteen Earth minutes? That's not enough. I have to see Ruby . . . space-crap . . . OK."

A molecule-reformation conduit is going to appear in Ruby's front room in fourteen minutes. I sit down and grasp the computer.



“Listen to me.” It listens, and I regurgitate my story into ‘Word’, leave it on the screen and grab pencil and paper.

### *Ascension*

Blood evaporates, bones shrink to flecks of protein. I still feel legs under my oval form – I miss them . . . and the other bits.

I remember the sensation of tears on my face as I look out at the distant curve of the Earth where Ruby might be back in her flat . . . reading my message.

*Write this story. It will be your film. Jez.*