



She Starlight

Gordon G Hall

SHE STARLIGHT[©]

A Novel of Magical Realism

By

Gordon G. Hall

words@lakefell.com

Prologue

“It’s nothing but a bloody shambles. A complete farce, you should never have let it get this far.”

Michael Pederson, mediocre Politician and now Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Home Office, was clearly taking considerable pleasure in berating his Permanent Under Secretary responsible for domestic security.

“If we had been involved earlier it wouldn’t have come to this. Now you tell me that we need to take ‘Positive Action’. Well I don’t like your sort of ‘positive action’, and I certainly don’t need to know anything about it.”

Hugh Strickland, was only partly listening to the tirade from his political master. His thoughts were more tuned to mapping the intricate path that would allow him to exonerate himself from any blame for the whole regrettable business.

“We are taking all the necessary steps,” said Strickland,

“I really don’t want that sort of information. Not in detail. If we can’t gain control ourselves then we must at least make quite certain that no one else does, and for goodness sake make sure that we keep our noses clean.”

“Indeed. We will of course be tying up any of the loose ends.”

“Such action is entirely operational,” said Pederson, “and thus falls within your remit, not mine.”

“We are gaining a better understanding of the scope of the situation. It is just a little unfortunate that as yet we do not have access to the data.”

“Unfortunate! Unfortunate! I’ll give you ‘Unfortunate’. If you had intervened sooner we would not be in the position we find ourselves in now. It’s not just ‘unfortunate’; it is turning into a bloody cock-up, and possibly worse. Under no circumstances do I want this to be an embarrassment to me, and I should make it clear that if things don’t go smoothly it is likely to be a good deal more than an embarrassment to you.”

Hugh would have to be careful not to allow this rotund and rather florid little man from some northern constituency to get out of hand. “I am not saying that you are wrong, Michael, but there are some positive aspects to this whole affair that I think we can build upon.”

Pederson mopped his rapidly balding head with a large spotted handkerchief. Such mopping was not strictly necessary, but was a clear warning sign to those that knew him well that he was on the point of violent explosion. Instead of the expected eruption however his manner became calmer and his voice dropped an octave. He turned away from the high, bullet-proof window that gave out onto the Thames and turned to face his thinner, fitter and slightly older Permanent Under Secretary.

“What we are dealing with here is very sensitive indeed. If word was to get out then the consequences are unthinkable. It goes way beyond HMG, indeed way beyond this country. It is of vital importance that we stop these freelancers and either terminate the whole thing, or perhaps better, bring it in hand.”

“You can rely upon the Service to sort things out Minister.”

Hugh felt comfortable in this rather forbidding room even if he was far from comfortable about the grilling he was getting from this bumptious politician. The walls were oak-panelled and hung with oil paintings depicting conflicts past. How much simpler life was then, you gave the nod to a rich young aristocrat and within a month he had a regiment fully clothed and horsed at his own expense, ready to do or die in the cause of King and Country.

Michael was plodding on. “Right. So, we have sufficient resources on the ground?”

“Indeed, a very good man, seconded from our Friends Over the Water. They say that he is totally reliable and, thank goodness, with some considerable expertise in the field. There is no doubt that in co-operation with the Friends we are well placed to ensure things go smoothly,” said Strickland with quiet satisfaction. He had said enough to ensure that if things went badly he could start to shift the blame in the direction of the Secret Intelligence Service, commonly known as MI6.

“Never mind that. What are our chances of taking on The Project ourselves?”

“The assessment to date is that conditions are not ideal for our participation in the near future without the close cooperation of the current Principals.”

“Come on, man, speak English.” Michael reached once more for his handkerchief, thought better of it and returned it to his pocket. Where did these mandarins

learn to speak such gobbledygook? Back up north a horticultural articulating implement was called a spade.

Strickland spoke slowly, annunciating his words clearly. "We are not capable of running it without the expertise of at least some the people who are currently involved."

"Well see to it then. It would be preferable for U.K. Inc. if the work could continue, but better to lose it entirely than have it fall into the wrong hands."

Sir Hugh nodded his agreement. "If Fielding continues to be involved with The Project then we need to find out what makes this chap tick."

"You tell me he is a professor at Lancaster, so presumably he is bright enough, but is he a bleeding heart or made of sterner stuff?"

"Enquiries so far suggest that he is reliable." Hugh liked that term. It meant a great deal to those in the Service, but he feared that its full meaning might be lost on this self-important politician.

"Hmmm. But does that mean he will play our game?" said Michael.

Hugh took a deep breath. He would have to spell it out rather more clearly. "It would appear that he is, potentially, 'one of us'. I have had a brief word. By all accounts he is a thoroughly good chap. He was at a half-decent school, went up to Cambridge where he carried a sound bat and read philosophy. He then followed an academic career path."

"Right, so he might be persuaded?"

"It would appear to be a possibility."

"Well that is something of a relief. Now you said that there was a positive spin that we could put on all this?"

"Yes," said Hugh, realizing that this man was more politically astute than he had given him credit for. "We cannot set up our own laboratory in total secrecy, particularly if Fielding joins us. I would therefore advise that it would be appropriate to do so openly, promoting our involvement, and thereby showing that HMG is increasing funding for academic research."

"Obviously without revealing the nature of that research." said Michael.

Hugh would work on this. But in the meantime there was a lot to do. He liked having long-term objectives. Furthermore, and of greater importance, he could at last see

how he might extricate himself, his career, and his KCMG from this nasty little affair. A few words with his Oppo responsible for Higher Education and the judicious leaking of this 'new Government initiative' would soon create media interest in the 'initiative', providing the positive result that Michael wanted.

“Very well. I think we can leave it there. The details of this are, as I have made quite clear, operational decisions that I must leave entirely to you. Just give me a few hours warning before going public with the investment in education story. Oh, and arrange a briefing note so that I can make a short statement to the House.”

One

It is time to make contact with a world where systems and timing and regulations are the rule. Where the tick of time sweeps us along remorselessly in the only direction that humankind knows, thus maintaining that thin line between order and chaos. The need to re-establish such order is paramount and necessitates a rare intervention.

The pilot knows the rules by which she must now abide. They are not her usual parameters. She has a natural distaste for conformity and a reluctance to enter a situation where at least a degree of conventionality will be required. But there is no moment of hesitation as she reaches across the control panel and switches the aircraft radio to One One Nine Decimal Nine Five.

“Blackpool Approach this is Beechcraft Golf Echo Tango Mike Echo, in-bound from Cyprus, currently twelve miles south of Blackpool, requesting joining instructions.”

“Golf Mike Echo, Approach, descend flight level thirty to intercept localiser. QNH is One Zero Two Five. Call at POL.”

“Golf Mike Echo, descend three zero. Call at POL.”

It has been a long and tiresome flight hardly helped by the constant whine of the small jet's propulsion. If she were a demonstrative individual, she would be feeling relief that she had negotiated her way thus far. She has made too many landings, organized too many refuelling rigs, suffered the groping of too many sweaty and lusting hands since that dusty-red take off from the improvised airstrip in the Outback. She savours the memory of that parched ancient landscape, so different from the chequerboard lushness of this, her destination. Perhaps she should have travelled in a less physically demanding manner, but it is better to ease herself into this assignment and to have accomplished this journey by conventional means.

Dressed in grey flying overalls that make not the slightest attempt to flatter, she rubs her hands over her spiky hair trying for the umpteenth time to reposition the headphones that are crushing her ears in their clamshell grip. She thinks of the shower that

she will enjoy as soon as she can find a bit of personal time. Of sluicing the cleansing water down over her head, her shoulders, her whole body. She will rinse the dust from her hair and scrub the grime from her pores.

Bliss!

But before that she will be caught up in the maelstrom of bureaucracy occasioned by an incoming international flight. She is alone, but nevertheless there will be a mound of paperwork that must be completed signed for and docketed.

She is not worried about leaving Egon and the others; this is not the first time she has done so and they will be ready for whatever she needs, or whatever she sends them. She must do what she must. She is a little apprehensive about what lies ahead. She does not wish to cause unhappiness. That said she is confident in her ability to handle tricky situations, and is resolute in her purpose.

She is well travelled but it has been a long time since she has seen the north of England. She remembers it well enough, nevertheless it will take her a while to find her bearings. Places will be different and there will be a number of changes since she was last here. There will be new people whom she must contact, befriend and re-assure. Only then can she start to weave and spin her way into the nub of that which she must accomplish. She has a mission to complete and although her youthful looks belie it, she has more than sufficient ability to perform the task. It will only take a few days, certainly less than a week, and then she will be on her way back to the Others. She is concerned that because of her actions they too may have to fight their own corner, in a different place and different time, in that red desert dust.

“Blackpool Approach, this Mike Echo, at POL.”

“Mike Echo, call Tower on One One Eight decimal Four Zero. Good-day”

“Good day.” She fiddles again with the radio, changing the frequency.

“Blackpool Tower, Mike Echo, Good morning.”

“Mike Echo, runway Two Eight, you are number one, cleared to land. QNH One Zero Two Eight.”

“Mike Echo, cleared to land.”

Moments later the private jet taxis noisily across the bitumen to the light aircraft parking area. There is little activity; it is a small airport. There are no other private planes parked here today, Blackpool is hardly a popular destination in late November. The pilot signs off with the Tower, concludes the shutdown checks and jumps down from her aircraft. She finds the refuelling rig and directs it towards her aeroplane.

She is aware that of the rig operator she will appear to be in her early twenties, but looks will deceive.

“Good flight, luv?”

She looks at him. He will see her as quite petite, with striking deep blue eyes and a wide mouth, wearing no discernible make-up. She does not appear as conventionally beautiful but exhibits an inner strength and vitality.

“Not bad. I need to sign off, and then grab a shower.”

She is aware that she is making a lasting impression on this man, as she does with most of those with whom she comes into contact.

“Admin block, over there. You can sort out the paperwork with Mike. Just ask him about the shower and he will get you sorted.” He points to a single storey building over to her left.

She waits until the refuelling is complete and signs off on the tally sheet.

“Thanks.”

She heads for the concrete-rendered functional building. She will need to travel on for less than an hour. There are a few basic preparations that she must see to before she can start her work.

Two

The dawn was making a reluctant effort to put in an appearance, it being a lazy time of year for the sun; one of those late November mornings when it seemed disinclined to part company with the horizon and thereby fulfil its allotted purpose.

“Seeing your lover again this evening, Miranda?” I asked, glancing at my wife across the breakfast table. I had to admit, if only to myself, that she was a good-looking woman with her auburn hair cascading down around her shoulders and her intense blue eyes smiling at me.

“I’ll be in the lab until late.”

“Another all-nighter?”

“I’ve got so much to do, and only that bloody little Simon to help me.”

“I thought Simon was your bosom buddy?”

Some time ago I had indeed suspected this to be the sordid truth, however of late I had come to realise that I might well be pissing up the wrong lamppost.

“I can’t imagine why I saddled myself with such a very passé Doctor of Mathematics, when I could be enjoying the enthusiastic commitment of an energetic young physics postgrad.”

I knew that this wife of mine was referring to the scientific ability of a suitable postgraduate rather than any of the physical attributes that such a youth might exhibit. On the cerebral-carnal scale Miranda was unflinchingly allied to the beauty of the thought process rather than gratification of the flesh. Thus she and my occasional drinking companion, Simon Pennick, were to be cooped up together for yet another evening without even a frisson of attraction to relieve the mighty experimental steps that they would be taking into the unknown.

“What about your evening; perhaps you could amuse yourself by chasing some floozie?”

“What an anachronism. Anyway I haven’t done anything like ‘chase a floozie’ for eons . . . well at least a couple of months.”

“That’s just as well. I am always worried that you will catch something unmentionable from these one-night stands of yours. You must look after yourself.”

“It’s OK, Randy, I’m careful.”

Despite our problems we look after each other.

Perhaps because of my own occasional dalliances it was a surprise for me to learn that it was Miranda who had gone the whole hog and immersed herself in a serious liaison. She was entirely honest with me about having an affair but she never let on to me who her lover was, and I did not not consider it appropriate to ask.

Thinking back a couple of years it now seems ridiculous that the two of us made the mistake of getting married. We were barely passed the Signing in the Registry stage before we both admitted that it was a singularly foolish thing to have done. Entirely our own fault, we should have foreseen the problems, but did not, and the deed had been duly enacted.

Miranda had said to me that it wasn’t that we were not fond of each other and, savouring the double negative I had admitted that we had stumbled into the arrangement without thinking it through. As it was living together was convenient and comfortable and our situation did not warrant anything as drastic as divorce.

After a few attempts to indulge in sexual intimacy we had admitted that we were incompatible. In order to avoid anything too Ruskin-esque we had, in the first week of marriage, achieve a physically painful, emotionally wretched, but nevertheless legally binding, form of consummation, following which we each retreated, both spatially and metaphorically, to our own comfort zones, and stayed there.

“It was daft of us to marry,” Miranda had said, “It was only because of my parents, poor things, they just couldn’t wait to get me properly coupled off, and you really were the candidate of least harm.”

It was a great sadness to us both that Miranda’s parents only just had time to see their eldest daughter bolted firmly into wedlock before they perished in that awful ferry tragedy in India. It was such bloody bad luck, stupid too, that boat was way over-crowded, they just copped the disaster that was inevitable.

Breakfast over I set out from home at the same time as my wife, the pair of us enjoying the extravagance of separate cars, she bound for her laboratory and I to my tutorial; convenience getting the better of eco-conscience.

“Stephen, I know you have prepared some work, perhaps you would care to give us the benefit of your thoughts on the subject?”

The student in question was not really called Stephen but boasted a Chinese name foreign to the Western tongue.

I turned to the sanitised view offered to me through the plate glass of the window. Only three months ago that ragged looking fuchsia was in full bloom providing nectar for its adoring collection of bumblebees as they paid homage to its sugary flowers. Now this charming but isolated plant will have to fend for itself as the winter closes in upon it. Beyond, there is a dearth of aesthetic delight in the ocean of ryegrass monoculture that stretched to the boundary of the campus. Close to me, at the very margins of this cropped green desert, those executioners of horticulture, the university’s gang-mower brigade, were unable to reach any beautiful alien intruders to cut and tear them to shreds. Only here, I mused, along this meagre unkempt strand, can the fuchsia, and a thin smattering of fellow pioneers of summertime individuality, inch themselves cautiously up the 1960’s grey walls of these, the cellblocks of academe.

I turned back from the window to scan the dozen expectant faces. I spoke quietly and without undue frustration. “We have done Death; that was last week; now we are concentrating on the consequences of dying. “

I started to build a philosophical analogy of the horticultural escapees. They existed as great minds, freed from the order imposed upon them by the World State. Swarming around each would buzz their acolytes, a dozen bees, each eager to taste the exquisite fruits of original thought; thence to fly homeward bearing with them sweet droplets of metaphysical truth.

I focused my attention upon the serious but lacklustre presentation from a Chinese called Stephen.

“Excellent work, Stephen,” I said as the diatribe swooped, slowed and, toppled with the finality of a landing glider, coming to a faltering halt. I had failed to listen to more than a few words of this inelegant chinoiserie but that hardly seems to matter. Such millstones as these were my bread and butter, and essential to help fund The Project that Miranda and I had been working on this past three years.

By early evening, after a day on campus, I was just comparing the relative merits of a cold empty home with the more compelling cosy companionship of the saloon bar of the Kings Head when my mobile burst into a wayward love song, thus interrupting my imminent departure for the pub.

“Bugger off,” I said to it.

It did no such thing.

I reached for the offending device and hit ‘receive’ only to find that it was babbling Simonese. “Duncan,” it said with just a trace more West Country lilt than is normally present in Dr Pennick’s delivery. “It’s Miranda, she’s badly hurt. Get down here to the Lab pronto. I’m pouring water over her.”

Bits of this message make sense, but why the hell is Simon dousing Miranda in the wet stuff?

I made it to the lab in great time but in greater perplexity. Miranda was usually so very careful about practical experimentation; however, I was not sure that Simon was as cautious. I also know she was working with some decidedly noxious substances, including radioactive isotopes.

Miranda was lying in a crumpled heap over on the far side of the room. I lowered my frame floor-wards to better catch the few words that she was attempting to mumble. The linoleum was wet, my knees were wet, my wife was exceptionally wet.

“I found her like this” said Simon. “I’ve secured the Lab and phoned for an ambulance.”

“What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know. I went into the cuddy to make us both a mug of tea, I heard an almighty crash and Miranda was lying sprawled out on the floor. There was a smell of burnt hair and her face was very hot; all I could think to do was to pour lots of water over her.”

By this stage Miranda was attempting to stagger to her feet, but without demonstrable success. I lent a hand and with some help from Simon deposit her upon a swivel chair. The chair rotated a full turn and the bloody thing came to the end of its thread and deposited itself, its passenger, Simon and myself under a solid workbench..

We decided by mutual consent, to conduct further communication whilst sitting on the floor under the bench. It was not exactly cosy, but it was convenient enough.

“I’m clearly going to die,” said Miranda.

“What the hell happened?” I said.

“It was the brain-scan laser. I must have overclocked it. But you know what, the experiment damn nearly worked. I reckon I just about captured the evidence. It’s what we have wanted all this time.”

Simon was sitting with his mouth open but keeping very quiet.

Miranda continued, “Dunc, we need to face the inevitable.”

Much as I would have liked to hug the bearer of such burdensome news my ability to do so was more than a little constrained by my sitting squashed underneath the bench. All I could do was to provide a sympathetic nod of the head.

Miranda went on, “If the authorities find out about this accident then The Project is doomed. You two must fix it with the University and the Hospital to make it seem that I’m in the terminal stages of cancer caused by a malignant brain stem tumour. This will explain my post-accident symptoms. Do you think you can do that?”

I knew my wife, her strong will, and her clarity of thought. Nevertheless, it was a long speech from someone facing their imminent demise, considering that only a rotating chair ago she was unable to utter anything remotely intelligible. Miranda had however cracked the problem of how The Project might be saved. With Simon’s help I now had to set about achieving a massive cover-up of the accident.

Our unhappy little under-the-bench party was rudely torn asunder by an inrush of figures clad in yellow and green, their radios bleeping and sundry equipment trailing. Simon, ever the practical one, curtailed their attempts to extract me from beneath the bench and to load me onto a gurney. He pointed an accusatorial finger at the female member of our small group. “She is sick,” he intones, “she is in the terminal stages of cancer caused by a malignant brain stem tumour.” Simon made up for that which he lacks in intelligence by possessing an excellent memory

With consummate ease the dying Miranda was rolled onto a stretcher, dumped across the gurney and rushed from the scene.

I decided that the time had come for Simon and I to resume vertical status.

I said, “Hospital Chairman.”

Simon said, “Pro Vice Chancellor.”

We went our separate ways to heap deception upon harsh reality.

It took Miranda nearly a month to die.

Three

“Food!” I say, better to ensure that I understand myself. “Better do something about it.”

My search for digestive inspiration meets but scant success. Home with Miranda was hardly heaven upon earth, but without Miranda it is almost entirely unwelcoming. Talking to myself is hardly a substitute for her, but perhaps it relieves the emptiness.

As ever the choice, due to my culinary incompetence, is a limited one: demolish a can of baked beans or order a pizza. The latter is easier, but entails the inevitable wait for delivery. It is a tedious conundrum that I face on an almost daily basis.

“Time against work; a moral dilemma. Hell, Duncan, you are slithering headlong into your own philosopher-speak.”

Like Balaam’s Ass I stand unable to choose between these alternatives, prepared indeed to starve upon the horns of my indecision. But a butterfly flaps its wings in the Caribbean, unnumbered forces, great and small, act upon the planet, the pendulum swings, and decisions are made.

“Tonight, the beans have it!”

I extract a recalcitrant can from the upper cupboard and wrench at the ring pull.

“Bugger!” I say to a weary and unheeding world “Can’t get the bloody thing undone.”

A small circlet of metal now adorns my index finger whilst the can remain otherwise untouched and untroubled by events.

“Duncan,” I say to myself, “you’re falling apart.”

“Nonsense,” a more practical part of me replies, “It is just that it was one hell of a sight easier when they expected folk to use a tin opener. Now it’s is all ‘Pull the Ring’, and if it comes off in your hand what are you supposed to do?”

I mutter Dark Things to relieve stress. I cast around in a rather futile way, rummaging in several drawers before discovering an old-type opener cowering behind a disused egg timer fearful that it is destined for the Tip. I hold the tin securely on the worktop and stab at it hard with the pointed bit of the device. The resulting gash is too near the centre of the tin.

“Bugger!” I say again, to a world that has no intention of replying, and would undoubtedly have terrified me if it had. I stab once more, this time with rather greater accuracy.

The tin’s defences are now breached at a more appropriate point. I insert the opener and work it around the can until it makes the full circle. Still using the tool, I try to lever up the jagged edges. The opener slips.

Blood flows.

“Bugger!” I say for the third time, sucking my finger. The world remains unimpressed and unmoved by my plight.

“Come on Miranda,” I say, uncertain as to whether I should be looking towards the stars or the fiery depths as I address my late wife, “stop rolling around with laughter at my incompetence. I know that neither of us were particularly expert on the domestic front, but you could at least give me a celestial hint or two about how to deal with this blasted can.”

Mournfully I inspect the gloopy morass within the tin, think better of indulging in such a blood-bespattered meal and drop the offending proto-meal into an already overfull bin.

“OK, Beans one, Duncan nil!” I admit to a totally unresponsive rack of kitchen knives that is hanging forlorn and unused on the wall to the right of the sink. “Tonight, is not the previously billed Night of the Bean. Tonight, we have a change of schedule. Tonight is – boom – boom – boom - Pizza Night!”

I wander into the downstairs bathroom, sucking my finger, in search of solace and sticking plaster. I glance into the basin mirror. Staring back at me is the adequately handsome face of a man who, as the forces of middle age wash over him, is happy to bend to their onslaught rather than take up arms against this particular sea of troubles. He wears his hair just a shade longer than is acceptable, even for someone in his profession.

I can hear Miranda’s voice chiding me. “You poor old sod, you’re turning grey.”

Close inspection reveals just one or two light strands are beginning to pepper the dark brown masses.

“Not so,” I respond, “such picturesque adornments merely add to my air of academic distinction, they are hardly harbingers of an onrush of senility.”

Finger duly plastered I make my way to the sitting room. I pick up the phone from the small inlaid table beside the window. I prod at a couple of buttons on the handset.

“Hi, is that the Pizza Palace? This is Duncan from 27 Druridge Street”.

The voice at the other end is female, remote and entirely disinterested in all things Duncan.

“Hi, Donna, how are you doing?”

The reply is as intelligible as a call centre from Pluto: distant, noncommittal and meaningless.

I continue unfazed by this unusual coolness, “Well tonight I reckon I’ll treat myself and go for your regular Hawaiian with, err, Nachos.”

The order having been successfully accomplished I replace the phone and flop my long bony frame into the larger and rather more comfortable of the two easy chairs. My meal should be delivered in about thirty minutes. I pick up the remote and flick on the T.V.

Disconcertingly I find myself suspended in a helicopter staring down vertiginously from above a sea-wracked cliff hounded by a Hitchcock-esque flock of wheeling, crying seabirds. The cliffs look terrifying; the sea gnaws cruelly at their base. The birds ebb and flow above the sheer walls. My mind spins in anguish at the precariousness of it all. A well-modulated voice oozes from its perch in the helicopter describing the tousled scene with untoward sanguinity.

The theme jingle for the ten o’clock news starts me from my doze. Reality barges in and ensures that my attention is refocused towards another bank crisis, a kidnapping, hurricane damage in the Caribbean - the news is either awful, or predictable, or both.

The front doorbell rings. My stomach gives a Pavlovian lurch. The pizza has arrived. I stumble through to the hall switching lights as I go.

Fumbling, I unhook the security chain and release the lock.

“Pizza for Professor Fielding!” sings out a clear voice from under the hood of a grey anorak.

The pizza is thrust forcefully towards my midriff. As I make to receive the box I find to my alarm that it is not being relinquished, indeed, propelled by it, I am being hustled backwards through the hallway. I make pitiful efforts to stem the advance of pizza and its deliverer, but fail.

“Who the hell are you. What sort of shit is this?”

The perpetrator, this head-down Hoodie, slams the door behind us with its foot.

The suddenness of such unprovoked invasion neutralises any possibility of resistance.

Fear overwhelms me.

No chance for a pause. Instead I am swept up in the moment, unresisting, uncomprehending, a passive victim of uncalled for circumstance.

I want to shout, to scream, to defecate. Instead I find myself continuing to be forced backwards through the hall and into the kitchen.

“Help!” I shout to a deaf world, “Help, I’m being mugged!”

I am being pushed hard up against the right-hand wall near the sink, and still this Hoodie is not letting go of the pizza box.

Is this a mugging? At what stage does a firm push become a physical assault – and then a mugging?

Where are this person’s accomplices?

Are there any accomplices?

Words are not being spoken.

My assailant does not seem to be bearing a weapon any more threatening than the pizza box. My apprehension level that has been so cruelly elevated now retreats a notch to just below ‘high’.

I remain slammed up against the wall. This is not a position that I feel comfortable in.

My assailant backs off a bit, still holding the pizza box. I am less immediately threatened, but most uncomfortable. There is a definite impression of a sharp ridge just below my shoulder blades. Of course, it is the knife rack. I always knew that I had put it in a stupid place, a fact that Miranda had reminded me of on innumerable occasions.

“Stop!” I say, finding a voice of indignation, “what the hell do you think that you’re up to?”

“This is your pizza delivery, sir.”

“No it isn’t, this isn’t the way that pizzas get delivered.” I know I am correct about this. Over the past month I have, perforce, honed up my personal experience in the pizza deliverer department.

“This is a special delivery, a very special delivery, a very special delivery just for you.”

It takes a while for the idea to dawn upon me. Very cautiously I feel behind my back with my left hand until I locate the rack. This is tricky, there are at least half a dozen knives dangling precariously from their magnetic catches. I have an aversion to sharp knife-like things falling off racks under the influence of gravity thus effectively transmuting my back into an involuntary pincushion. My hand moves cautiously upwards and detects a large blade. That will do. One gentle tug and I have it in my palm. At least I now have a weapon.

“I didn’t order, nor do I want, any sort of Special Pizza Delivery.”

“That’s a shame, after all the trouble that I’ve gone to in providing you with such a personal service.”

“Well just leave the box here and get out.”

“I think it would be a whole heap more friendly if we were to share it, sir,” comes the response.

“The Hell we will” I say, clutching grimly to the knife but, emulating Mac upon his Sidewalk, manage to keep it out of sight.

This is far from good. I have not yet been assaulted, but it can only be a matter of time. Young people that burst into middle class homes late in the evening are, in my vast experience, motivated by bad deeds rather than good intentions. Probably supporting a drug habit. It would be best not to escalate the situation; I am in enough danger as it is.

“What can I give you? How much money do you want?”

“Hey, relax, it’s OK,” says the interloper, “Please don’t be frightened, I mean you no harm and certainly didn’t mean to scare you.”

I am a rabbit petrified in car headlights. Of course I am scared. Bloody scared.

The Hoodie removes her jacket revealing a head of spiky close-cropped yellow hair and an altogether pleasing young lady, perhaps in her mid twenties. “Hi,” she says.

“Who the hell are you?”

"You can call me Starlight".

"That's a very strange name."

"You'll find it less strange than my real one," says the female who calls herself Starlight. "Come on. Don't worry. Nothing's going to hurt you. Let's sit down".

Why should I do what she is telling me? I am in danger and it would be considerably more effective to be standing when it comes to defending myself. My instant judgement however is that this Starlight person is not one to be trifled with. Perhaps it's best to take the line of least resistance – for now.

I sit.

I really do not understand what's going on. Why is she picking on me? What is the point of this Starlight girl barging in on my evening? The situation is decidedly discomforting. I suppose that she might have come from the Pizza Palace, but I have never seen her before. She has an air about her more akin to a film star or royalty than a pizza delivery person. This could hardly be some sort of food promotion; after all I am being invited to share my food with her, food that I have paid for with my own money. This is no free hand-out that I am being coaxed into buying.

"This isn't a food promotion is it?" I ask, knowing full well that it is not.

"Not very likely," comes the reply.

I am almost sure that this girl does not mean me any immediate harm. That is not to say that I am out of danger, just that the risk of incipient injury has receded. As a gesture of conciliation, and to steady my nerves, I bring my hand round from behind my back and carefully place the knife down on the table in front of me, being sure to position it within within easy reach.

"OK" I say, trying to defuse the situation. "Here's the deal. You and your friends stop threatening me and I'll leave this weaponry, this knife, where it is."

The girl looks at the knife lying on the table and then stares me straight in the face. A smile plays around her mouth and her blue eyes twinkle with merriment.

"Threaten?" she says.

"Yes, "

"Weaponry?"

"Yes."

“But that’s a bread knife.”

I look down, and sure enough the weapon of choice for the defence of my mortal body is but the saw-toothed, blunt-ended slicer of my morning toast-fest. I feel foolish.

The girl smiles the most gorgeous smile I have ever seen. “Serious weaponry I see!”

I look at her, look at the breadknife, and capitulate. “I don’t suppose it’s that much of a threat.” I too am grinning now.

“Come on let’s eat.” says Starlight, “I’m starving!”

Whilst she tucks in to the pizza with considerable gusto I find that one slice is sufficient for me. I really ought to be handling the situation differently, but what on earth should I do? This is a gross intrusion upon my property, my privacy, and my life. I was taken unawares or this would never have occurred. I have yet to discover why I should be entertaining, at my own expense, an uninvited guest at ten fifteen on a cold Monday evening.

“Look,” I say, “that’s my pizza you are eating.”

“I thought we were sharing it.”

I try hard to remember if I have seen the girl before. It flashes across my mind that she might have attended one of my seminars over the past couple of years, but I cannot place her. I am almost certain that she is not one of the regular delivery people from the Pizza Palace.

“Who are you? Have I met you before?”

“Conceivably!” says the girl who calls herself Starlight.

“What do you mean ‘conceivably’? Have you come from the Pizza Palace?”

“Almost certainly.”

She is really quite attractive. She has draped her jacket over the back of one of the kitchen chairs revealing a well filled white T-shirt. She is a good deal shorter than I am, not thin, but well proportioned. Her spikey blonde hair is just a shade lighter than her eyebrows. Her eyes are of the most intense dark blue and her demeanour is friendly and relaxed.

She calls herself Starlight, but has said that this is not her real name. I wonder what that is. Even if she has come from the Pizza Palace that would hardly explain her

actions. Perhaps she has bribed one of the regular delivery staff so that she can bring my pizza to me; but why me? If she intends me no harm, and I am by no means convinced of that, then what is the point of a young lady of undoubted attractiveness breaking into the home of a crotchety old widower at this time of night?

I just might rephrase that 'crotchety old widower' bit. It hardly does me justice. How about 'eligible philosopher exuding maturity and wit'? God, that is worse! It sounds like an advert for speed dating at Saga. I toy with this analogy for a full minute with just a trace of a smile forming around the corners of my mouth. In doing so I abandon the attempt to couch myself in more flattering terms.

"Have you come here alone," I say, trying to make it sound casual.

"Probably." says Starlight.

"Look here, it's about time that you gave me a straight answer!"

"Hey, don't get cross. Chill, just go with the flow," says my potential assailant.

I definitely fancy this girl. I wonder what my bodily systems are making of having to switch from 'full fight' mode to 'incipient desire' mode in such a short space of time. My whole endocrine system must be approaching overload. I resolve that whatever the state of the various hormones doing battle within this temple of humanity known as me, I must remain very cautious of this young lady. The sexual stirrings she is arousing in me are all very well, but my situation remains perilous. If I weaken to my baser nature I will be laying myself open to all sorts of future accusations. The situation is too fraught to take any chances, especially those that might be considered as compromising. Perhaps I should phone the Pizza Palace to see if she is indeed one of their delivery girls. On the other hand how about giving a spot of direct action a try?

"I'm going to chuck you out." I say. "You can't just wander in on me like this, violate my house, eat my food, and speak in monosyllables."

"The words 'conceivably', 'probably' and 'certainly' have three or four syllables each."

"God-damn it. Get Out!"

Starlight does not seem in the least dismayed. She looks at me with, to my concern, a slightly pitying expression. She makes as if to say something but apparently changes her

mind. She pushes her chair backwards across the floor with sudden resolve. She rises to her feet. She smiles slightly at me. She crosses to the kitchen sink. "I need some water."

I soak up her youthful figure appraisingly. What am I supposed to do now? I can hardly manhandle her out the door and throw her bodily into the street. Perhaps I should call the police, but that might land me in fairly hot water, depending upon what she says to them. It would be fairly easy for her to maintain that she was innocently delivering a pizza and that I hauled her into the house against her will and thereupon set about ravishing her.

I play that bit back again so that I can maintain the scene a little longer I really rather like the verb 'to ravish'. I try to remember whether I have ever ravished anything or anyone in my whole life, but nothing comes to mind. Pity really, it is a waste of a really good word if it is not put to sound practical use.

The girl calling herself Starlight bends over the sink. Her upper body curls around as she opens her mouth beneath the cold tap and drinks water directly from it. Her left foot lifts from the floor as her torso bends and her leg extends. Wow, I really fancy this girl.

She turns and sees on my face what can only be an expression of drooling lust, with just a morsel of Ravish still remaining. "Do you want to fuck me now?" she says.

Four

London was having one of its bad days as its arteries teetered towards a collapse into chaos. The drizzle of the wintery morning had persisted late into the afternoon bringing shame upon the weather forecasters and misery to all. Christmas shoppers were colliding with things animate and inanimate throughout every cranny of the capital. The gutters of the side streets, swollen by the remorseless rain, bore a slush of discarded rubbish pulped by crushing wheels into a festering morass. Buses bulged with bodies crammed beyond the limits of personal space; squashed, soggy, irritable refugees from that even harsher world of the streets. Dry, fortunate, and grateful, the smug few had commandeered the remaining black cabs thus achieving the ultimate goal of the day in distancing themselves from the reality of the seething, dripping masses.

Helen Marston buttoned her chic coat against the elements, snapped her umbrella open and stepped into Devonshire Street. She bothered to make two futile attempts to hail a taxi before accepting the inevitable with a slight sigh of resignation. She had little option but to turn her back to the wind and rain and hurry off in the direction of Great Portland Street underground station.

Battling to keep her broly as a protective shield behind her Helen smiled wryly as she recalled her last clients of the day. She knew them as a small but ambitious firm of builders based in Enfield. Goodness knows what sort of scam they were pulling in hiring her company's suite of meeting rooms at such vast expense, but she had set the whole thing up for them beautifully. Their 'punters' would have had no idea that the chameleon-like offices of 'Room for Business Ltd' were not the London headquarters of a major civil engineering firm.

Helen was good at her job and enjoyed the games that she was able to help her clients play in renting out her buildings for their possibly slightly nefarious purposes. She could create all that was required: offices, boardrooms and company headquarters as well as provide 'virtual office' facilities such as phone lines and e-mail addresses. 'Corporate Prostitution' she had called it, creating a semblance of reality, a vision created of smoke and mirrors that could be made to disappear with one stroke of her magic wand. She was not sure that her staff would appreciate their hard work being so described.

She had remembered this time to get her building supervisor to replace the temporary nameplate at the entrance door with the real one. Details mattered in her business and it had been embarrassing a month or two back when the team had overlooked a simple nameplate change. Now she had made sure that the building was set up for the small informal meeting that one of her regular clients had scheduled for tomorrow morning. No deception involved with this one, but again it had to be right.

Helen had been devastated by the death some three weeks ago of her older sister. Miranda had been just two years her senior and throughout their lives had been very much the leader. Miranda had been the clever one, with her University Fellowship and her long list of published works and then her position leading a cutting-edge research team. Helen's own achievements seemed to her to be rather feeble by comparison. "Mind you," she thought, "I'll be earning a damn sight more money than Miranda ever did."

The funeral at their parents' home village of Cartmel, and then the memorial service a couple of days later in Lancaster had been satisfactory. Duncan had dealt with the whole business of coroners and undertakers before she had arrived up north and she was sure that she had been wise, and indeed quite happy, to go along with Duncan's suggestion that she should not view her dead sister's body. "Best to remember her as you knew her in life," he had said. It was one of death's many clichés, but she knew Duncan was right.

The wake had been a little harder to cope with. She had not known many of Miranda's friends and such conversations as she had joined in with had been tediously academic, but Duncan had kept an eye on her and had come swooping over to the rescue as and when help was needed. She had spent the minimum time up north before returning to the boutique home in Islington that she had, until very recently, shared with George.

Helen dipped into the station, flashed her Oyster at the card reader, and was fighting her way through the crowds on the eastbound platform just as a tube clattered to a halt. No chance of the sanctuary of a seat during the evening rush hour, but she only had to endure for a couple of stops. She suffered the squeeze down the carriage and hung on with grim determination to the back of a seat. She would have to change at Kings Cross. There was a momentary wait at Euston Square, then the train lurched viciously into action again playing its usual sport of skittles with its passengers, who cannoned each other towards

the end doors of the carriage. They were plunged into the dry darkness before hurtling into Kings Cross and St Pancras. The doors opened and Helen allowed herself to be ejected from the tube along with the outgoing crush of passengers and baggage.

There was the usual *mêlée*; people turning, twisting, crushing, changing direction. She made for the Victoria line. Arriving on the platform she pushed her way forcibly towards the far end in search of a little more space. There was a collective intake of breath from the crowd behind her; she looked round. Someone screamed. There was a shout of “No” as the executioner howled out of its tunnel, brakes locked, iron wheels scrabbling ineffectually against the remorseless destiny of the rails.

“Oh Bugger,” said a respectable looking man to no one in particular. “Another bloody jumper, that’s all we need.”

Helen, to her shame, felt much the same. “Incredible how inconsiderate people are to do this sort of thing at Rush Hour,” she thought, and then “Oh, my God. Look at what living in London has done to me!”

The Unfeeling Monster of the Underground, made her way to the Northern Line platform, suffered an even more intimate transportation experience, alighted at the Angel and walked homewards along Liverpool Road. It continued to rain.

Helen had been fortunate to buy the house in Bewdley Street about three years ago. It was a fashionable enough address and she had very much set her heart on it. The price had been high and repayments of the resulting mortgage were towards the upper limit even of her income, so that generous contributions from the recently removed George had been particularly welcome. Now that he had left (and “bloody good riddance to the wanker” she thought) she would have to plan her retail therapy with a little more care. She needed to be sure that she could continue to cover the repayments.

She unlocked the oiled oak door, deposited her wet, and ridiculously expensive, coat in the hall, picked up the post, and kicked off her shoes. She glanced into the mirror and gave her medium length exquisitely styled dark brown hair a quick primp. She wandered into the dining area to pour herself a drink. The two gold bracelets on her left wrist clinked together as she waved the gin bottle generously at an eager cut glass tumbler.

The house boasted a Spartan rather than a luxurious style of furnishing. Those pieces it did contain were expensive and interesting rather than comfortable. There were

three exquisitely chosen paintings that reflected both her excellent taste and George's ample wallet. She sank, ever so slightly, into the plush cushions of a green chaise that was one of but a few outstanding pieces.

Half a glass of G&T, a gas bill, a credit card statement and an appeal from Oxfam received appropriate treatment. Helen picked up a small white envelope with her name and address typed on it. It did not look like a bill and bore none of the hallmarks that denote a charitable appeal. With slightly quickened interest she slit it open. Inside was a single piece of white paper, folded in half. It read:

'FROM WHAT DID MIRANDA DIE'

That was all; displayed in bold capital type. Nothing more. No address. No signature. Not even an interrogation mark. Helen looked at the postmark. The letter bore a legend denoting that it had been posted yesterday in Preston.

She sat looking at the message trying to divine further meaning from its simple text. Her first thought was that it must be a hoax, although in the very worst of taste. Someone wanted to upset her by casting totally unjustified suspicion on the sufferings of her poor sister. She wondered about George but, pig as he was, he would not do such a thing to her. His metier was a needle-sharp caustic wit, not the abusive pen. She was surprised to discover herself suddenly missing the undoubted benefit of George, or to be more precise the benefit of George's logical brain. It would have been good to talk this through with him. He could be relied upon to smother any desperate crisis with the dreariness of a finely tuned legal mind.

She had indeed wondered about the progression of Miranda's startlingly rapid death. She knew that cancer could strike quickly and conclusively, but Miranda's behaviour was hardly consistent with the sister that she knew. Miranda had not confided in her about her illness, and that was highly unusual. Helen readily admitted that she had not known anyone who had died from an inoperable brain tumour, so she accepted that for all she knew the speed and unexpectedness of the diagnosis, and the rapid progression of the disease, were entirely normal. But it had seemed wrong that Miranda had not spoken of it to her.

Duncan had seemed quite satisfied with the care that Miranda received. He, after all, had a lot more to do with the hospital authorities than she. Now she felt guilty that she had only managed a one-day visit to Lancaster. Perhaps she should have stayed up there during Miranda's short illness, but what use could she have been? Whilst she loved her sister dearly, they had never been 'touchy feely' types and the thought of holding Miranda's hand and watching her die had filled Helen with the deepest dread.

Helen's phone rang.

It was George.

"I thought I might discover you sola domi," he said. "Following our recent minor contretemps and your rash ejection of me and mine from chez nous I distinctly remember your catchy phrases that, roughly translated, suggested that you were not at all enamoured of the idea of setting eyes upon me again. Well, in these changing times water has flowed, so to speak, and I have tidings that I need to impart to you over foul food and fine wine."

Five minutes earlier Helen would have screamed a string of obscenities at this master of the flowery phrase and flung the receiver down. Even now this would have given her a great deal of satisfaction. She was sorely tempted. However, the needs of the moment prevailed and instead she said, in an almost conciliatory voice tinged with only a small element of canine command, "Come here now, George. I need to talk to you too!"