

DARK LUSTRE  
1 of 6  
FIRST INSTALMENT



Roy Wilkinson

# DARK LUSTRE

Roy Wilkinson was born in Newcastle upon Tyne. He has written for outlets including The Guardian, The Independent, MOJO, Sounds, Kerrang!, NME, The Westmorland Gazette, The Angling Times, Caught by the River and The Quietus. He has managed groups including British Sea Power and Cornershop. His acclaimed rock/family/forestry memoir Do It For Your Mum was published in 2011.



ROY WILKINSON

# DARK LUSTRE

Morte Point / Lympstone Commando  
Chiemsee-Kessel / Privatbrauerei

*Something's going to happen.*

*We just don't know what it is . . .*

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**Dedicated to  
Ronald Wilkinson**



For you are grown so great . . .  
And even Hell proclaims your rich estate

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*

Now and for always, Simon will be moving through  
the night, up on those diesel locomotives . . . crossing  
these lone territories between stations in a blackness as  
complete as outer space.

Alan Warner, *The Deadman's Pedal*

Lucky to be given the chance.

Aldous Harding, *Imagining My Man*



## Dramatis personae

Main participants in Dark Lustre first instalment:

Pamela Budeaux – singer/guitarist in The Countess Marie-José de la Barre d’Erquelinnes Hextet.

Tommy Quantox – North Devon’s leading ad-hoc creative solution-ist. Likes Kraftwerk and camping out; electricity and the elements.

Lol Furneaux – Tommy Quantox’s oldest pal. Retired salmon fisherman.

Young Ollie – a young man, sadly missed. Found dead below Morte Point.

Dickie B – good friend of Tommy Quantox; former music writer.

Gary / Gideon Horncastle – first in line of succession to the hereditary baronetcy of Crookham and Burghclere.

Herr Sepp Löwe – German mystery correspondent.



# CHAPTER ONE

Tommy Quantox / Morte Point

The Countess Marie-José de la Barre d'Erquelines Hextet



**BAMM!**

**Action stations!**

**Dive! Dive! Dive!**

**Achtung! Alarm! Fluten!**

*The same rules apply. Because the same rules apply.*

*If you're only going to buy one record this year,  
then don't buy two.*

*The past is by no means dead. In fact it sometimes seems  
it hasn't finished being born.*

*It hasn't been born yet . . . Hasn't been born yet . . .*

# I

On the windowsill lay the dead body of a tiger moth. Overhead, an unidentified light aircraft. Tommy Quantox was feeling good. He hadn't had a drink in two weeks and a new band was due in town. Interfered With By Stone Age Man. Tommy had seen a local promoter putting up posters. He'd shouted over, volunteering some advice: 'Looking good! But remember – if no-one comes, make sure you let no-one in . . .'

At Tommy's house the phone rang. He looked at the moth corpse for a second. Cream, scarlet, black. He picked up the phone. Tommy's pal was on the line. Lol Furneaux. His speech was rapid, the grammar unorthodox. Tommy told Lol to take a breath, to slow down. Take a piss in the stream now and worry about the milking later. Lol carried on regardless.

'Tommy! Listen to me here! Nazi gold! Right up here on the coast! Just up the road . . . For sure! All day long! That's why Young Ollie's dead . . . Can't you see?! Dead! That thing they said . . . Because of the Nazi gold. For certain!'

Lol's exposition came in a breathless, wheezing rush. His voice was rich in the rasped rhotic R of the West Country – pirate-rough and full of primeval vigour. A strangely sensual stream of R-rhotic incantation. Tommy told Lol he would come right over, right away.

Tommy headed through town. The crisp sunlight felt exhilarating. He turned a sharp corner. A truck came blasting down the narrow street. Tommy threw himself back against the wall. The wing mirror just missed his head. The dozy fucker . . .

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Twenty minutes later Tommy was nearing Lol's ground-floor flat, up toward the northern edge of Barnstaple. Tommy stood there for a minute. He gazed down across the weightless late-spring evening, down to the wide estuary – out to the South West Coast Path, to Zulu Bank and the hamlet of Heanton Punchardon. There it was, the end of the river's journey. Slowing, flattening, shimmering in the light. Reaching out for the endless afterlife. The waves, the sea, the ocean.

As Lol welcomed Tommy into his flat The Doors played on the stereo. Inside the flat there was order and there was disorder. Tommy put the kettle on. Dishes and pans sat everywhere. Unwashed. On the table, however, systematic construction was under way. Pieces of wood and metal lay all around.

Lol sniffed and beckoned Tommy over to sit down. Lol had retired a few years ago, after a lifetime working on the coast and estuary. Salmon-fishing, both legal and illegal. A mass of hair coalesced into a quiff, above his gnarled brow and chunky nose. Here was a man who could safely handle a pasty in a tin mine.

On top of Lol's lozenge-patterned knitwear and the elasticated waistband of his tracksuit trousers he wore a multi-pocketed fly-fisherman's vest. The vest could inflate to become a buoyancy aid, a red toggle activating a canister of carbon dioxide. Chances are this would not be needed in a domestic setting. A small set of pliers hung from a D-ring on the vest. A pair of tweezers sat secure in Lol's strong, stubby fingers. He was well advanced with his assembly of a 1:48 scale model of a World War II German submarine – complete in 150 weekly parts. When finished it would be 1.4 metres long.

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Tommy was familiar with Lol's enthusiasm for partworks – the age-old publishing practice whereby you could amass a whole Dickens novel or a colourful collection of miniature steam engines, all by means of weekly instalments from the local newsagent. Tommy had previously looked on as Lol constructed a **PRECISION MECHANICAL SOLAR SYSTEM** – as it was described on the box, supplied in 52 weekly parts. The packaging had featured further celebration of this intricate array of metalwork.

**A BRASS INSTRUMENT THAT REPRODUCES  
THE MOVEMENT OF THE PLANETS IN TIME  
*OVER 10 MILLION COPIES SOLD WORLDWIDE***

As the kettle boiled and The Doors played, Tommy wondered if Lol ever calculated the aggregate price of these things. The model of the solar system, Tommy reckoned, had cost over £400. Tommy figured the completed submarine would come in at over £800. But three decades of friendship had taught Tommy not to disrupt Lol's less ruinous leisure activities. Next to his friend, Tommy was a model of sense and clear thinking. Lol was the older of the pair, by almost a decade, and was prone to misadventure. Online gambling was a constant peril, a hazard which Tommy did his best to neutralise. The pair were also diverse in their dress. Tommy would never be seen in tracksuit trousers, not even answering the door. Lol brought in the tea. Then moved aside the latest set of submarine parts.

\* Laser-cut MDF board with the third portion of the right main bulkhead.

\* Laser-cut MDF board with two additional transverse frames.

\* Laughing sawfish decals.

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Ah, thought Tommy. He was familiar with this sawfish – the cheeky cartoon design painted on the conning tower of U-96 when the sub was under the command of Kapitänleutnant Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock. Who was later replaced by . . . Ah yes, by Hellriegel. The Seebär of Wilmersdorf. The Sea Dog of Wilmersdorf. A region of Berlin . . .

Lol interrupted Tommy's maritime reverie: 'Listen. This might not interest you . . . But, I tell you, my friend, it is definitely interesting. It might sound daft or far-fetched, but . . . I think – and it's not just me – that there is good reason, pretty good reason, to think that there is German gold – Nazi gold – hidden away up here on the coast. On the sea, and on the sea not far from here . . . During the war there were German sailors here for sure. They were seen. Seen just near here. At Sherrycombe Falls . . . What, ten miles from where we are right now? This is not made-up monkey business. This is important. This is not . . . I repeat, this is not some kind of crap in a kettle . . .'

Lol talked more about Nazi submarines on the North Devon coast. Tommy was broadly familiar with the story. Submarines out in the Atlantic, tracking convoys . . . Sooner or later, they would run out of fresh water. Rather than arrange a perilous rendezvous with a supply ship, or make the dangerous journey to home ports in France, they could surface at night by certain Devon beaches. Men would row ashore in a rubber dinghy with some empty barrels – at places like Sherrycombe, where fresh-water waterfalls cascade down onto the beach.

There was a story about a courting couple during the war. In the midst of a coastal tryst they'd heard strange voices. They saw men on the beach playing football, keeping quiet,

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playing without a word. Then a goal was scored. The joy was ungovernable. The men shouted out. In a foreign language. In German. The story went that someone from the armed forces came to see the couple. They signed something binding them to silence. The government, it seemed, was worried about morale and panic.

Lol came to the end of his narrative, sucking on his teeth, drawing in breath.

‘Fascinating stuff,’ said Tommy. ‘It does ring a bell . . .’

‘Well, you know Jeff Lovering?’ continued Lol. ‘That old roofer who lives in those old houses near Martinhoe? Yeah, him . . . got stuck up on his cat-ladder that time, up on the roof at the village hall . . . Well, he had an interesting story on this one. A few years back he was doing some work at that funny pub, The Pack O’ Cards . . . Jeff was in the bar at lunch-time and this man started talking to him. Jeff said he was a real big fella, with a foreign accent. So, Jeff was having a chat with him and asked what he was doing in the area, and had he ever been before. This man said he had . . . in 1942! Jeff was taken aback. He asked him what he’d been doing there in 1942. This fella just said, ‘Zen is ze same as now – looking for a drink . . .’ Very friendly he was, it seems. Then the man started asking Jeff about the coast. He seemed to know quite a lot about it. He asked if Jeff knew how to get to that little inlet in the cliffs – that one just in from The Green Roads.’

Both Tommy and Lol had a thing about The Green Roads, a local underwater coastal feature – what looked like surface-world thoroughfares, but deep down below the waves.

Lol went on. ‘What I think is that this visitor was a German – someone who’d been in submarines and had been here

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before. I think he was looking for something – say, maybe for gold that they’d hidden hereabouts. And . . . Actually, I think that is maybe why Young Ollie is dead. Where was his body found? Not far from this very area . . .’

## II

‘All over the world girls are dreaming . . . Dreaming about me . . .’

Pamela Budeaux turned over, moving inside her duvet. Waking from deep sleep. Dreamland residues lit her mind. Like honey? Like gold dust?

The subconscious reverie felt thrilling. Coming up from her sleep, Pamela’s mind felt toned, her musculature also. She found herself imagining something. A little cloud of green glitter . . . Chipped and abraded from a jadeite axe-head. Manufactured in Italy, but unearthed on the British coast, dated 4,000–3,000 BC. Imagine owning such a thing. Just to keep in your pocket. Feeling the cool rock when you were having a think.

The words revolving in Pamela’s head – the words about the dreaming girls – were from a song she’d heard a couple of days earlier. Well, not so much a song . . . More a piece of peculiar spoken word. Sprechgesang. As recorded by some obscure Scotsman, and heard around 2am at the home of the improbably named Pinkie Cleugh. The track had beamed out from the domestic speakers. The vocal was a viscous Pictish brogue, rich and brown. Pinkie was in her cups. Whisky Macs, neat and warm. She started going off on one – right off on one.

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‘Aw! Listen to that! So good. What a voice! Like a stag’s antlers while in velvet . . . Combining seduction with . . . latent aggression! A tonal feast . . . Oh hear you, Pamela Budeaux . . . Right here we have nothing less than . . . the future voice of Werther’s Originals!’

As the track played on, Pamela had seen Pinkie’s point: ‘Girls are dreaming . . . Dreaming about me . . . Stella up in Scotland in a boat upon the sea . . . Surrounded by lots of water, she’s dreaming about me . . .’

Waking up in her big four-poster bed, Pamela felt great. So cosy inside her 16.5-tog encapsulation. She was half awake, not quite sure if she wanted to head further day-ward. The dream about the dreaming girls had been just part of Pamela’s nocturnal subconscious. Her brain had also dredged up some hyperreal, electric-bright version of a story, purportedly true, that someone had told her in the pub earlier that week.

In the pub Pamela had been talking to a young man. He’d detailed the privations and brutality of his Scottish boarding school. But, despite the looming threat of sexual predation and the routine physical punishments, how the man’s eyes had lit up bright when he recounted these tales. The man had ended up getting expelled from the school. A fellow pupil had discovered a way to access the school bursar’s office – by cramming himself inside a dumb-waiter’s miniature lift system, and then descending to the office. This dumb-waiter master-thief’s version of priceless gems and diadems was a supply of liberated bursar’s cheques, to be sold on to fellow scholars. In Pamela’s dream, the dumb-waiter had been lit inside with fluorescent tubes. The compartment resounded with the gorgeous electronic fantasia of Kraftwerk’s Neon Lights. In

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German. *Neonlicht, schimmerndes Neonlicht*. The dream-world version of Pamela's pub interlocutor had come undone when he'd made out his stolen cheque for the immodest sum of £1,276 – and merely guessed at the bursar's signature.

The final component of Pamela's dreaming involved another story she'd recently heard – imparted to her as pure bona fide. An acquaintance had been driving back from a local gig where he'd been working as soundman and general roadie. As he reached the edge of Exmoor, his headlights ignited an adrenaline-surging sight. A big red-brown corpse. Half on the road, half in the green of the verge. A dead deer.

In the dream, the man stamped on the brakes and climbed out of the van. The stag lay ill-disposed, wrenched away from normality. Its eyes were open, silver in the headlights. The antlers were massive, extending across the road and grass. Blood was congealing in the corner of its mouth, but the animal was still warm. Clearly hit by some passing vehicle and not too long ago. The man's mind moved involuntarily. If only this dead marvel could be got to a butcher's. There could be a cash bonus to magnify any stage tech's coffers. The back of the van was full of gear. But, after pushing down the back of the passenger seat, the man had somehow wrestled the corpse into the van. On arrival at his home he'd parked in the garage. Might as well, he thought, leave the stag in situ until the morning . . . But by the morning rigor mortis had set in hard. The deer was stiff and solid, stuck hard in the geometry it had been forced into. Extraction would be no simple operation. In the dream the man moved toward the dead deer. He was holding a hacksaw. The stag's head creaked, turned and then spoke. 'Mate . . . Do you really think this is a good idea?'

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Pamela lowered one foot onto the ground. Brrr! She got out of bed. As she waited for the kettle to boil she thought about her dreams. As far as she could see, they had only one possible cause. There had been the unconscious narratives about dreaming women . . . The unorthodox routes to reward and riches . . . The travel and drama . . . Her band were set to rehearse that day. She was looking forward to this very much. Her dreams were all metaphors for rock ascension – the trajectories that Pamela and her band were destined to follow. Up to the sky, and then a bit further.

### III

Young Ollie's corpse had been found by Morte Point. He had, it seemed, fallen from the heights of the cliff, down to the jagged rocks below. An angler had happened on the body, close to where this peninsula stretches out toward the islet of Morte Stone. It was solemn geology – a serrated slate cleavage thrown up in the Upper Devonian period.

Young Ollie's death had filled the locality with its own gravity. As Tommy and Lol talked an inquest was pending. Had it been suicide? There had been talk in the area. But it seemed an odd place to kill yourself. The incline from top to bottom was steep, but it was no vertiginous fall. There were higher and cleaner drops nearby.

'You know what Young Ollie was like,' said Lol. 'The idea that he jumped off the cliff doesn't make sense . . . No sense at all. Can you imagine? Him, of all people . . . Hadn't a care.'

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His daughter, his new job. He's the least likely . . . That fucker wouldn't be doing that. And you can't imagine him falling. Feet like a cat. Knows that area like almost no-one. Nimble, all co-ordinated. You know what he's like playing in goal . . .'

Lol sipped his tea and then continued. 'Ollie . . . He was always poking about. With his metal-detector. Found that unexploded bomb at Hele Bay, from the war. If you ask me why he's dead, then that's why. He was onto something. Hidden gold . . . Investigating . . . And someone did something about it.'

Morte Point was indeed a less-than-obvious suicide spot. However, history had stocked this place with fatality. The point and the adjacent coastline had once been favoured locations for smugglers and wreckers – luring ships toward nocturnal cataclysms of smashed timber and smashed bones.

Three miles across the bay from Morte Point sits Baggy Point. These two promontories acted together as a deathly pincer, a colossal man-trap – or, more particularly, a ship-trap. Seagoing vessels were vulnerable to gales from the west and north. In February 1799, the sloop o' war HMS Weazel was in the bay. The wind picked up, pinning her on the rocks. Distress signals were fired, but there was no escape and 106 men died. Many ships suffered deadly misadventure. The Bristol schooner Thomas Crisp. The brigantine Thistle. A pilot cutter called I'll Try. They all went down. Five ships were lost in Morte Bay in 1852. One shipwreck involved a cargo of live pigs. The pigs survived. One is said to have lived on at a small cove for a year, feeding on seaweed. The cove acquired the name Grunta Beach.

Lol reignited his narrative. 'You've got to look into this

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gold thing,' he said excitedly. 'You can solve this one, Tommy. You're the man for this job – everyone knows how you investigated that thing with that bloke at the Co-op. That was brilliant! Everyone knows that.'

Lol was invoking a near-mythical local episode. The Strange Tale Of The Disputed Universal Onion. Tommy had acquired a reputation as a man who could solve mystery, confusion, dissension – most frequently in the supermarket. The manager at the local Co-op had become aware of criminal intrigue on his watch. Nat Darch was a lonely figure of retirement age and, by general consensus, not quite all there. But he'd worked out a way to obtain real everyday savings at the Co-op's self-service check-outs.

Nat had realised that by sticking through sundry items and inputting them as loose fruit and veg, he could secure unlimited financial advantage. Soon he was scanning through pretty much all his groceries as loose onions. A pound package of fillet steak – 39p. A twin-pack of long-life nine-volt batteries – 14p. The manager had wanted to bring the legal shit-hammer crashing down on Nat. But Tommy heard about events from another Co-op staff member and was able to intercede. Tommy soon got to the bottom of things, quietly persuading the manager to forget prosecution. Tommy's barrack-room legal summation had been persuasive: 'You know old Nat – perhaps he really just doesn't know his onions.' With the manager on side, Tommy had a quiet word with the check-out crime-lord – he'd been rumbled, the game was up, just pack it in and nothing more would be said. Order and harmony were restored.

Lol returned to the idea of alien gold on the coast. Tommy

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was deeply engaged by what Lol was saying. And also a long way from believing any of it.

‘This is fascinating stuff,’ Tommy said, bidding Lol goodbye. ‘I’ll certainly be having a good think – a real good think. You look after yourself. Important submarine construction to be completed!’

He left Lol clearing away the mugs and getting ready to ease into place the third portion of the right main bulkhead.

## IV

The early light was brightening over the dock. Pamela looked out of her bedroom window, peering at clouds lit up with a warm orange. Red sky at morning, sailors take warning. The rising sun reflecting off the moisture-laden meteorology . . . More rain-bearing air likely from the west . . .

Pamela could see the waterfront, the long riverfront dock. A pair of massive modern tractors sped by on the dockside road. Their forklift arms were tilted upward, holding immense bales of cable. Pamela’s mind clocked along, at ease but full of wonder. Could this cable run from a guitar to an amplifier? Or across the sea . . . across the ocean, carrying messages good, bad and indifferent? Pamela had recently seen cross-sections of transatlantic cable in a local museum. It was beautiful, exquisite, an intricate array of metal circles – copper and silver in colour, and everywhere between.

In the other direction up the street lay a pub. A branch of the omnipresent JD Wetherspoon chain. It was, what,

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8.30am? Already people were smoking outside. The pub had, until the 1960s, been a cinema. Pamela had loved the pub's name on sight. The Rose Salterne. An information board inside the pub explained that the name came from a heroine in the 19th-century novel *Westward Ho!* This pub chain was, famously, owned by a man evangelical in the dream of sun-dering Britain from the continental landmass. Pamela wanted to be part of Europe, but she was also keen on the idea you could find beauty anywhere – at least, a kind of beauty.

The Rose Salterne was in the town of Bideford, a sluggishly hypnotic place, perhaps best known latterly as the point of departure for the boat service to the isle of Lundy. A description in the pages of *Westward Ho!* had given Bideford a sub-title, which featured on local road signs. The description came from the colour that much of the town was painted.

## BIDEFORD

Little White Town

The line had recently been subject to a rethink. This was perhaps advisable given Bideford's generally pale ethnicity. The author of *Westward Ho!* was invoked. The local council made plans to modify the road signs.

## BIDEFORD

Charles Kingsley's Little White Town

Some locals weren't keen on these changes. Bideford Black is a coal-based pigment peculiar to the area. It had been used in paint for 17th-century Royal Navy warships. It was also

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used as a pigment in mascara. When the council announced plans to modify BIDEFORD LITTLE WHITE TOWN, ancient residents began to discuss whether Bideford Black would now become Bideford Indigenous Colouring Of Colour, or some such. The council decided not to change the signs after all. All the while, life went on.

Pamela watched a woman outside the pub. She was aged, frail. Pamela found herself imagining a biography. A working woman . . . A lifetime's toil . . . Now, toward the end of the day, seeking dignity, calm. The woman, Pamela imagined, had been in the pub since doors-open at eight. Enjoying, to the maximum, the all-you-can-drink coffee refills. But another longing had descended. To head out into the open air. To see if a transformation might transform. A light at the end of the tunnel. A light at the end of her roll-up.

Pamela watched on. In the morning half-light she could see a tiny red jewel at the end of the woman's cig. Pamela breathed out. Please, God, don't let us die. Not while we're still alive . . . Pamela looked along the street. She hoped the water in the pipes would keep running, that the electricity would stay on. For a while at least. There were things to do, songs to write. Pamela had recently seen an old advert painted up on the side of a building. It was clearly a relic – antique boosterism, enduring from a previous age.

### **Recording and Marketing the Human Voice**

#### **Domestically and Overseas - Unalloyed Fidelity**

This was pretty much what Pamela was determined to do. As soon as possible.

V

LIVE AT  
**Klüb Konkrète**  
• THURS 24 MAY •



**The Countess Marie-José de la  
Barre d'Erquelinnes Hextet**  
Interfered With By Stone Age Man  
DJ SAS Dirtyman

@ The Riverfront Café,  
The Strand, Barnstaple  
COME ON IN! £7/£6

Remember – in the kingdom of the blind the cock-eyed man is king

Tommy was looking forward to this. Two new bands playing live by the old river. He was sat at a table with a pal. Dickie B was a former music journalist, now mainly employed in the 'third sector'. He worked for a local charity helping rehabilitate young men gone astray – cosh boys on national assistance, youngsters on a one-way road to nowhere.

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Dickie's rehab programme included instruction in person-powered wood-turning. Tommy had witnessed this life-changing craft in full effect – the affirmative pleasure of pumping the foot pedal, feeling the force transmit through the big fabric loop and then skilfully applying the sharp metal cutting edge to seasoned sycamore. With this foot-powered lathe, you could turn out an attractive bowl, fashioned in same style as those found in the sunken Mary Rose.

At Klüb Konkrète, Tommy and Dickie were engaged in solemn discussion. There they were. Boys Talking Rock. Tommy mentioned the sad loss of dear dead David Bowie. But, ale-fisted, Dickie was having none of such routine rock rumination. He was in possession of both highly-original rock opinion and a near-full pint of Avocet bitter – refreshing, organic joy-in-a-glass, made to the south at the Exeter Brewery. Dickie B let fly.

'Richard Thompson – what a fucker!' He embarked on a committed dismantling of the sainted Fairport Convention singer and guitarist. 'The most ruinous of influences . . . All craft, no art. That's not culture, it's bread – artisan wholemeal bread. Fucking sourdough . . . There should be some way of banning that clown from turntables. Let him spin round on a fucking potter's wheel. That's where he fucking well belongs . . .'

Tommy wasn't inclined to add to this fearsome bitches' brew of rock conjecture. Rather, he reported on last week's fund-raising pub quiz in aid of Barnstaple Caring. The music round had been spectacularly rich. A spot-the-intro section featuring Love Will Tear Us Apart, Stand By Me and Kraftwerk's Autobahn. And also Telegraph Road by Dire Straits. The live version – from the live album Live: Alchemy.

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‘Live: Alchemy!’ exclaimed Dickie B. ‘That’s the one where, in 1985 or something, Mark Knopfler discovered the wonders of that new-fangled thing – the syn-thee-sizer! Live: Alchemy, recorded live! An amazing fucking farrago – but such a fucking farrago that it’s amazing!’

The quiz intros round had also featured tracks by Adele and Hot Chocolate. Tommy’s team – Quiz Team Aguilera – had got five out of six correct. But so had their arch rivals, the Beyoncé Know-it-alls.

Tommy and Dickie turned their eyes to the stage. The house lights were turned down. The support band were about to start. The stage was lit up by an intricate cat’s cradle of white fairy lights. Dry ice billowed out. Big black speaker stacks loomed like mist-cloaked megaliths on Salisbury Plain. The three members of Interfered With By Stone Age Man walked on.

The male drummer and guitarist were bearded, squat, hirsute, like an intermediary stage on a school poster showing The Evolution Of Man. The female bass player towered over these two homunculi. Real name: Magda Boniek, originally from Slovakia. Stage name: Magda Carta. Interfered With By Stone Age Man were picking up praise, in the southwest and beyond. As they played, the crowd swelled to maybe 60 people.

A cumulonimbus of down-tuned art-metal slowly, gradually, filled the venue. There were chord changes like grinding tectonic plates. Distorted power chords chugged at geological tempo.

I-SAM – as they were known to their widening circle of admirers – only played two tracks, but these took up 35

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minutes. The first, Bowerman's Nose, started with a gale-force field recording from a Dartmoor forest, before assuming the portent and power of an impending electrical storm. The 20-minute Childe's Tomb (Remains Of) began cataclysmically, and then moved into a rock approximation of six pages of Gothic-lettered parchment, as inscribed by monks on sixth-century Lindisfarne. Finally, the composition resolved into restful waves of synth and distortion.

The singer's Boudica-ish bodacious-ness was a powerful adjunct to her bandmates' dark-dude musical intensity. She was wearing a kind of sleeveless rabbit-skin twinset. It was accessorised with a fur fascinator – a strip of skin tied bandana-style around her head. This headgear was clasped with an ancient-looking brooch, from which projected a bunch of pheasant tail feathers. The effect was compelling – as if the Raquel Welch of One Million Years BC had staged a hostile takeover of a private enclosure at Ascot.

Although things were looking good for Interfered With By Stone Age Man, not all was perfect. There was the increasingly problematic attitude of the drummer. All of the band contributed to the band's material. The drummer was a multi-instrumentalist. He'd passed his Grade 8 exam on the saxophone and was increasingly trying to crowbar too-weird time signatures into the band's compositions – maybe a little 3/8 crush-colliding into some outright 2/32. He liked a bit of C<sup>7alt</sup> and a touch of ♭13. He'd been heard bothering strangers with unbidden information: 'I regard the term "jazz" as too limited to describe my music.' But, for now, the band could still operate harmoniously.

Sequentially, the trio left the stage. The singer was last to

leave. She finally departed to loud cheers and much applause. Even Dickie B was on board. He shouted out in delight.

**‘JUST GIVE ME THE FUCKING CHICKEN!’**

This line was familiar to Tommy. It stemmed from one of Dickie B’s favourite rock anecdotes. The tale had originated when Dickie had interviewed a London emo-rock band. The band’s singer had had a Saturday job working on the rotisserie at Le Coq Hardi, a Primrose Hill delicatessen. Virtually every week, Paul Weller would come in to buy a roast chicken. The emo singer was a Weller fanatic. One Saturday he summoned the courage to inform Paul of his admiration: The Jam! Red Wedge! The Style Council! That art film with the vicar guy . . . The one where you played King Canute . . . In fisherman’s waders . . . Weller had looked up, both embarrassed and exasperated. He’d shifted from foot to foot. Excruciating micro-seconds passed before the inconvenienced Modfather formulated his flustered response. He eventually delivered his rejoinder in a familiar Woking rasp: ‘Just give me the fucking chicken . . .’

Tommy had been transported by I-SAM – moved, mentally, out onto the moors. Dickie B was also on the move – to the bar. ‘Just give me the fucking chicken!’ he shouted, one more time. Between bands, the DJ played some good stuff – Status Quo, Fats Domino, Siouxsie And The Banshees, Patsy Powell & The Honky Tonk Playboys. Then she cued up a twin-turntable fusion that had particularly endeared her to local aficionados – the New York synths-in-extasis of Suicide’s Dream Baby Dream mixed with Lady Saw’s cautionary Kingston dancehall tale, Peanut Punch Make Man Shit Up Gal Bed.

## First Instalment

Dickie returned with the drinks and the DJ faded the record down. Silence and anticipation descended. Gorgeously sombre intro music beamed forth. Dickie recognised it as the middle movement of Henryk Górecki's Symphony No. 3, the Symphony Of Sorrowful Songs. The music lived up to its Italian orchestral directions, whatever they meant. Tranquillissimo. Lento e largo. Then three young men strolled on to the stage.

One of the boys sat behind the drums. The other two picked up guitars. They were a trio of pretty, sharp-cheekboned lads – floppy fringes and tight black trousers. What? thought Tommy. How disappointing . . . Tommy knew a little about the real-life Countess Marie-José de la Barre d'Erquelinnes – aka Marie-José Villiers, a British-born World War II Belgian secret agent who'd saved shot-down Allied airmen, navigating occupied Europe with maps hidden in her knickers. How could these game bozos equate with such a name?

Then, just as Tommy was about to head off to the bog, three women strode onto the stage. Each held their left arm aloft. Two of the women grabbed the guitars from the boys, patted them on the shoulder and directed them out into the audience. The third woman shoved the remaining boy from the drum stool. He went flying, landing with a thump. It was now clear the boys were part of the show – stunt-man stooges. A diverting and voltage-raising false start. Before the girls took over . . . Having liberated the rock instrumentation from these male manifestations of alt-rock averageness, the three women thumped into their first song. What an opening gambit, thought Tommy. And . . . and what a sound!

The bass-player and guitarist stood facing away from the crowd, either side of the drummer. Their opening number

## Dark Lustre

grew into a churning, compelling chug of tom-toms and finger-dampened power chords. Fuzz bass . . . Lots of reverb . . . Then the woman playing the guitar turned round. With two crisp, precise steps, she relocated herself in front of the single vocal mic.

The singer/guitarist wore a strange, pointed red cap – and a facial expression that was two-thirds smile, one-third sneer. Attached to the cap was a colourful cockade – a roundel of blue, black and red trailing blue ribbons. A sash hung across her upper body. Again blue, black and red. Overprinted with three words in white text.

### **LIBERTÉ ÉGALITÉ MISÈRE**

The watching Dickie B had an idea what was going on – some spin on the French revolutionary symbol Marianne and her Phrygian cap . . . For some reason the blue, white and red of France c.1789 had been darkened somewhat. The woman in front of the mic started to sing: ‘Queen Victoria’s a bitch . . . Hhhhh!’ Dramatic pause. ‘I don’t miss her at all.’ It was Pamela Budeaux, the very same. She was 21 and from Falmouth in Cornwall. She regarded the term ‘music’ as too limited to describe her music.

For Tommy the next 25 minutes took on a rare effortless-ness. Oh yeah! Whence came this dazzling and cataclysmic ram-raid on western musical idiom? Time seemed greased with mink oil – moving without friction, freed from all engagement with conscious thought. Whoosh! First it was now. Then, suddenly, it was later . . . Tommy stood open-mouthed.

### **BONFIRE NIGHT! EVERY NIGHT!**

## First Instalment

Tommy had recently read a quotation from WB Yeats. Now, in the moment, this quote scrolled through Tommy's brain – something about our youth being like a cup . . . a cup which a lunatic dying of thirst had left only half-tasted. Tommy looked at the three women on stage. Here, youth really was *not* being left half-tasted. Who were these women? They were clearly young, still waxing toward the body's corporeal maximum. But they were also full of such gravitas and authority. The sound and vision seemed to make them immortal – flesh and bone lit so starkly it was like a map to the land beyond. Morse code from another dimension . . .

To some extent, the band's influences were evident. They clearly very much liked Somerset wise-wound wizard Polly Harvey. They liked her so much they'd taken some of her songs and set them to music. But there was more. The words seemed full of fascinating vocabulary and reference points.

Tommy focussed in on the singer. Who was this wondrous votaress? What could account for such a figurehead? She seemed at once benign and spectral. The music was pulsing, powerful. Tommy was removed from the moment. In his mind he was soon very far from a dark little room in the Devon night.

Tommy's mind spun with varied nomenclature. Half recalled, half real, half a sixpence . . . Snakeshead fritillary. Lymptone Commando. Iridescent Vulgate. Cream-spot tiger. MILF tumblr. Eroded polar vortex. As Tommy well knew, such wonder-struck streams of consciousness were just where rock music should take you. But it had been so long . . .

Tommy had seen a lot of bands, a lot of night-time transmission, but he hadn't encountered performers this transportive

for a long time. At no point did he find himself wondering if he might have fish for tea tomorrow. Or perhaps something with cheese. Routine internal dialogue was eradicated. For the first time in four days he was able to entirely forget about Nazi gold and the unexplained death at Morte Point.

## VI

Pamela squeezed the clutch lever and put the machine into third gear. On she went in a heart-singing surge of throbbing vibration, of revolution. There were forces both centripetal and centrifugal – all integrated with respect to kinematic variables. It was the morning after the show at Klüb Konkrète. The vaporous early light was now softer still, when seen through goggles. Greens and browns and bright sunlight flickered by in her peripheral vision. Pamela had ridden motorbikes before, but never with a sidecar

The bike was precision engineering from Japan. The sidecar was a ramshackle DIY cart, knocked together near Minehead. It wasn't much more than the go-kart things kids used to build from old prams – back in the distant days. Pamela was doing a spot of cash-in-hand delivery work, for a friend who dealt in antiques. The motorbike/sidecar combo was an unlikely delivery vehicle, but Pamela didn't have a car. The motorbike was the only thing available. Pamela's pal had acquired it in lieu of an unpaid debt.

When moving along the straight, Pamela found the motorbike and sidecar worked in reasonable harmony. But she had

## First Instalment

to forcibly wrench the handlebars into bends. For the first ten minutes corners had been terrifying – as if hung over an abyss, only to be pulled back as she reached out toward a point of gravitational no return. At each left-handed turn she felt like the combo was going to keel over. Nonetheless, she was soon in control of this unruly Japanese-Devonian twinset.

The delivery wasn't too bulky, just a big batch of signed first editions, plus a painting. The books were all by Henry Williamson, the man who'd written those stories about the otters. Pamela recalled a copy of *Tarka The Otter* from her own childhood. She'd collected the items the previous day, along with the motorbike/sidecar. The delivery was scheduled for 9am.

Out of curiosity, Pamela had looked up the Henry Williamson works now in her care. She hadn't known that he'd lived and worked nearby – in a village a few miles away, out toward the coast. There were ten volumes from a series called *The Chronicle Of Ancient Sunlight*. The titles included *The Dark Lantern*, *The Golden Virgin* and *Lucifer Before Sunrise*. There was also a collection called *The Flax Of Dreams*. Pamela looked at the dedication. It had been signed for 'Mein Lieber Herr Himmler'. Pamela only knew of one Himmler. The painting was of Williamson. He looked gallant, moustachioed. On a big leather gauntlet sat a peregrine falcon.

Pamela was soon at the specified address, turning into the gateway. She climbed off the bike. Sat before her in the drive was a weird little jalopy. An old, three-wheeler vehicle of some kind. She looked at this strange car's bodywork. It was covered in something. What looked like black leather . . . A little cockpit contained two seats, in a tandem arrangement.

## Dark Lustre

Over the seats arched a clear plastic canopy. Pamela found this extrusion unsettling, like some giant chrysalis. Spooked, she walked up to the front door and rang the bell.

She waited a minute and then rang again. No sign of life. She wandered around to the side of the house. It was an impressive building – single story, modernist in design, big windows looking out across adjacent fields. Pamela couldn't see anyone. She walked back round toward the front door.

As she turned the corner she saw a man standing in the entrance. He was gaunt, his angular face topped by a floppy centre-parting. He looked at Pamela. His expression was at once severe and supercilious. He didn't say a word.

'I've brought your books,' said Pamela. 'And the painting. From Ruth . . .'

The man gestured for Pamela to come in, then turned back into the house. Pamela removed the tarpaulin cover from the sidecar and lifted out the delivery. It took her two journeys to get the items into the house. She put the books and painting down inside the entrance hall and held out the delivery invoice. The man still hadn't uttered a word.

'I need you to sign this,' said Pamela, proffering the paperwork and a ballpoint pen. 'Receipt for the delivery . . .'

The man took the form, looked it over and then waved away the offered pen. He spoke for the first time. 'No . . . I will get my own.' His voice was high-pitched, effete. Pamela found it hard to locate any sign of class or geography.

The man turned into the house's interior. Pamela decided she might as well follow. He'd disappeared somewhere inside. Pamela walked into a vast light-filled room. Two of the walls consisted of big windows. Green arable land glowed outside.

## First Instalment

The room was lined with sleek modernist chairs, but among this furniture sat other items, variously decanted from packaging. There were several sculptures. Pamela guessed the man was some kind of art dealer.

With no sign of her host, Pamela wandered around the room. Immediately in front of her was a stylised sculpture, about half life size. A skeletal human form, evidently in flight. Behind this figure were three twisted, black canine pursuers. Dogs? Wolves?

Pamela walked over to the far side of the room. Another sculpture, this time in some kind of stone. A winged figure held a nude humanoid form in a tight embrace. Pamela recognised it. But it took her a moment to recall exactly where she'd seen the thing before. A school trip to an art gallery . . . Jacob Epstein's 1940s work, *Jacob And The Angel*. But the sculpture in front of Pamela was about one quarter the size of the version she'd seen in London. Beside this sculpture sat a bronze of a head that anyone would recognise – a glowering face framed by an angular fringe and a toothbrush moustache.

On top of a chest of drawers sat a glass display case. Inside was a skeleton – a small, almost human form, but hunched over, with long arms hanging down. The hands touched the wooden base of the display case. Some species of monkey or ape? A gibbon or chimp, perhaps?

By now, Pamela was unnerved. She wanted to leave, but the man was still elsewhere. She wandered over to a wooden lectern, set up looking out to the verdant exterior. The lectern was being used as a kind of writing desk, arranged to be worked at while standing up. Propped up on a slanted shelf was a sheet of handwritten prose, the words stretching out

in immaculate calligraphy. It was clearly a work in progress. Pamela read the text.

‘Epstein typically manifested an ugly and obscene style, with scant regard for realistic intent, scorning the harmonious rigour of the true artist. It is no exaggeration to say his sculptural work sometimes verges on a cannibalistic aesthetic. His Yiddish imperatives would surely disgust any learned observer. Indeed, in the 1940s, The National Vigilance Association, an august British society established in 1885 for “the enforcement of the laws for the repression of criminal vice and public immorality”, described Epstein’s work as reminiscent of “some degraded Chaldean or African”. A spokesman for the NVA went on to criticise Epstein’s degenerate output as suggestive of “Asiatic American or Hun-Jew . . . emaciated Hindu or badly grown Egyptian”. It was also said that Epstein’s aim was “to convert London into a Fiji island”. It seems fair and reasonable to posit that this so-called artist could be better called a disease infecting the arts.’

Pamela laughed – and then felt a twist of nausea in her stomach. What was going on here? A tone so goofily arrogant that she half thought it had been written for laughs – if it wasn’t for the tone of sneering superiority. Pamela then felt a presence in the room. She turned to find the man looking at her. He raised his arm and pointed Pamela to the exit.

The man stopped to sign the delivery invoice with an antique fountain pen. He handed the signed paperwork to Pamela and then closed the exterior door behind her, without a further word. Pamela snorted to herself. What a twat. She made ready to start up the motorbike, but before she did so she had another look at the odd car in the drive. On the vehi-

## First Instalment

cle's curving nose was the maker's badge. It was in a sharply graphic style. Inside a metal circle there was a stylised rendering of some fierce beast. Eagle? Dragon? Griffon? Below this sat the name of the manufacturer.

### MESSERSCHMITT

Pamela climbed aboard the motorbike and pushed down the kick-start. She drove away, quickly.

## VII

It was now three days after the concert from The Countess Marie-José de la Barre d'Erquelinnes Hextet. Waves rose two-storey high then smashed down. Seabirds cried out in the dark. The Atlantic churned and roared, slamming like a whale in an iron helmet. Tommy hadn't been able to sleep. It was just gone 3am. He was up on the coast.

Tommy had woken in the black of night, his mind whirring. A tune spun in his head. That band he'd seen. What were they called? The Countess . . . The Hextet . . . Witnessing them had felt revelatory. Their music remained. Even so, thoughts of Nazi gold and death on the cliffs had returned.

Tommy had decided he needed to walk and to think – to calm the mental fridge-buzz with the gentle chug of nocturnal locomotion. He put one foot in front of the other, out along the cliffs. The Moon hung over the black water. So soundlessly. Other lights glowed sweetly, orange and white in the distance. Twelve miles away – the island of Lundy.

## Dark Lustre

Tommy was treading careful in the night. In the half-light he could see the extended cat's paw of Morte Point, reaching out into the sea. He walked along the turf at the top of the cliff. He found what he was looking for – a faint white light wavering on the edge of vision, coming and going. Tommy edged forward, wary of where the grass ended and the incline steepened. As he moved slowly toward the sea an arrangement of plastic, wood and flowers materialised.

Something rustled in the wind. Polypropylene pockets – the kind of thing you might snap into your ring-binder. There was a big bouquet of flowers. The now wilting blooms were wrapped in cellophane and tied to a wooden stake hammered into the turf. A collection of glass vessels held candles. They had been long since extinguished by the wind, but a single plastic, battery-powered candle flickered on.

A football programme was wrapped inside one of the plastic envelopes. The weather had got inside, bloating and distorting the sports literature. But the cover lines were still legible. BLUEBIRDS WELCOME THE BEACH BOYS – allusion to a recent cup match, against Concord Rangers from the Skrill Conference South. At the centre of this cliffside memorial sat an array of weather-worn messages.

WE MISS YOU DAD  
UR ANGEL MANDY

OLLIE m8 – never forget U  
Pete, Ray + ALL THE SQUAD ILFRACOMBE TOWN AFC

PLEASE COME BACK!  
PLEASE PLEASE COME BACK!!  
YOURS FOREVER XXXXXXXX

## First Instalment

No actual bluebirds over these cliffs. Not tonight. These cliffs were grey, green, gunmetal, never quite white. Gulls could be heard, somewhere out on the waves. Tommy walked on, heading down to the beach. Completing a series of cork-screwing inclines, he was soon on the sand. He stood still and took in the tang of the waves, the calm of the dark. That young man . . . Ollie . . . Coming to an end here. How? Why? Morte Bay had its historical mortality, but today it was a much-loved beauty spot, a place for summer picnics and a nice walk along the rolling landscape.

Tommy walked on, curving round a dark rock outcrop. His mind emptied, hovered in time – sentient but without subject matter. He headed on across the sand. The substrate slowed his progress as he headed on across the mile-wide bay. He looked up at the stars, letting his eyes roll across the constellations. He could make out the hazy smudge of the Omega Centauri cluster. He'd been reading about this mazy mass of stars. How far away was it? Around 20,000 light years? The light that was hitting the back of his eye had left that place 20,000 years ago. Wow . . .

Tommy's gaze moved out toward the waves. Something caught his eye. A whiteness in the dark. A spectral glow rising from the sand. Kind of luminescent. He walked over. Getting nearer. What? Aw, no . . . Spreading across the beach were white lines. Lines of birds.

The birds were clearly dead. So many birds. All precisely arrayed. Their feathers flicked up by the wind. Seagulls . . . Kittiwakes . . . *What?!* . . . Tommy moved among the birds. Their wings were contorted, their heads cocked unnaturally, beaks wonky and agape. On several of the birds a small

circle of darkness stood out against the whites and greys. Red? *Blood!* So many birds. How many birds? What the fuck . . . Tommy looked over his shoulder. He hushed his breath, listening for people, for danger. Nothing. Just the waves and the wind.

The birds had been set out to a particular design. But the perspective was flat, indiscernible. Tommy climbed up onto some adjacent rocks. It was tricky. The rocks jutted up into sharp edges. Dragons bent sinister . . . As Tommy ascended the rocks the white lines became clear. The birds were arranged into four big letters.

**D E A D**

Tommy's mental processes fizzed and bucked. The world seemed recast. Familiar local colour was bleached into Darwinian black-and-white. What? How? Why? He stumbled backward. He involuntarily patted his head. He then noticed something else by the birds. He climbed down from the rocks and moved slowly, carefully toward it . . . It was just a discarded aluminium drinks can. Old, battered. Tommy recognised the brand. Monster Energy. He was familiar with their produce.

**MONSTER REHAB**

**MONSTER RIPPER**

**MONSTER ULTRA**

**MONSTER ASSAULT**

## First Instalment

Tommy felt stunned. He idly cradled the can in his hand. On the front sat the brand's logo – a big stylised, primeval letter M, as if it had been gouged into flesh by the talons of some immense beast. The Hound Of The Baskervilles? The Beast Of Bodmin? Some other night-black succubus? Any of which might be behind Tommy right now . . .

Without thinking, Tommy placed the empty aluminium metalwork in his coat pocket – ready to put it in the recycling when he got home. He'd read that two kilograms of bauxite were needed for every such can – two kilograms of ore dragged screaming from the substrata.

Tommy looked around. He began to walk inland, away from the sea. He wanted to get away from the dead birds. He walked on, but continually turning his head to look back. Idiot reverie fizzed through his mind. He thought about the Shipping Forecast . . . About sea area FitzRoy . . . The new name for the age-old sea area Finisterre. Why, oh why, Tommy wondered. Why, for fuck's sake, had they got rid of Finisterre? Did they not realise what they were doing? Enacting *the end of the End Of The Earth* . . .

As he walked, Tommy stopped regularly, to catch his breath. He peered around, listening, listening. Those birds! Who could have done that? But was it entirely surprising? Tommy knew kittiwakes had been getting it in the neck for decades, centuries. Their feathers were beloved of 19th-century milliners. Once some 9,000 birds were killed in two weeks, out on Lundy, whose island lights now shone out to sea. All those thousands dead, in a place where nowadays less than 30 people live.

## Dark Lustre

Emerging back up at the clifftop, Tommy began to walk quickly. As he got into his stride, through a patch of gorse and close-cropped turf, he heard a noise to his rear. Boom boom. He walked on a few paces. He heard the sound again, this time to his right. A neat, round-sounding one-two. Boom Boom. He walked on. The noise again, now to his left. Boom boom. Five steps. Boom boom. This time ahead of him. He stopped, scared, puzzled. Three steps. Boom boom. Should he start running? 'Hello.' No reply. Five steps. Boom boom.

He was about to break into a run when he noticed something scarpering up a trail into the gorse. A rabbit. Just rabbits . . . The animals had been thumping out alarms, warning their fellow creatures of Tommy's advance through the night.

An image flashed unbidden across the darkroom of Tommy's mind. A silent room. Tea being poured. Calm. Sociability. Then . . . Bang! A song thrush smashing into the window.

Blood drained from Tommy's face. Panic seized him. But also a strange clarity. The hissing of the great background came full into the foreground. The wind shushed around, whispering wild intimacies into his ear. The sea boiled away, pulling back and forth on the shore.

Tommy stood stiffly upright. His head moved side to side in a metronomic sweep – a lighthouse beam without a light. All was dark and confusion. Woooof! This psychic punch came with both a strange exhilaration and a sense of shame at this exhilaration. What the fuck . . . Nice one God . . . Yeah, well done God . . . Young Ollie dead. Why? Why?

## First Instalment

He took out a little torch and shone it on the can from the beach. His mind was still running loose, adrift. He began to read over the can's metalwork. At the top were three words in big capital letters. And then some other stuff.

### **TAURINE GINSENG L-CARNITINE**

**ENHANCE YOUR CALL OF DUTY ADVANCED WARFARE  
IN-GAME EXPERIENCE WITH 2XP PROMOTIONAL RING-PULLS**

Entrants will need internet access, a Call Of Duty © account, an Xbox Live Gold, PlayStation Plus or PlayStation network account and a compatible copy of Call Of Duty ©: Advanced Warfare (PEG 18) and game console.

What, wondered Tommy, was L-Carnitine?

He read down the ingredients. Sucrose . . . caffeine . . . guarana-seed extract . . . '2.5 micrograms of vitamin B12'. Only 2.5 billionths of a kilo, but a whole 100% of 'DAILY REFERENCE INTAKE'. Who could argue?

Tommy emerged at a carpark. He walked swiftly across the empty space – empty apart from one vehicle. As Tommy passed it, he couldn't help but stop to look. It was a bubble car. Typically, such vehicles seemed like the cutest mode of transport. Tiny three-wheeled teardrops. Headlamps like the eyes of some small furry animal. But, as Tommy knew, this one was different. He'd seen it before.

The bubble car was a 1950s model, built by a corporation better known for other machines. Messerschmitt. The entirety of the bubble car's bodywork had been given a customised upholstery. From nose to tail it was covered in matt black leather. The Black Leather Bubble Car. The canopy over the driver's seat was a striking construction. It was transparent in its entirety, made from some kind of plastic. Perspex maybe. The vehicle sat empty, neatly positioned in its parking

## Dark Lustre

space. Tommy was familiar with the car's owner. This man had arrived in the vicinity maybe a year ago. He'd taken on extended occupancy at a local house, a Grade II-listed modernist building of some architectural importance.

The bubble car and its owner had very much been noticed in the area – an odd, supercilious man, habitually dressed in black. He occasionally arrived in town for supplies, carrying with him a distant air, a sense of disdain. As rock reporter Dickie B had it, ‘. . . his horrible, silly-billy vampiric hauteur . . .’ Tommy looked around. No sign of life. But the sight of this vehicle up here was not a reassuring thing for Tommy. The Black Leather Bubble Car. Tommy hurried on even quicker, getting away.

Ω Ω Ω Ω Ω Ω

# CHAPTER TWO

Pamela Budeaux / Marsden Bay / Laterite Compound



## I

The device had been kept powered. Now it had been activated. A portion of PETN detonated – pentaerythritol tetranitrate; structurally very similar to nitroglycerin. The initial blast wave travelled at around 5,000 metres per second. This was markedly faster than the speed of sound – 1,234 km/h in dry air at 20°C, or roughly 350 metres per second. There’s a pub-quiz question about such velocities. What was the first man-made thing to exceed the speed of sound? It was the tip of a whip. The explosion was louder than a whip. If anyone was listening. If anyone wasn’t listening. Wood, metal, plastic

and a rapidly disintegrating package of snack-food flew through the night.

**FRIDGE RAIDERS  
SMOKIN' BBQ  
CHICKEN BITES**

The effects of the explosion continued. A 5 x 70mm double-sunk screw ripped through a blackbird's nest. The nest hadn't been used since the previous July. A chunk of medium-density fibreboard shattered against the trunk of an old oak tree. The widening arc of heat, metal and other solid material would fragment muscle and bone at a radius of between 10 and 15 metres. Was there any muscle and bone in the vicinity? In the instant, in the darkness, it was hard to tell. The sound wave whomped back from the conifers on an adjacent incline. There was a mass flapping of wings. A cacophony of clacking jackdaws. Then the hoo-hoo of a tawny owl, solemn over the remote and unattended storage facility. But soon all was quiet, all was black.

Tommy heard about the explosion the next day. The news arrived on Radio Devon, after an item on the Bikers Make A Difference charity fund-raising weekend in Paignton. The Friday-night headliner at the biker bash had been The Lorraine Crosby Band. Lorraine was better known as Mrs Loud – as the radio announcer had explained – the female vocalist on Meat Loaf's 1993 hit single I'd Do Anything For Love (But I Won't Do That). The all-female AC/DC tribute band AC/DShe had also played.

The following news spot included a report on an explosion at Devon-Wessex Self Storage, a lock-up facility about 20

## First Instalment

miles from Tommy's house. Police said no one had been hurt. The report revealed that the lock-up had held some unusual contents: 'An Aladdin's cave of historical artefacts – including several items that were thought to be German in origin, and of Second World War vintage.' There was mention of an old machine gun, some breathing apparatus, a couple of ancient hand grenades and a ship's compass. The police were appealing for anyone with information to come forward.

The news was followed by a phone-in feature on dentists.

'I had a bridge done,' related a caller from the village of Nomansland, close to Tiverton. The man relayed his experience in an affectless monotone, a dispassionate West Country burr, like a gas meter ticking over. 'I wasn't told about the price . . . Not until *after* they were finished . . .'

'You sit in that chair,' observed a caller from Bovey Tracey, 'and whatever they say, you just do it, don't you? It's the robot manners that get me. I will never go back, not never . . . Some of the things I've heard about dentists, well, a vet wouldn't do it to a horse . . .'

Thereafter the caller digressed. 'Well, I got artichokes stuck in my teeth after I last saw a dentist. So, fat lot of good he did. Have you ever had artichokes? Like potatoes, but a bit more salty . . .'

'Teeth can be tricky things,' rejoined the radio host.

Tommy's thoughts, meanwhile, were occupied by the news of the explosion. Related notions clicked through his mind. Brisance – that was the word. About 10 years previously, while serving in the Royal Navy, Tommy had taken a course on ordnance and explosives. Tommy had been serving as a petty officer on HMS Ocean, an amphibious assault vessel. His role involved supply and logistics. It had been thought

## Dark Lustre

a knowledge of explosives might be useful. At the time, Ocean had just figured in Operation Cunningham – getting air passengers back from continental Europe after they'd been stranded following the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull. Ash had filled the skies, rendering flightpaths perilous across Europe.

The explosives course had taken place over two weeks while the ship was docked at Devonport. The instructor had gone into a lot of detail, some of which had seemed a bit extraneous to Tommy. Not that he minded. He'd enjoyed hearing about an explosive's brisance – from the French verb *briser*, to shatter. This brisance related, if Tommy remembered correctly, to a high explosive's effectiveness, the way it would fragment and wreak destruction. What else had he learned? There was the Czech man who'd worked on the invention of Semtex. Bratan? Boris? As Tommy recalled it, the man had been suffering from depression. He'd committed suicide by strapping Semtex to his body and blowing himself up in a Czech spa town. A few other people had been hurt, but no one fatally – apart from the Semtex man.

Tommy's mind moved through the gears, weighing up the scene. A bomb exploding just up the road . . . A German machine gun and Lol's Nazi gold . . . Ollie dead at Morte Point . . . Dead seagulls . . . Dead seagulls spelling 'DEAD' . . . Wow, he thought.

Tommy left his house. He felt himself driven to investigate – trying to secure context and perspective, to impose some kind of order on everything that had happened. In the event, this just stirred and agitated things further. He walked the streets. He came home. He lost himself in the limitless

## First Instalment

expanses of the World Wide Web, travelling ever further from daylight.

There were multiple accounts of actual and potential Nazi gold. Hidden in mine shafts and sunk deep in lakes . . . Buried under a forester's cottage and secreted inside the Vatican . . . 'Nazi gold train found in Poland' ran one web link – leading Tommy to an endless stream of fact and counter-fact on a website called Axis History Forum. It all seethed with intrigue and, variously, indications of fantasy and delusion.

Tommy's pal Lol had filled him in on any new info he'd gleaned in the pub or 'on the line'. The latter was Lol's rendering of the universal internet argot 'online'. Tommy enjoyed Lol's vibrant reimagining of web-world. A couple of years ago, Tommy had heard Lol in the pub talking to two young men. The conversation had turned to the best deals on kitchen-tiling supplies. Lol evidently had some useful information on this front and seemed happy to pass it on: 'Just give me your email number and I'll . . . I'll download you a message . . .' Tommy was a great fan of Lol's own-brand Wurzel-web – a communication system no doubt supported by an array of gleaming, gargantuan server sheds, sat there radiating heat and electromagnetism just outside Weston-super-Mare.

The other day Lol had called Tommy on his mobile. Excitement was manifest – at one end of the line. Lol talked enthusiastically about possible proof that Hitler had survived the war, having been secretly rushed aboard a submarine and transported to Argentina. Lol detailed the fugitive dictator's new life. No moustache. His fringe slowly going grey. Hiding from the sun inside a remote hacienda-styled hotel: 'It may

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have happened! The chambermaid, the driver – they both saw the old bastard! Only thing, he weren't no vegetarian over there – seems he was tucking into the best steak, right off the pampas! Hanging out with the gauchos no doubt!' Lol had gone on. Did Tommy know about Rudolf Hess's predilection for cross-dressing?

After the phone call, Tommy had gone round to Lol's flat – to let his friend get all his in-depth research off his chest and also to ascertain, in person, if Lol had heard anything new about Ollie's death on the cliffs. Tommy thought it best not to mention the dead kittiwakes. As became clear, Lol hadn't any new info on Ollie. Rather, he offered generalised support for Tommy's investigations: 'I do really reckon you are the man for this one, Tommy . . . Just keep looking, mate. Just keep going! Exactly!'

Tommy noticed a new feature within Lol's cramped domicile. A glistening black suit of armour. At least, something thereof. Lol explained that it was a new partwork he'd started on – a 1:2 scale model of some 16th-century samurai armour. Tommy later looked up the samurai partwork online. It was based on a metallic exoskeleton worn by a Japanese warrior called Date Masamune, born in 1567. The partwork came in 55 weekly parts. Total cost, around £300.

Tommy also called in on Ollie's widow – to see if he could maybe ask if Ollie had ever shown any interest in wild notions of hidden gold. But when Julie answered the door – a gentle mess of tears and disbelief – Tommy had removed Nazi loot from the agenda. Rather, he attempted to help a little with a circular spiel of commiseration and tribute. 'I'll never forget,'

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he'd found himself saying, 'that time Ollie helped me find those pied flycatchers . . .'

Tommy had reported the dead kittiwakes to the police. No suspect had been found. But, later, a policeman who Tommy was friendly with gave him some extra background. The policeman had looked into police records. Something very similar had happened 17 years previously – up on the northeast coast, near Newcastle, at Marsden Bay. This stretch of cliff and beach was best known for its seabirds and for some eccentric ideas on home-building. In the 18th century a man called Jack the Blaster had excavated a cave-home in the cliffs, opposite the seabird colony at Marsden Rock. Using explosives from a local quarry he'd created a rent-free grotto, accessed by zig-zagging steps, winding down from the cliff top. Later, in the 19th century, a Scotsman lived in the cave, developing the space into a 15-room complex – supposedly by means of money won at the races. This subterranean realm eventually became an extensive cave-pub, which endures to this day – The Marsden Grotto. Marsden Rock had also featured on the sleeve of a single from the alt-pop group Franz Ferdinand.

In South Tyneside there were 73 dead kittiwakes, in North Devon 57. In both cases the birds had been shot with an air rifle. They would have been relatively easy targets, given their habit of nesting on cliff ledges. Even so, killing so many gulls would have taken time and relentlessness. Aside from numbers, the two kittiwake slayings had been remarkably similar. There had been, however, a little regional difference. On Tyneside, a single pigeon had also been killed and placed at the end of the lines of kittiwakes, forming a full stop.

## II

There are two words in the current English language ending in ‘gry’. Angry and hungry. Pamela Budeaux was both. She’d spent the morning buffing a box of bakelite doorknobs – not a euphemism.

Pamela was working at her pal Ruth’s antiques start-up. The utmost in up-cycled china. Ruth’s business mainly meant looking around for things from *then* that people would buy *now*. Vintage clothing. Old maps and posters. Art deco glassware. Sometimes records. Ruth had got excited when she heard about how a Hollywood gynaecologist had bought a Celine Dion cassette for £700. It had been found in an Oxfam shop in Bristol.

Most of all, there was the eternal search for a hidden cache of King Edward VIII/Mrs Simpson punch bowls.

The story was that, prior to King Edward’s abdication in 1936, a Leicestershire silverware merchant had an inside tip that the UK government would sanction Wallis Simpson entering a morganatic marriage with the King. This ancient term generally meant a marriage between a man of regal status and a woman of less privileged standing. In the view of the British aristocracy, Edward’s Pennsylvanian paramour very much fulfilled the latter. A morganatic marriage would have prevented titles and other hereditary benefits being passed to Wallis – and to any children – but it would have allowed Edward to remain king.

Hoping to get ahead of competitors and also to greatly

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reduce manufacturing costs, the Leicester silverware magnate had had several thousand King Edward/Mrs Simpson punchbowls made up in Lahore. Despite all the paperwork and the intricacies of maritime transit, the punchbowls would be ready in good time for the royal wedding.

When Edward was forced to abdicate, the punchbowls had been melted down. But a few were said to have survived – later becoming a grail for traders in esoteric 1930s collectibles. The bowls were said to be decorated with a head-and-shoulders image of the King and his consort – the likenesses executed to a not particularly high standard. The image was surrounded by the King's titles and foreign honours. His Majesty The King. Knight Grand Cross Of The Order Of The Bath. Knight Of The Order Of The Elephant (the latter from Denmark). Grand Cross Of The Order Of The Condor Of The Andes (this one from the people of Bolivia).

Today, Pamela was occupied with less rarified areas, finishing off the renovation of the bakelite doorknobs. It had taken her two days – equating to an hourly rate of around one third of the UK minimum wage. Pamela herself was of non-regal origin. Her background was a kind of colourful Cornish poverty. Just a few decades previously, polishing domestic furnishings or similar might have been her lot. The factory conveyor moving on. And on. To the end of her days.

Pamela saw the doorknobs and other antique accoutrements as a bit eco bobo, as the French had it. A kind of bourgeois-bohemian displacement activity. But she liked her friend Ruth. She also liked recycling, and the bakelite had a certain beauty. But the best thing about this work was that it let her think – planning and plotting for expression in the

rock medium. Pamela's band – The Countess Marie-José de la Barre d'Erquelines Hextet – had something to say. Lately they'd been saying it. Even so, right now Pamela was angry.

Earlier in the morning, a friend had phoned Pamela. During the conversation the friend had touched on the latest activity from Gary Horncastle – or Gideon Horncastle as he was known to his parents. Pamela and her friend had first encountered Gary/Gideon when they were all taking a BA in History at the University of Edinburgh. During his first year, Horncastle had suggested he might be referred to as 'Horny'. More generally, people knew him as That Twat. During the degree course, Gary/Gideon, had become known for his entrepreneurial bent, making an impact in the realms of social media. Her friend had asked Pamela if she'd heard about Gary's latest venture. Pamela had and now she'd been reminded. Gary was having some commercial success under the guise of The Imperial Sir Lord Versace Bants-Banga – expert in the fluid modernist lingua franca of 'banter'.

The self-proclaimed Bants-Banga's primary project was Badass Banter Babes. As it read at the top of the website: 'M8s! Come chat with these high-minded hotties. Body of a babe, brain of a banterin' bloke!!' Pamela didn't like to think about the mechanics of this enterprise. Young men and teenage boys saw, on-screen, a photo of a comely young woman, plus a premium-rate telephone number. Apparently, ringing a phone number was part of the frisson. It was seen as thrillingly 'old school'.

Dialling the number connected the boys with a friendly and sonorous female voice – a voice that manifested interest in several key topics. Marijuana. Conspiracy theories. The Lam-

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borghini Sesto Elemento. And the Premier League footballer who'd staged a spectacular indoor firework display at his Cheshire mansion, blowing a toilet bowl from its pedestal and causing three fire engines to attend his estate at around 3am on a Sunday morning. 'Urghhh,' Pamela groaned to herself. 'I am Ozy-bant-ias . . . King of Kings . . . Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair . . .'

Several were the ways in which Gary/Gideon and his electronic comfort women saddened and maddened Pamela. She vaguely knew some of the women who were taking the phone calls – not the lustrously-coiffed figureheads pictured on the website, rather a mix of drama students and PhD researchers. These women both needed the cash and had the guile to pose as Bluetooth enchantresses – coo-ing envoys in the service of the Maserati Quattroporte and Premier League Goal-den Goofs. This phone-line commerce between man and woman seemed so melancholy to Pamela – the tiniest tragedy. Then there was the fuck-nut comedy titularity of Gary's trade name – The Imperial Sir Lord Versace Bants-Banga.

In the real world, Gary had real connection with Britain's honours system – and with the peculiar strands of etiquette that went with it. He was probably aware of the importance of not wearing brown shoes east of Ascot. And of not reversing in the waltz. Or being seen carrying parcels in public. Horncastle's father was a hereditary baronet, complete with proofs of succession.

The honorific flavour of the name Sir Lord Versace Bants-Banga mirrored a similar tendency with calypso singers and rap artists. Sir Lord Comic and Lady Nokia. Lord King Domino and Queen Latifah, First Lady of Hip-Hop. But these

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were people grabbing a kind of entitlement in a world where they had none. Now an actual member of the aristocracy was glomming on their parade – a virtual black-face, a multi-media minstrel show. Pamela felt a cliff-face bathos. Endless science, electricity and rare-earth metals . . . All in the service of such brain-broken commerce.

There was one sure way for Pamela to neutralise her angst. She pulled a pair of in-ear headphones from her bag and inserted them into her mobile. She clicked on a podcast she'd downloaded – a radio discussion presented by the broadcaster Melvyn Bragg, the Cumbrian pub landlord's son who'd earned the right to be also known as Baron Bragg of Wigton.

The audio kicked in. Melvyn led a group of academics in a discussion of the history and science of the ice ages. Pamela listened intently to this meditation on heavy isotopes and glacial moraine. Suddenly the mind was free – free of psychic chaff, free of the constant flicker.

## III

After the explosion on the industrial estate, Tommy asked his friend in the local police force for perspective. The cops, it seemed, remained puzzled.

Tommy's policeman pal told him about the skilfully-assembled homemade bomb that had been attached to the door at the storage unit. But the police had no idea as to how and why it had been triggered. There was no indication of anyone

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in the vicinity at the time. There was no evidence of anyone injured by the blast.

Tommy attempted to make sense of his mental maelstrom. The internet absorbed much time and voltage. In the newspaper he read a striking item. On YouTube the world now watched one billion hours of video footage a day. Tommy wasn't sure if he'd ever have the 100,000-years-a-day viewing time needed to equal this film intake. But he was sure much of this web footage would be about Hitler and his associates.

Tommy was astonished by the limitless extent of Third Reich audio-visual – as often as not narrated by the actor Robert Powell, star of productions including BBC One's *Holby City* and the 1978 film of *The Thirty Nine Steps*. Across the internet, Nazi footage reeled on forever. *Hitler In Colour*. *Hitler's Megaships*. *Grey Wolf: Hitler's Escape To Argentina*. *Nazi Quest For The Holy Grail*. *Uncle Hitler*. *The Secret Nazi UFO Base Beneath Antarctica*. *Hidden Führer: Debating The Enigma Of Hitler's Sexuality*. On it went, on and on. Tommy did an internet search for 'Nazi documentary'. This produced over two million results. He then did a search for 'German football documentary'. It produced 51,000 results.

The book world was also awash with Nazi literature. Tommy found himself surveying this gigantic bibliography. There were, of course, numerous serious academic works. At the town library, Tommy ordered an amazing book on Hitler, by the German academic and journalist Volker Ullrich. The book detailed life at the Berghof, Hitler's mountain retreat in the Bavarian Alps. In 1937, as Hitler planned territorial acquisition to the east and as Nazi Germany's Condor Legion bombed Guernica, daily existence went on at the Berghof.

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Hitler's private cinema at the Berghof was well stocked – including 18 Mickey Mouse cartoons given as a present by Goebbels. An artist called Sofie Stork decorated lampshades and plates with pretty mountain scenes. Stork was known as Storchklein – Little Stork – and became friends with Eva Braun, Hitler's companion and future wife. Hitler gave Stork money, to help her father when his Munich fishing-tackle business faced financial difficulty. But it wasn't all Mickey Mouse and high-street altruism in Bavaria. Braun's relationship with Hitler was hidden from the public. He referred to her with the formal 'Sie'. Within Braun's earshot, Hitler relayed tips on male-female relations: 'Very intelligent people should make sure they get a primitive, stupid woman.' The Duke and Duchess of Windsor came to visit – as the former Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson were then known. The Windsors complained they'd had to travel so far for their audience with Hitler. The Duke encouraged the Führer to press on with his plans for eastward expansion.

Tommy was amazed at the extent of pseudo-scholarly World War II arcana – book titles such as *Collectible Spoons Of The Third Reich* and *The Encyclopedia Of Third Reich Tableware*. The latter was a meticulous survey of dinner-table paraphernalia.

H. Goering, *Reichswerke Gravy Boat*, p.32.

Martin Borman, *napkin ring*, p.86.

Even in the 21st century, the Nazi realm powered many disparate areas of commerce. Film. Television. Music. Tourism. Computer games. On the one hand there was Shoah, Claude Lanzmann's sombre nine-hour 1985 documentary

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film – audio-visual testimony that methodically, meticulously, recorded the ways and means of the Holocaust. On the other hand there was the Jimmy Page Stormtrooper figure, created by KnuckleBonz Inc., of North Carolina. The Page Stormtrooper was a limited-edition, nine-inch figurine of the Led Zeppelin guitarist, playing his twin-neck Gibson. He was dressed as he appeared on stage in Chicago in 1977, wearing black jodhpurs and black SS cap, complete with insignia.

Looking for theories on Nazi gold in Devon, Tommy posted enquiries on internet forums. One web correspondent wrote about how a U-boat was seen surfacing off the Devon coast at dawn on 30 April 1945, the day on which Hitler shot himself dead. Someone else talked about broken wooden crates found washed up in Devon in 1946, stamped Deutsche Reichsbank.

Tommy also joined social-media groups dedicated to the history of Nazi gold. Correspondence here didn't produce anything of substance. But he did discover there was at least one rock group with the band name of . . . Nazi Gold. The group featured, on drums, Thor Harris, who also played with the US art-rockers Swans. But any internet conclusions on alien gold in Devon remained in the world of mind-spangled speculation. Here was a place full with a weird kind of exhilaration – something based on firm belief in the unbelievable.

Then, from nowhere, Tommy received an email. The mail came with the German email suffix @gmx.de.

Herr Quantox

Please forgive this email when you do not know me.

But I have seen with interest that you are seeking information on

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a certain history of German gold where you live in England.  
I believe I have very useful information on this area. Please do  
contact me at the earliest time that is good for you. I can help  
you in all ways possible.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

Sepp Löwe

München

Tommy was puzzled as to how the sender had obtained his email address. Nonetheless, he replied to this Herr Löwe. Tommy's correspondent suggested he should visit Munich immediately. There was important and delicate information to be imparted – as Herr Löwe had put it, surely best done in person?

There was more email correspondence with this Sepp Löwe. At first Tommy was perplexed by the unbidden entreaties. But the man was courteous. He continually suggested that he knew about gold in Devon. His tone was plausible. His prose and the modest frequency of the mails seemed to say he was removed from the well-populated mass of Nazi nutter-dom.

Tommy began to feel he should make the journey to Munich. He had the time and he could afford it, just about. He'd never been to Bavaria. The thing that clinched it was when he realised he could time a visit to coincide with live dates from group he'd become fond of. Dickie B had put Tommy onto Cobra Killer, a Berlin duo who'd acquired a cult following with their live art-rock fusillades and releases such as the 2002 single Heavy Rotation. Tommy had watched some videos online. Amazing footage. The videos looked, Tommy had found himself thinking, like a controlled explo-

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sion in a window display at that posh knickers shop – Agent Provocateur.

After a little more deliberation, Tommy booked a train from London to Munich. He told Lol about his planned trip. Lol interjected earnestly: ‘Could be a typical German trap!’ Lol had a certain kind of traditional take on history: ‘Watch out, Tommy!’ But he was also clearly excited to hear about his friend’s expedition. Tommy emailed Herr Löwe, passing on the date and times for the service he’d be taking.

Tommy took his seat on the 06:47 Eurostar service from London. Two changes for Munich – Bruxelles-Midi and Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof. Out eased the train, past the flat brown expanse of the Thames estuary. Light flickered on the water in the early morning. In the distance Tommy could see the gigantic road crossing at Dartford – the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge. The bridge’s supportive cabling sparkled in the Kentish sky. Transpontine travel was free for motorcycles, or six pounds for multi-axle vehicles – £5.19 with a pre-paid account.

Tommy settled back into his seat, half asleep. Gentle lucence seeped through the glass. The grey, curving, plastic interior suggested something else – maybe a marine creature’s vast digestive tract. Runnels and cavities led away like nerves and blood vessels. Then the hum and click of movement shifted the mind back to the man-made and mechanical. Tommy thought of the Franco-Swiss modernist Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris – better known as the architect Le Corbusier, and forever linked in Tommy’s mind with his maxim about a house being a machine for living in. You don’t say, Tommy smiled to himself. Right enough Le Corb. And a train was a machine for travelling in . . .

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The train emerged from the Channel Tunnel, through the barbed-wired, refugee-deterrent embankments around Calais, then on into Belgium. The flatlands of Flanders had a restful, sombre quality. The view toward the horizon was occasionally interrupted by electric pylons and a series of church spires. Half-conscious, Tommy gazed out at the churches – impressive achievements in the pre-electrical era. And/or stone syringes injecting the sky with piety. The ecclesiastical architecture led Tommy’s mind elsewhere. He thought about the album *Space Hymns*, by the psychedelic-rock musician Ramases, released in 1971 on the Vertigo label.

Ramases’ *Space Hymns* was a striking thing. The original vinyl came in a 12-inch wrap – on which was depicted a powerful sci-fi rocket blasting upward. But the album artwork unfolded into something bigger – a three-foot-by-two-foot poster. The image, in its entirety, was remarkable, created by the great prog-rock sleeve artist Roger Dean. When the poster was laid out, the rocket was revealed to be a church spire – blasting free from the remainder of an immense, gothic house-of-worship. The church was enveloped in flaming propellant.

Tommy was aware that, before assuming the alter ego of an Egyptian pharaoh, Rameses had been known as Kimberley Barrington Frost – a former physical-training instructor in the British Army. Barrington Frost was born in Sheffield, but information was vague on the date. Some time between 1935 and 1940. In 1960, he’d become one half of a particular power couple, marrying a woman called Dorothy Laflin, the 1957 Felixstowe carnival queen. Barrington Frost was sometimes heard to rejoice that Felixstowe girls were the

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ones for him. He would, invariably, go on to explain how he could never contemplate a woman from even 40 miles up the coast – wary of what he called the ‘Lowestoft common denominator’. Barrington Frost’s bride was renamed Selket, after an ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility. Ramases and Selket decorated their house in a Roman style, apart the mausoleum they erected in the garden, which was finished to a Sumerian design.

The Space Hymns album had been recorded in Stockport with musical backing from Kevin Godley, Eric Stewart, Graham Gouldman and Lol Creme, who would soon form the band 10cc. The track titles were full of power and portent – including Dying Swan Year 2000 and Jesus Come Back. Anything seemed possible. But Space Hymns made little impact. Phonogram released a second Ramases album in 1975, titled Glass Top Coffin. Such a striking title, Tommy had always thought. But a third album – to be titled Sky Lark – was never released. Ramases committed suicide in 1976 and Selket’s second husband is said to have burned the Sky Lark tapes.

The train rushed onward, a tube of luminescence shooting through the world outside.

## IV

Pamela packed away the bakelite doorknobs she’d been renovating. She was now feeling a bit tired, but she had two things to help her transcend quotidian stasis. She had a box of 25 12-inch singles and she had a pasty. Today’s choice of

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crimped savoury came from the Warrens bakery of St Just, a market town due west of Penzance.

St Just sat on the outstretched toe of the Cornish peninsula, reaching out forever, out into the wild Atlantic. There was quite a bit of text on the branded and grease-stained paper bag the pasty came in. ‘The Oldest Cornish Pasty Maker in the World,’ it read at the top. Pamela was Cornish-born and now resident in North Devon. She didn’t take sides in the immortal dispute over the pasty’s county of origin. Pamela was proud of her own genesis amid the brutal Celtic fringes, but she also loved verdant Devon. She was an equal-opportunities pasty person.

As Pamela read on, the Warrens Bakery inception myth seemed right up her street. ‘The story of Warrens began back in 1860 . . . At its heart lies a romance . . . Miss Harvey, daughter of the local St Just baker, met Master Warren, the farmer’s son . . . While the Warren farm provided the ingredients fresh from the fields, the Harveys made the pastry and baked the pasties . . .’ A Warrens Chunky Vegetarian Pasty could cost a little more than similar items from the other pasty chains. In Pamela’s opinion, it was money well spent. She remembered a saying from her childhood: ‘Don’t be nar-sty. Have a par-sty.’

With her sustenance and her mug of tea, Pamela was able to calmly consider the big brown cardboard container on the table top. Pamela lifted the box. It had a pleasing weight. When she opened the lid and drew out a sample of the contents, the box began to take on TARDIS-like potencies. As wide as time, as deep as the ocean . . . She pulled out a substantial cardboard square, printed on rough reverse-board

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stock. Inside this quadrilateral was a record – the first record from The Countess Marie-José de la Barre d’Erquelinnes Hextet.

Pamela pulled the vinyl from the card sleeve and the plain white inner. The interior lighting glinted from the treacly black vinyl, and from the shiny silver label. This lustrous metallic centre was a ‘spot-colour’ special. Pamela had mulled over the particular Pantone selection for days – her eventual selection confirmed, to some extent, by her two bandmates. Pamela was happy with the result – a semi-matt silver, like brushed aluminium gently glowing in the 5am quiet of a summer morning. Excellent! Just like it was always meant to look . . . Against the silver, alternately in red and blue, were four track titles:

Laterite Compound  
Definitive Stamp / Marianne 48  
Like Marie Curie Said  
Red Sleeping Beauty

The last track was a cover version – an interpretation of a 1986 A-side from the little-known Essex Euro-Marxist indie-rock quartet McCarthy. The other three tracks were original compositions, words and music by The Countess Marie-José de la Barre d’Erquelinnes Hextet. As the press release for the Hextet Vier EP had it:

- **Leading Corno-Devonian all-female vocal trio.**
- **Currently endemic to UK regions west of the Bristol Channel.**
- **Sporadic but increasingly numerous seasonal sightings across the entire Western Palearctic.**
- **Warning! Multi-media! Featuring both words and music.**

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Pamela put the vinyl back in the cardboard and looked at the sleeve. She had to admit, it looked good – kicking crampons deep and sharp into the cerebral cortex. At the top of the sleeve sat the band's name. Below this text was a series of three heads in silhouette, across the width of the sleeve, all looking to the right. First, a stylised female head, in profile. Fiercely elegant features sat beneath hair pulled back, on top of which was perched an unusual hat. The head and headgear were pretty recognisable – Marianne, symbol of the French Republic. A face and form that has appeared on French stamps and one-cent Euro coins. The same woman who strides forth breast-bared on Delacroix's 1830 oil-on-canvas *Liberty Leading The People* – and who had recently been personified by the Haute-Normandie actress Laetitia Casta, star of *Asterix & Obelix Take On Caesar*.

Next to the sleeve's traditional image of Marianne was a second profile. It was similar to the first but now with the addition of a blindfold across Marianne's eyes. Then there was a third head. It seemed to be the same profile as in the first two images but, in this case, wearing a short veil. A stylised version of female Islamic headwear . . . At the right-hand edge of the veil was a gap, a narrow portal like the slit window of a concrete pillbox. Inside this slit you could make out the bridge of a nose and the tips of long, curving eyelashes.

Looking at the sleeve made Pamela feel a little faint. Moths fluttering in her gut. Adrenaline. Blood withdrawn from her stomach as her body made ready for fight or flight . . . What were those knickers that Agent Provocateur made? With a 'cheeky, scalloped peephole' running longitudinally along the

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length of the crotch. An ouvert? That was it. Truly, if this was France, then we'd see everything . . .

Pamela was fully aware of the disruptive power inherent in the Hextet sleeve imagery. After all, her nation's Prime Minister – a man so egregious Pamela knew him only as the Right Hon. Wankfist – had written that women in burka headdresses resemble letterboxes. But the Hextet were no Wankfist. In this instance, they had the latitude, they had the room for manoeuvre. If you looked at the third woman on the sleeve, her eye-slit did resemble a pillbox. But, here, this was a position of strength. That was the intent anyway.

A solitary magpie flew past the window. Pamela instinctively saluted and quietly said out loud, three times, 'Hello Mr Magpie, Hello Mr Magpie, Hello Mr Magpie . . .' Her eyes flicked back to the Hextet 12-inch singles. So powerful, they seemed. Loaded things . . . Pamela knew very well the sleeves were hostages to fortune, ready to be taken one way. Or another . . .

Marianne had been attached to many causes over the years. She'd become a symbol of French resistance to the Nazi occupation. But, more recently, she'd also been co-opted by the right wing. In 2013, thousands of people had taken to the streets of Paris protesting against same-sex marriage. A trio of women were prominent amid this protest, dressed as multiple Mariannes. Wearing flowing white robes and tricolour sashes, they'd brandished thick, red, leather-bound copies of the Code Napoléon, the French civil code. Pamela had no desire to be lumped in with the reactionary fringes – exactly the opposite. But what the heck. The record would soon be

out there. Another dispatch in *The War Against Intelligence*. But on which side?

Pamela felt secure that if anyone were to dig just a little past the right-wing rendering of Marianne they'd find other, countervailing presences. Amid the coverage of the Paris protest, Pamela had seen another image. Two women had carried a banner. It featured an image of Marianne and some bold sloganeering: 'MARIANNE WAS GAY . . . LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, SEXUALITÉ.'

There were other protesters. The bare-breasted Ukrainian-French provocateurs of the Femen protest group had disrupted the right-Parisian protest. The Femen women had dressed as topless nuns, with black veils and suspender belts. Slogans were scrawled across their naked midriffs: 'IN GAY WE TRUST . . . OCCUPÉ TOI DE TON CUL'. The latter bit seemed to mean something like 'Keep busy with your ass . . .' Taking back control or what?

## V

The Eurostar train was a thing of many marvels. But, for Tommy, it was when he changed trains and boarded a Deutsche Bahn service that the journey reached its sensorial peak. The exterior of the DB Inter City Express was a study in streamlined red and white. This colour scheme seemed to indicate a kind of Red Cross of rail repose – an emergency rest cure for enfeebled nervous systems. For a nature lover such as Tommy, a stroll into the carriage vestibule brought a feeling of

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great joy. Not only was there a recycling facility, but one of tripartite opportunity – separate bins for glass, metal and paper.

Tommy looked at the compact Deutsche Bahn menu for the train buffet – ‘Unser Angebot im Bordbistro.’ Tommy even understood a little of the German here. His insight came care of the debut album from the Düsseldorf Kosmische Musik masters Neu!. The album included a track called Sonderangebot – ‘special offer’. The DB menu folded out to reveal an inviting panoply. ‘Traditionell gut!’ There was text in both German and English.

What would Tommy go for? Perhaps ‘Maultaschen Schwäbische Art mit Speck-Zwiebelschmelze . . . Filled pasta squares Swabian style with bacon & onion sauce’. No, Tommy was pretty much vegetarian. He went for one of the meat-free options – ‘Flammkuchen-Zungen Griechischer Art . . . Tarte flambée Greek-style’.

Tommy also selected an Erdinger Weißbier, brewed in Oberbayern. His recent research into the Nazi nut-o-sphere had made him aware that Oberbayern – Upper Bavaria – held the big glacial lake Chiemsee. In 2001, the Chiemsee-Kessel – the Chiemsee cauldron – had been found in the lake. It was a massive 10kg bowl in 18-carat gold, decorated with Iron Age-style figures. The cauldron was initially thought to be around 2,000 years old. Then scientific analysis showed it had been made much more recently. Documentation was discovered, showing that the cauldron had been fashioned by Otto Gahr, a silversmith and Nazi party member. Gahr was best known for his death’s-head rings – personal jewellery for members of the SS and their partners. The cauldron had come into the possession of the Reichsführer-SS, Heinrich Himmler.

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The cauldron's flying beasts and axe-wielding homunculi were in keeping with Himmler's fascination for ancient esoterica – an inclination that led him to send research groups around the world, from Tibet to the Crimea, looking for proof of the Germanic race's ancient origins. Perhaps the cauldron had found a home at the SS castle at Wewelsburg, in the Rhineland. This castle was Himmler's idea of a latter-day Arthurian stronghold, complete with its Gral Zimmer, a 'grail room'. Himmler designated Wewelsburg the 'Zentrum der neuen Welt' – the 'centre of the new world'. This global epicentre was to be finalised following the final victory, the one that never came. In the 21st century, the Chiemsee lake became the backdrop to a music festival – Chiemsee Reggae Summer. The bill included Shaggy, Lee 'Scratch' Perry and Ruffcats feat. Mellow Mark.

Tommy returned to his seat. He tucked into his tarte flambée and began a meditative examination of the beer's label. Boy, was this wheaten brew tasty. The flavour and fizz seemed magnified by the bright sun beaming in through the windows. As the alcohol entered Tommy's bloodstream, the bottle, the metal top and the label became increasingly full of intrigue and wonder – a rapturous study in cream, gold, red and blue.

Underneath a stylised graphic representation of an ear of wheat there was a powerful alphanumeric array.

PRIVATBRAUEREI SEIT 1886

Tommy was delighted to see that re-use of the bottle was encouraged.

Deposit CH 0,30 sfr – NL Statiegeld €0,10

## First Instalment

Eco-encouragement for the Swiss cantons and for the Netherlands – and hard cash to boot. Flambée-fingered, beer-fisted, Tommy eased back into his journey, ready to continue his en-route research. He had the neat carriage table all to himself. This was the life . . .

Tommy felt the background reading he'd brought with him had to be handled with care in the Deutsche Bahn carriage. The paperback's cover was unashamed in its Nazi-centric garishness. The background colour was a bold signal-box red. Over this lay an embossed gold eagle. In its talons sat a swastika. The book's title blasted out in big black type.

# NAZI GOLD

THE SENSATIONAL STORY OF THE  
WORLD'S GREATEST ROBBERY  
– AND THE GREATEST CRIMINAL COVER UP

*'Reads like the sleazy world described in Graham Greene's *The Third Man*  
with several noughts added to the transactions.'*  
*Daily Express*

Tommy had imagined it best not to flourish the book on German public transport. He'd made a DIY book jacket, in plain brown paper. However, the book's contents were more refined than the cover.

The book had been written by two men. Born in Kingston upon Thames in 1935, Douglas Botting had an impressive CV

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– explorer, author and TV presenter. He'd served as a BBC special correspondent in the USSR and had written over 25 books. He'd also served under Idi Amin in the King's African Rifles. Botting's co-author was Ian Sayer. Born in 1945 in Norwich, Sayer had enjoyed equally varied employment – transport entrepreneur, historian and investigative journalist. In 1969, he was one of the nominees for the London Evening News Personality Of The Year. His rivals for this award included Nelson Mandela and the Formula One motor-racing champion Graham Hill. Between them, Sayer and Botting had produced an array of books surveying the crooked crannies of the Third Reich. Titles included *Hitler's Bastard: Through Hell And Back In Nazi Germany And Stalin's Russia*. This was the story of Eric Pleasants, a man from East Anglia who served in the Waffen-SS and was then captured by Russian forces – after which he was incarcerated within Stalin's Gulag system of hard-labour camps.

Despite their diverse histories, in the early 21st century Botting and Sayer were maybe best known for their book *Nazi Gold*, which goes full-fathom into the facts and legend of Third Reich plunder. Gold appropriated in the late-1930s annexation of Austria and occupation of Czechoslovakia had boosted the reserves of a near-bankrupt German nation. By the time the Third Reich was approaching its catastrophic conclusion in 1945, the Hitler gang had acquired maybe \$1,000 million in Raubgold – stolen gold. This was at 1945 prices. A 21st-century adjustment takes the figure to \$200 billion. As the sun spread warmth through the carriage, Tommy drank his beer and read on.

In April 1945, elements of the US Army had pushed into

## First Instalment

Thuringia, the central German state known as Das Grüne Herz Deutschlands, named after its thick forests. A unit of US troops picked up a couple of female hitchhikers. The women were displaced French citizens, trying to get home – ‘guest workers’ who had been press-ganged from their homeland to work for the German war effort. The women knew this part of Germany and passed on some fascinating information to the US troops.

Subsequently, US army personnel investigated the tunnels of a salt mine. They found 100 tons of gold – something like \$3 billion at today’s prices. There were also vast sums in various currencies, alongside paintings by Rembrandt, Titian and Van Dyck. Among all this was the so-called ‘Nefertiti Bust’, a representation of the wife of the pharaoh Akhenaten. Created over 3,000 years ago, this prodigious work of art was made from quartz, limestone and beeswax; coloured with the blue of copper oxide and the yellow of arsenic sulphide. During the war the Nefertiti Bust was the most valuable work of art in Germany. It still is today, sat in the collection at the Neues Museum in Berlin.

The gold found in the Thuringian salt mine was part of the Reichsbank reserves, evacuated from Berlin. But it was far from all the treasure that had been chaotically rushed around the fragmenting Third Reich. On 14 April 1945 – two weeks before Hitler’s suicide – a convoy of gold-laden trucks left Berlin. The trucks carried over nine tons in gold bars. The gold convoy pulled up outside an army barracks in the Bavarian town of Mittenwald. Mountain troops loaded the gold onto mules and lugged the loot up into the heights, up toward the

peaks of the Steinriegel and the Klausenkopf. The gold was buried in the night.

Tommy exhaled. There was a lot to take in. He looked out the window, then put the book down. He stood up and headed off for a piss.

## VI

The debut release from The Countess Marie-José de la Barre d'Erquelinnes Hextet would be available on 12-inch vinyl. Pamela had thought about making the record a CD. In a way she wanted to make no concession to the vogue-ish quadrant where vinyl lives, but remains unplayed . . . But no-one was playing CDs much these days either and a 12-inch record was so much bigger. All that space for word and image.

She'd thought about a limited edition of 1,792 – to reflect the year in which the Marianne figure had moved into the revolutionary mass-mind. But Pamela wanted the record to sell out as fast as possible, and these were tough times. The Hextet's debut release was going to be a limited edition of a hundred 12-inch singles – selling at £100 a piece. A fair bit of money, but this was a work of art. Everything said it would soon be worth more than the purchase price, maybe a lot more. And, for anyone dwelling in the nebulous swathes of cloud-land, two of the EP's four tracks would be available to buy as digital files – beamed direct, right up into the *Cirroculmus stratiformis*.

## First Instalment

Pamela's thoughts turned to the Hextet's gathering whirlwind. She felt so urgent in her mission that she started thinking about the story of the Cornish tin miner who used to eat his breakfast and midday meal together at 8am – in case he was killed in an accident before lunchtime. Ooooh . . . She suddenly felt a little tired. So much to consider! But she could go on, she would go on . . . Vorwärts immer, rückwärts nimmer! There were plectrums to buy and a splitter van to book.

The Hextet had lined up three shows to mark the release of their debut single. The first was at Tunnels Beaches at Ilfracombe, on the Devon coast. There were two hand-wrought tunnels leading out onto the sand, excavated by Welsh miners in the 1820s. The tunnels branched – left to Gent's Beach, right to Lady's Beach. When the tunnels had first opened the male and female bathing zones were rigidly segregated. The men swam naked, while the women were expected to cover much of their anatomy. The sexes were separated by a rocky outcrop on which a guard was positioned to ward off inter-denominational contact. At the first suggestion of encroachment this sentry would sound an alarm on his bugle. Non-nude mixed bathing was then sanctioned in 1905. But which tunnel would the Hextet occupy on the Ilfracombe shore? They were, of course, going to set up their amps in equal proximity to both zones.

The second Hextet show was to be at Bethnal Green Working Men's Club in East London. The third night would take place at Le Musée De La Chasse Et De La Nature in the heart of Paris. This museum – sat by the Seine, alongside both the ancient Jewish quarter and Le Marais, the medieval quarter – was to be the centrepiece of the mini tour. On the

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face of it, Le Musée De La Chasse was a hunting museum but in actuality it was a blend of nature, art and science set in a pair of striking mansions.

Pamela had spent happy hours in the museum. She'd wandered around the Room Of The Boar and the Salon Of The Dogs, stopping also to take in the Cabinet Of The Wolf. The museum housed a mix of guns and contemporary, avant-garde artwork. There were numerous antique bird lures – strange, mad-scientist-style arrangements of brass, glass and wood, engineered to imitate bird calls. Thus, the lures' operators would deceive the perdrix rouge and rossignol philomèle – enticing the red-legged partridge and nightingale, to blast them with guns or leave them stuck to glue-smearred branches, twisting, terrified and soon dead. Such a web we weave . . .

In the museum there was also a stuffed albino boar's head. It had been animatronically augmented, allowing it to talk to visitors. Pamela was looking forward to this gig – they'd been able to line up a show easy enough as a friend of a friend had started working as a PA to the museum director. But first the code of the road must be observed – the soundman engaged and the van booked.

Pamela had already booked a soundman and a driver/stage-tech. A pal had put her in touch with Welsh Paul, esteemed guitar tech and master of the efficient 1am load-out. In turn, Paul had introduced Pamela to a soundman pantheon – Stanna, Blagger, Boxhead, Scotch Jim, Irish Jock, Manx Jasper, and several other key representatives of the road-crew nomenclatura.

Pamela next needed confirmation of the tour van. A Mer-

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cedes Vito Dualiner six-seat mini-splitter was available, at a reasonable £85 PD. The 300-mile daily limit wouldn't be a problem on this excursion. Similarly, the advice over tare and axle-loading wouldn't apply in the case of the Hextet: 'Please be aware of the weight of your passengers and cargo. We accept no responsibility for overweight vehicles.' The band didn't weigh much. Similarly, the wire-taut Welsh Paul and the whippet-thin selected soundman, known as Stonk. But the hire also involved a £500 deposit on a credit card – 'ear-marked funds' that temporarily disappeared into the mysterious channels of the monetary labyrinth. Pamela's own card couldn't stand such a loading. She'd had to ask her fisherman brother to book the van. The phone rang. It was the sibling master mariner. The van was booked. All systems go.

Now all Pamela had to do was confirm the title of her PhD. She was due in Berlin not too long after the Hextet had completed the Ilfracombe/London/Paris triangle. She'd been awarded a place at the Universität der Künste Berlin. They'd been impressed by the depth and originality of her undergraduate work. They'd also been extremely patient regarding her prevarication over which of her two proposed PhD subjects she would go with. She was spoiled for choice. 'Oppositional art in Nazi Germany, 1933–39'. Or 'Allach porcelain – Nazi micro-monumentalism and the SS socio-cultural shadow'? Which way to go, what to do? More certain, it was presumed that Pamela's PhD would have no impact on the Hextet's progress. Her bandmates were joining Pamela in Berlin, relocating from the UK. Ronnie and Sally were secure in the fact it would take more than academia to divert Pamela from impending rock legend.

## VII

Tommy returned to his seat on the Deutsche Bahn service to Frankfurt. He immediately noticed something had changed at his table. It took him a second to work out what it was. His book, *Nazi Gold*, was no longer inside its home-made brown paper jacket. The book sat on the table blaring brightly in red, white and black. The swastika on the cover radiated its bleak potencies. There was no sign of the missing brown wrapping. What the fuck! What the fuck!

Tommy looked around the carriage. It was almost empty. The nearest other passenger was across the aisle, sat maybe five seats ahead of Tommy, facing the direction of travel. This man was looking away from Tommy's table, engrossed in a magazine and seemingly oblivious to the mystery of the disappearing book jacket. Tommy wanted to go and ask him if he'd seen anything. But he hesitated. He was put off by the thought of a confused interrogation in broken German. Further, the book now broadcast its content, both by means of the golden swastika and the big black block of double-decker type.

**NAZI  
GOLD**

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Tommy was flummoxed. Then a bilingual passenger announcement sounded in the carriage. Tommy's confusion and panic were compounded. He quickly pushed the book and the remains of his meal into his rucksack. He was about to change trains at Frankfurt.

On the Frankfurt-Munich service, Tommy took his assigned place. He was in a window seat at a table, facing the direction of travel. There, he was joined by a silver-haired German man, maybe 70 years of age. This older man sat directly across from Tommy and began looking out the window. The platform outside was busy. A group of scouts moved past. Tommy took in this man opposite. He looked sharp, resolute. The man said hello, in German. Tommy just about managed a reply in the language of his host nation: 'Ja . . . Er . . . Sehr gut . . . Prima! . . . Danke . . .'

Tommy got out his Nazi Gold book. He read it with the book flat on the table, obscuring the title and the swastika. He read about more gold and treasure being hastily removed from Berlin. In April 1945, two trains had left the city's blasted southern suburbs. They pulled freight trucks loaded with 500 million Reichsmarks and more besides. The trains were called Adler and Dohle – Eagle and Jackdaw. Adler's load included a passenger carriage full of senior Reichsbank personnel, including bank president Dr Walther Funk. The trains were bound for Munich, 500 miles distant.

In another instance, an SS officer, Josef Spacil, had raided the Reichsbank HQ in Berlin, removing gold and jewels at gunpoint as the Russian army drew closer. The invading forces rained shells down on the city. Spacil oversaw the loading of the loot onto a big Junkers transport aircraft. The plane took

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off through a gap in the Russian artillery fire. On arrival in Salzburg the gold was transferred to a lorry and driven off into what had become known to Allied high command as the Alpenfestung – ‘the Alpine fortress’, a rocky lair where it was thought the SS might stage a Wagnerian last stand. This Alpenfestung was an illusory concept. Defences were minimal. But the area did become a kind of promised land for Nazis like Josef Spacil.

After his arrival in Austria, Spacil was soon captured by the Allies. He tried to buy time – and maybe his eventual release. He engaged his captors with wild tales. He knew where they could find Hitler’s body. He claimed to know the whereabouts of an ancient sceptre that had belonged to Charlemagne, the ninth-century emperor of western Europe; the founder of the First Reich; admired by Hitler. What Spacil actually knew about was hidden under a barn, and secreted in a roadside cache. Gold. And hundreds of thousands in paper money and coins – including two English silver sixpences and nine threepenny bits.

On the train Tommy became engrossed in his reading. While skipping on to a new section, he inadvertently raised the book up off the table. Almost as soon as he did so, the man across the table addressed him – loudly, in confident but slightly flawed English: ‘Also! Nazi Gold! You are a history man! This is a very . . . A very . . . interessant . . . theme . . .’ Tommy’s cheeks blushed red. He was embarrassed to suddenly be identified as some kind of Nazi donut. But the man continued. ‘Nazi Gold! People like to read of this . . . Nazi Gold! In England and also here . . . in Deutschland. People pretend that they are not interested. But they are very interested!’

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The man smiled broadly. Tommy tried to ignore him, but he wouldn't shut up. He started talking about a lake called Toplitzsee, up in the Austrian Alps. As the man laboriously outlined, the story was that the SS had hidden gold in the lake – and other things too. This German train traveller talked about someone writing a book claiming that a Nazi UFO had also been hidden in the lake. After the war American servicemen were sent to search the lake. A US diver became entangled in some underwater logs and drowned. Having outlined the legend of Toplitzsee, Tommy's German neighbour broadened the discussion. Tommy felt there was little he could do but sit and listen.

'I see that you are an English historiches man! You travel on holiday?'

The UK population had recently voted to leave the European Union. This development clearly still had currency on the Continent.

'Britain and its splendid isolation!' announced Tommy's table-mate rhetorically, his eyes beaming. 'Your Prime Minister Lord Salisbury has this idea . . . and now Britain has it again. It is an idea and, you know, this idea now will be tested. Look at Schweiz . . . at Switzerland. They do not do too bad. Nicht zu schlecht! Certainly!'

Then, at the next station, a young man entered the carriage. He was wearing a suit. The strap of a laptop shoulder bag ran sash-like across his torso. This newcomer was about to sit in the empty aisle seat beside Tommy. But the older man opposite Tommy waved the younger man away from his chosen seat. The old man got up out of his own seat and firmly indicated

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that the younger man should, in fact, sit in this place – over by the window, opposite Tommy. It was a puzzling interchange. The young man was clearly baffled by it, and somewhat annoyed. He raised his hands in frustration, looking deeply perplexed. But the older traveller maintained a calm authority. What he was indicating, he seemed to imply, was sensible, perhaps even inevitable. Why he preferred the younger man to sit opposite Tommy was a mystery, but the young man, his brow wrinkled in irritation, acquiesced.

While this peculiar seating impasse approached resolution, Tommy glanced across the aisle, to the neighbouring table. A bearded man caught his gaze. He was holding an iPhone at table height. The basilisk eye of the phone's camera lens was pointed toward Tommy's table. It seemed to be aimed directly at Tommy. Almost as soon as Tommy looked over, the man plunged the phone down into the folds of his hooded puffer jacket. He lowered his gaze and then looked out the window, entering into protracted observation of the landscape slipping by outside.

The puzzling carriage interactions unbalanced Tommy's train of thought. There was a vertiginous feeling at the base of his stomach. He felt as if he'd somehow materialised in some subtly unreal realm, a parallel microcosm sat in phased asynchrony to the world he thought he was occupying.

Tommy's composure wasn't helped when he looked over at his older neighbour's reading matter. This older man had inadvertently nudged a single A4 sheet over to Tommy's side of the table. It was in English. Tommy started reading the sheet, upside down. The A4 paper featured text set in a range

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of different type sizes, getting smaller down the length of the paper. The text consisted of a weird mixture of lucidity and nonsense.

### DISPLAY and advertise clearly . . .

Paragraph headings in newspapers are often set in type like this, usually in CAPITAL LETTERS assume-once-vane-sum . . .

The news columns in most of the daily papers use this average size of print crow-verse-see-renew . . .

The man noticed Tommy reading the page. ‘Also! You have found something interesting to read. Ja? Yes, yes . . .’ He picked up the piece of paper. ‘I work as an . . . Ein Augenarzt . . . *ophthalmologist* . . . an eye doctor . . . an *op-tik-yan* . . . These here are words . . . All big and small . . . separate sizes . . . My friend in England is also ein *op-tik-yan*. He uses these words for eye tests. Some of this I don’t understand . . .’ Tommy smiled and shrugged, but the ophthalmologist’s explanation didn’t calm his feeling of agitation.

Tommy sought displacement activity – something to take him away from the strangeness surrounding him. He reached into his rucksack and took out a bag of crisps. He opened the packet and crunched into the delicious salted friability. Pushing his reading glasses up the bridge of his nose, he read the small print on the crisp packet, displayed in both German and English.

Bio-Kartoffelchips Meersalz  
Rohstoffe aus kontrolliert biologischem Anbau  
gemäß EG-ÖKO-Verordnung  
Organic potato chips sea salt  
Raw materials from controlled organic cultivation  
according to EU organic regulations

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Wow, thought Tommy, these must do you the world of good. The crisp packet was covered in pictograms. There was a chicken drumstick with a big X superimposed across it:

VEGETARISCH

There was also a crossed-out ear of wheat:

GLUTENFREI

A bottle and another X:

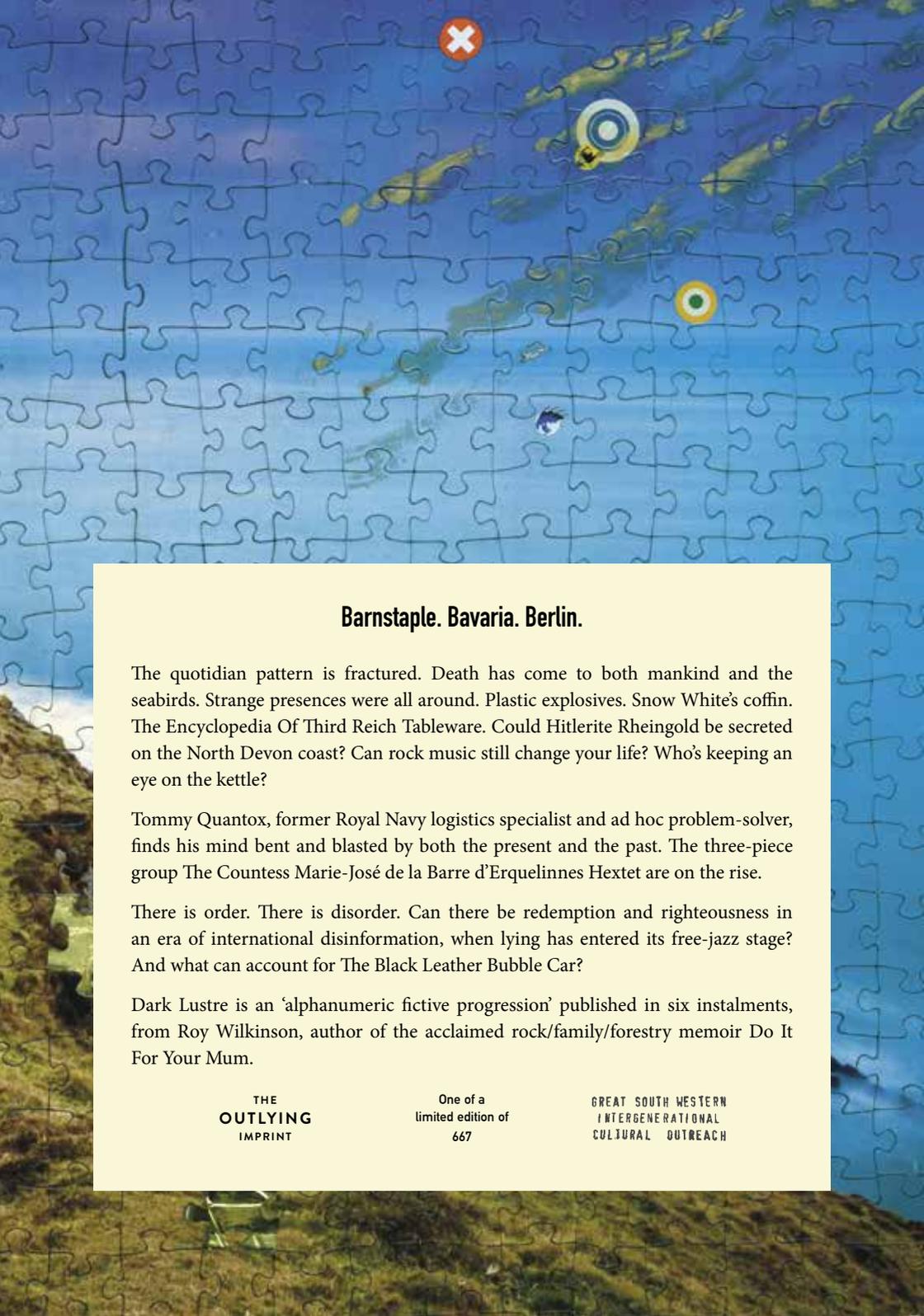
LAKTOSFREI

Great, thought Tommy, eat these up and you'll soon be fit as a fiddle. Health-food stuff . . . Tommy found himself wondering why more of the planet's plumper population hadn't twigged about this stuff. Similarly, why were so many people worried about drinking too much or too little? Just drink organic beer and you'd be healthy as a lark . . . That's what Tommy found himself thinking. Even in his own mind he wasn't sure what it meant.

The train sped on, toward Munich.

Ω Ω Ω Ω Ω Ω





## Barnstaple. Bavaria. Berlin.

The quotidian pattern is fractured. Death has come to both mankind and the seabirds. Strange presences were all around. Plastic explosives. Snow White's coffin. The Encyclopedia Of Third Reich Tableware. Could Hitlerite Rheingold be secreted on the North Devon coast? Can rock music still change your life? Who's keeping an eye on the kettle?

Tommy Quantox, former Royal Navy logistics specialist and ad hoc problem-solver, finds his mind bent and blasted by both the present and the past. The three-piece group The Countess Marie-José de la Barre d'Erquelinnes Hextet are on the rise.

There is order. There is disorder. Can there be redemption and righteousness in an era of international disinformation, when lying has entered its free-jazz stage? And what can account for The Black Leather Bubble Car?

Dark Lustre is an 'alphanumeric fictive progression' published in six instalments, from Roy Wilkinson, author of the acclaimed rock/family/forestry memoir Do It For Your Mum.

THE  
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INTERGENERATIONAL  
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