

Chapter Four

Joe jabbed his finger towards the sea. ‘I ain’t drunk, you hear me? You’re dirty, noisy, and dunno when to shut your trap.’

The sea, his accuser, thrummed in his ears, thwacked at his head, and spat back salt at him.

‘Where’s me bleeding shirt gone? Thieving bastard, you.’ Joe hurled a stone at a piece of flotsam that had been bobbing on the waves for the last half-hour, always missing the beach by an exasperating inch or two.

The autumnal morning chill failed to raise a single goose-pimple on Joe’s bare chest, even though his mind told him it was frigging cold. A smell of pee overrode the smell of brine.

‘It ain’t nuffink to do with me,’ he told himself, but still he patted the back of his trousers and bent to sniff his crotch just in case he had reverted to babyhood or suffered premature ageing overnight at some joker-of-a-god’s bequest. ‘Not guilty, me lord. Auntie Ethel must’ve turned over and pissed in her grave.’

Chuckling to himself, he crawled across to his sleeping mates huddled beneath the breakwater above the tide-line and checked them out for any signs of incontinence, but they hadn’t disgraced themselves either.

He dragged himself to his feet and scuffed up stones all the way down to the water’s edge. ‘Too many wankers pissed in the sea, and made it stink of oldies’ wee.’ His own pee arced into an incoming wave, foam-on-foam.

The glare off the sea made Joe’s eyes run tears. He squinted at his watch. It read four o’clock. Minutes later, it read the same. He tapped its glass, gave it a good shake, cursed Swiss watchmakers, and consigned it to the rubbish tip in his pocket.

Joe turned his back on the sea, hoping to give his eyes a rest, but the white cliffs beyond the deserted promenade glared at him without mercy. However hard he tried, he couldn’t get his head around the mind shafting he’d suffered, and was still suffering.

The breakwaters cast lengthy shadows. A milk float clattered along the coastal road. The dog walkers were notable in their absence. Why was the light so fierce and un-British? He remembered going to Spain one summer when he was a kid. The sun had almost blinded him, but his old man had insisted he come along as a boy runner to assist with a scam.

There his mind went again, derailing itself into a London-to-Brighton train-wreck. He must focus on the here-and-now. His name was Joe Buckell. He was in England—the trendiest place on the planet. It was autumn. It was around six-thirty in the morning. And his foreign watch was telling bleeding fibs.

He dug at the pebbles with his heels, creating a gravelled crater in the sand. Orange seawater seeped in and formed a small pool. Joe spat a glob of phlegm into it, while scooping up a flat stone to hurl at the sea. The stone skimmed along the surface for several feet before sinking. The same thing happened with the next one, and the one after that. He noticed how the foamy waves of only minutes past had calmed down into tiny wavelets: spooky or what?

He shuddered and ran his tongue over his cracked dry lips. All that fucking water and not a drop to drink, and why the bleeding-hell had he got the willies when the sun was out? In answer to his unspoken question, random words appeared in his head: ones he’d heard for the first time last night, being a lad of limited *vocabgages*-like.

Yep, now he saw it clear as the day he'd had his first rocket-launch of a wank, almost repainting the ceiling above his bed.

That posh bitch, Sammy Hammy-B, had cast a whole load of paper squares into the air, reminding him of the rubbish they throw at newly hitched brides and grooms. Not that he ever intended to share vows with a bird togged up to resemble a cream meringue for her big day. One of his best mates had gone down that route and seen his hot bird turn into a nagging, frigid dragon overnight.

Samantha's squares of paper were larger and less colourful than them wedding scraps. They had fallen on the table, a few at a time, before organising themselves into words; the same words that were bursting to get out of his mouth this minute: words he hadn't the foggiest about.

Joe took a run at the sea and launched a chunk of old concrete at it and shouted, 'Abrasion!' after which he asked nobody in particular, 'Why, the fuck, did I say that?'

A scratchy sensation teased its way up both his outer arms—the sort of scratchiness a blunted penknife would make on the skin—not exactly painful but possessing an underlying threat that made him feel sick.

He picked up another chunk of concrete, intending to cast it after the first one. Instead, it slipped from his hand to land at his feet.

At the same time as yelling 'Desiccation!' his legs crumpled under him. He tipped face-forward on the ground, cheek-to-sand, and lay there spitting out bits of grit from his mouth and watching a miniature crab scuttling away from him.

He thought vaguely of another crab, another day, another year, when he'd spent a whole afternoon watching Roger pull off crabs' legs for sport. Where was it, now ... where had they been? Not Brighton ... Hastings, perhaps? No, that was where the gang had painted graffiti on toilet walls, broken plenty of deckchairs, and bloodied the noses of a few rockers. Yeah, he remembered: it was on a day trip to Bognor Regis organised by the landlord of the Cock and Bull pub. Trouble was, they went by coach, and Roger got all stressed out at having to leave his brand new Lambretta scooter at home in case the pigs got wind of it. He'd nicked the thing off some posh dickhead who thought that if he dropped his aitches and did a bit of effing and blinding part-time, it qualified him as a mod.

Joe didn't want to think of Roger's mutilated crabs any more. In fact it quite upset him to imagine them being tortured, seeing how alive this one was on the beach now. But at the time, and even up until yesterday, he hadn't cared a toss for the creatures.

Lurching to his feet, Joe stumbled down the beach and plunged headfirst into the sea. He re-emerged spluttering and in a bit of a panic, convinced the water was deeper than it was, and stood there, his soggy trousers stuck to him, dragging on his leg hairs. When he lifted his arms in the air, water descended his back in rivulets, to pool in the crevice between his buttocks.

Stuck in a no-man's land between hell and euphoria, he cried out, 'Saturation!'

There had been something about water in the library. No, not the library but another place: a silent, dark, dank forest, scented with ammonia, where he crawled on many legs, encased in a carapace, cool and cloaked in fog, at one with his surroundings in the home he loved. Then a harsh, dry wind had come and torn him away, to dump him in a treeless stone tunnel, where he lay upon hard ground, gasping, spluttering, lonely, abandoned, and drifting in a world between.

'Evaporation!' The dry air burned his lungs. How could he breathe with such a crushing weight on his chest? He scrabbled at his neck, searching for openings that were no longer there. Then his hand moved upwards and he found two holes in his face. Air exploded out of his nostrils and lifted the crushing weight. How could he have forgotten his nose?

‘You effing...effing...effing cow, Sammy H-B,’ he bellowed to the cliff-top and the school beyond. Amphetamines had always made him do violence to others and not himself, but that acid last night had given him the King of all mind-shaftings, and it just kept shafting him like a bleeding great brain echo.



Janet sat up in bed with a start, convinced she’d heard a shout of distress from somewhere. She rubbed at her sleep-encrusted eyes and peered at her clock: five minutes to seven. Jittered by her speedy awakening, she picked up a letter she’d received from Andy to help bring her back to Earth; no, perhaps that was not the right word for it, but at least it would cheer her up.

Sis, Mike really blew it this time. That po-faced git-of-a planning officer, John Bryant, came to dinner. I mean, who in their right mind would ask their boss around for nosh, especially a teetotaller? Mike got plastered+++ (already stoned big-time before the silly git arrived). Sang, yodelled, & screeched his way through Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds/House of the Rising Sun. Exposed his stash of wacky baccy while trying to put his guitar plectrum back in the wrong tin & generally behaved like a total a-hole. I think our dear father can now kiss his career as a big-timer architect goodbye.

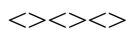
My news: a weekend away on the South Downs with the Helmstone-by-Sea UFO Society. And what a load of four-eyed anoraks they turned out to be. I saw—actually, actually, really saw—this cigar-shaped space ship hovering over the English Channel at 2 a.m. And would you believe it—all the idiots were looking north at the time? Every last one of them LOOKING NORTH!!! And indisputable proof of intelligent life beyond this planet, vanished by the time they graced me with their attention.

As you can imagine, I’ve banished them to the realm of amateurs, along with a certain quasi-religious organisation—you remember it, Sis? That lot who prayed into a battery. Something about storing spiritual energy, so extra-terrestrials could use it to avert planetary disasters. And you remember how you pointed out to me what a load of hooey it was, considering the mortality statistics had already hit one million in the Indian drought. ...What a clever, clever sis I have!

As a reward for being so plain wonderful, please find enclosed a sachet of one of Tilly’s healthy facemasks to help get rid of your zits, so you can get yourself a boyfriend.

Luv Andy XXXX

Janet took a sniff of the face pack and laughed. It ponged of cow’s manure.



Normally, Janet relished time spent in the school laboratory because science intrigued her and she always got good marks for it. But today, the smell of formaldehyde caused tides of nausea to wash over her and she could not concentrate on her chemistry lesson even for a second.

Five hours on from witnessing the crazy goings on of the night before, her mind was as out of shape as old elastic and she could not regain her grip on normality.

Miss Valder wrote a formula on the blackboard, releasing clouds of chalk-dust into the air. Janet stared through her teacher and the diagram, until the animate and the inanimate melded into a single white blur against the black background.

Off to Janet's left, the lab's resident axolotl moved across the bottom of its glass tank on the counter. Janet turned to meet its primitive red eyes. This anaemic-looking salamander, in its permanent larval state, had inhabited the same restricted space for the last twenty years, like some kind of alien foetus forever trapped in amniotic fluid.

Next to the tank, generations of caged white mice—also with red eyes—had passed much of their short lives spinning wheels and darting in and out of wool bedding.

In the far back corner of the lab, the fridge rattled to a halt, life suspended beyond its cream-coloured door. Janet visualised its contents without having to look inside. The lowest shelf, which was the only tidy one, housed an excess of silkworm eggs. Miscellaneous bottles, chemical repositories, and Miss Valder's supply of home cultured yoghurts were stored in disarray on the other shelves. Just as well a school inspector had not taken a good look at the toxic dump within.

There was the freezer box, too, that contained a pack of frozen rats awaiting dissection. Up until now, Janet had not felt in the least squeamish or disturbed by procedures that contributed to her understanding of anatomy. But today a vision of guts spilling out on the workbench beset her: the rats' guts and her own in a tangled heap of spaghetti and slime.

Penny elbowed Janet, to alert her to a silence descended upon the lab. 'Psst ... Miss asked you a question.'

But the macabre vision of disembowelment rendered Janet mute. Whatever the question had been, someone else must have answered it, as Miss Valder had moved on with the lesson.

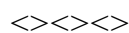
Perhaps five, ten, or even twenty minutes passed, until it was time to do an experiment. Janet stopped thinking about guts and switched her focus to the weaving orange flames of the Bunsen burners. The nearest flame summoned up in her mind the young man's half-naked form as he performed his dervish dance on the sundial, candle in hand. She became warm and flustered at the image; however, after it had gone, her flesh crawled, her senses shifted into slow motion, and she grasped a pair of metal tongs with her bare hand without thinking.

Miss Valder shouted at her. 'Use the crucible!'

Janet heard what her teacher said, yet it did not register fully enough for her to translate it into action. She thrust magnesium into the high flame and a blinding white flash illuminated the room. After a delayed reaction, she screamed and smelled her burned flesh.

Miss Valder snatched a pack of rats from the icebox and slung them into a bucket of water. She grabbed hold of Janet's wrist, plunging her burned hand into the chilled liquid.

Without blinking and oblivious to the pain, Janet stared down at the defrosting rodent corpses in their watery grave and, for no rational reason, sensed a dark presence beyond her immediate situation: a presence adrift that had no frame of reference upon which she could draw.



PC Bill Day whistled nonsense tunes to himself as he freewheeled on his pushbike down the path leading from his back garden onto the undercliff walkway below. The early morning glistened, drenching his lungs with clean air. It filled him with the exuberance of a fellow twenty years his junior. Bill had covered every inch of the beach from Rockydean to Helmstone in his time. Not one occasion duplicated an earlier one, the sea a great paradox of constancy and unpredictability.

The storm from last night had washed up an array of dead wood, cuttlefish remains, and puffy husks of bladderwrack, with the bulk of debris strewn along the shingle on the upper part of the beach. The retreating tide had left its lesser offerings marooned on the rocks and floating in shallow pools, triggering Bill's childhood memories of delving into similar treasure troves in the wake of autumn gales.

About fifty yards farther along the route, the beach had spewed shingle onto the concrete path. Bill weaved through an obstacle course of largish cobbles, his breath billowing white before him, his excited pulse racing, and his spirit liberated. But, out of nowhere, a melancholy crept, playing its minor key upon his heartstrings. It aged him in an instant and constricted his chest. Drained of energy, he climbed off his bike and plodded along, pushing the reconditioned black and chrome two-wheeler beside him.

An acrid smell tugged at the inside of his nostrils and his eyes watered. He wished the drunks would relieve themselves in the sea, rather than against the undercliff wall where the cleansing tide seldom reached.

Up and beyond this urinal for the nocturnal lowlifes, existed a microcosm of girls destined for quite a different future. He glanced at his watch to confirm the hour; they would have rung the morning bell at Toffdene School by now.

For a brief moment, to rescue himself from his melancholy, he locked onto an image of six-formers stripped to the waist, leaning over bowls filled with cold water from a pitcher, their nipples hardening beneath wet flannels. Not for the first time in his married life, he experienced a surge of guilt over his favourite fantasy.

Slowing to a halt, Bill left his bike on its side at the top of the beach and wandered down to the water's edge, where he stood flicking pebbles at the sea and watching a cargo boat moving south-eastwards, returning to the Continent after unloading at Foresham Docks.

Only when the old hulk had dipped and merged with the horizon, did Bill retrace his footsteps and become aware of a pile of rag bundled beneath a breakwater—at least he thought it was rag until he moved closer to inspect it and heard it snore. 'Prof, is that you?' he asked, prodding a familiar form with the toe of his polished black shoe.

'Uh,' grunted the bundle.

'Go home. Your wife's waiting,' said Bill, expecting to provoke one of the professor's rants against society and its enslavement of intelligent men through marriage.

'Um ... uh,' the prostrated form grunted once again, before it sat bolt upright, wide-awake, white-faced, eyes starting from its sockets like a ghoul from a freak show. The Professor normally looked wild after his benders, but this one seemed to have left him scoring extra high on the derangement scale.

PC Day put a safe distance of a yard between the two of them, with the intention of applying a little low-key questioning to the situation. 'That's a nice new coat you've got there, Prof.'

The man clutched at the parka with one hand, while with the other, he pointed a trembling finger at the entrance to the Old School Tunnel. 'I found it over there.'

The tunnel led from the beach and burrowed upwards through the cliff, passing under the coastal road, to surface at the southern boundary of the school's playing fields. On several occasions during his adolescence, PC Day had walked the tunnel, ignoring the DO NOT TRESPASS sign at its entrance, his hormones charged by hopeful fantasies, only to find a locked iron gate blocking his way into the grounds of Toffdene. From behind the gate's bars and with wistful eyes, he had watched girls in short pleated skirts playing Lacrosse and snatched the occasional glimpse of their gym knickers as they stretched up to make a high catch.

'I saw them ... large, larger than ever,' said the Professor. He stopped to cough, bending over where he sat, the phlegm rattling in his chest and throat like rain spitting in a rusted metal drum.

A green lump of slime landed dangerously close to PC Day's spotless shoes. He backed off a pace. 'Saw what, Prof?'

'Gargantuan *Armadillidium!*'

‘Armadilly ... what did you say?’

The Professor staggered to his feet, perspiration streaming off his forehead and down the sides of his face. ‘*Armadillidium vulgare*,’ he replied, nearly falling over again. He reached inside his acquired Parka for a three-quarter’s empty bottle of whisky and chucked the last quart down, treating his gullet with as much respect as a waste pipe shot full of neat disinfectant.

Bill had noticed how much more florid the Professor’s hallucinations were of late. ‘Vulgar armadillos ... What the heck are you talking about?’

‘B-b-bunched, as big as boulders.’

Bill shook his head slowly from side to side. What a tragedy to hear a once brilliant man reduced to talking such gibberish.

The Professor cast a look of disdain at him, as if to say *you pitiful, uneducated police constable*, before turning his back on him and peeing against the nearest breakwater.

Bill shrugged his shoulders, glanced at his watch, and started to retrace his steps. He had wasted quite enough time on this incurable drunk when he had work to do. The Professor shouted after him the word ‘woodlice’. PC Day turned briefly and managed a quick smile.

The Professor threw up his hands. ‘Don’t believe me, then.’

Retrieving his bike, Bill resumed his whistling without managing to recapture his happiness of earlier.

He remembered how five years ago Professor Overhill had taken up the offer of early retirement from his post as Head of Science at the Polytechnic, having for the previous year only turned up for one lecture in ten, and even that one delivered in an unacceptable state of inebriation.

Since then, Overhill had engaged in a social experiment, which involved living the life of a vagrant on the beach in preference to his luxury five-bedroom house in Toffdene Crescent.

Bill had met many drunks in his life on the beat, and if the Professor thought this ‘social experiment’ label added an ounce of credibility to anything he said, he had another thing coming to him.

‘Woodlice!’ laughed PC Day. ‘How low can you get?’