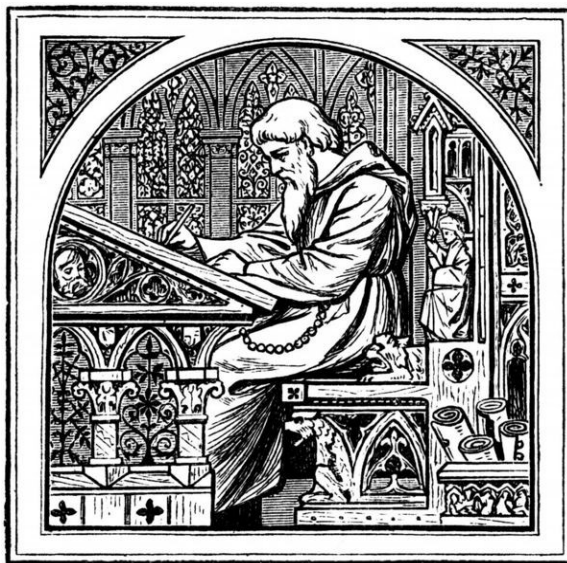


A Pocketful of Lies



J-P Stacey

Wake-up call

He was luxuriating, glad of the hot pounding and cold spritz of the shower's spray, when the telephone rang. Its jangling cut through the freshness, to his hangover beneath, and with a groan he pulled himself out and answered.

"Hello?"

There was a pause before the confession: "... Hi."

He sighed, away from the phone. Keep it light, he thought, and brightly said: "Hi. Morning. Uh..." (rubbed his eyes) "... how are you?"

"OK," the voice said, following the outline of a shrug. "I miss you."

There was a pause as they both waited. "Well? Say something. Say you miss me."

"I miss you," he admitted, rubbing a hand over his face and collecting droplets into a swipe of water. "But..."

"But."

"Yeah."

Her turn to sigh. "OK. Ring me? Please?"

"OK."

He finished his shower, but couldn't get back the hum in his skin or the way the warmth had been seeping into his bones. As he dressed he saw among the clutter on his bedside table the photograph frame, still turned away from the bed. He swung it round towards him for a moment, then back to the wall. Got his bag, left the house, headed towards the tube station. Tried to forget the smell of her hair: almonds and roses.

Open secret

The student in the gardens of St George's Church ranted at his companion.

"Nobody believes," the student wailed. "Oh, everyone in the department pays lip-service, I mean, they all claim to know about—" in a sarcastically elevated pitch "—those terribly eccentric assimilations of Egyptian and Phoenician superstitions that he made into his architectural oeuvre, rendering the sublime both bizarre and baroque—bloody Dr Price's words, incidentally—but nobody really realises what he discovered."

The other just nodded, sympathetically.

"I mean, take the geometry of the steeple. It follows the principles of a hermeneutic that he learnt from the writings of Mausolus. It *glows* with ancient power. Anyone can see that from miles away. But do people care? No!" He almost spat. "People are amazed if they can sharpen a razorblade in a paper pyramid, but they don't *think*, they don't think about the possibilities on the grand scale of a visionary like Hawksmoor."

The researcher flailed his arms like a drowning man. He had taken to spending his lunchtimes in the gardens. It was close enough to his supervisor's and his own offices, and

familiar to him through his hours of research; he invariably met one friend or other there: someone to talk to, or more often at.

Still quiet, his companion offered a sympathetic half-smile. This was all the encouragement the student required.

“Look at it,” he said, waving up at the church buildings and beginning to stride. “The ideas! The symbology! Hawksmoor knew, you know. Glorious! Theosophical! Perfect!” He gazed in awe at the building, while his companion shifted round to appraise it. “Hawksmoor—” (he wagged his finger) “—*learned how to protect himself from the ravages of time*. He could resurrect the dead and wind up history like a spring. He pulled the past to his present and his present to the future!” The researcher was shouting now. “His life was eternal: his, and all those lives that he gifted with his secret knowledge! *They live forever, but NOBODY BELIEVES!*”

Spent, he hung his head onto his chest, and all the life seemed to leak out of him. His companion shifted, and spoke.

“I believe,” he affirmed. His accent couldn't be placed: it was musty, like damp, hidebound books.

The student lifted his head at this and nodded amiably in response. He looked on as his friend slowly disappeared, leaving only the gravestone he had been leaning on.

To pass the time (I)

She sits squeezed into a leatherette window seat, feet up and eyes fixed unfixedly on the street outside. Her oval, faintly tanned face catches the sunlight, turning blonde the fuzz at the back of her cheeks. This is in turn exposed by the style in which she wears her hair, which pulls its black sweep back so severely. Occasionally she remembers her cigarette and takes a distracted drag; otherwise it burns slowly, almost smokelessly: neglected.

Her coffee has gone cold (the coffee, like the cigarette, is a prop). When—if—her attention returns to the inside of the shop, she will feel selfconscious and go to order another. From the quiet and calm of absorption in her own thoughts she will then have to connect to noise and bustle, be spun once, twice—docked and orbiting social interaction—only to be released and return to her seat. For now, her small mouth is slightly open in thought, revealing two front teeth, aspirin-white.

Stanley Manly

Woah! Stan, eh? Stan The Man! Remember Stan? Ahh, you must remember him, everybody knows Stan. Sharp as anything, he is. Such a great bloke too. Always got an answer to any question, and the answer is: Stan!

I remember when I first met him. Oh, it must be a few years ago now. A little pub out in Highgate, it was. I'd been having such a rough time of things, and I remember, the first thing he said was: “it could be worse.” It could be worse, eh? We must've talked for hours that night, and he didn't half cheer me up. Got a way about him, he has. Knows how to really cut to the heart of the matter. Anyway, me and Stan were both pretty wrecked, and we leant on each other all the way home—he lived practically on my doorstep back then. He really talked some sense.

When I got in, my housemates must've wondered what had got into me!

Saw Stan a few times after that. He'd pop round, ask me if I wanted to soak up some of his old philosophy, and maybe sink one-slash-a-couple-slash-loadsa beers with him! Always there when I needed cheering up too. I remember one thing he used to say: "never trust women," he'd say. And he was absolutely right. I never have. But I felt I could tell Stan whatever was wrong with my life, and if he didn't know what to do, he'd at least be a shoulder to cry on. Dependable, was our Stanley.

We drifted apart, I suppose. Maybe Stan only hung around for as long as I needed him, like some sort of guardian angel or something, and when he realised I was coping better, making a decent stab at things, he just drifted off to help someone else. But I still think of him, and I see him every now and again, just popping through, going with the flow. I don't have a lot of time nowadays, though, so it's always a flying visit.

I'll never forget what he taught me, though. He's always there, in the back of my mind, with all those sharp little points he made, all those smart lines, giving me the edge: letting me know he's right. He's always right. He was a good one, was Stan.

Visions and revisions

I stopped at the gate, one hand on the dry wood. The church stood, calmly observing me even as I frowned at it. Unable to push the gate open, I merely applied some of my weight to it. It creaked, sounding tired. Whereas the church felt like some sort of sentinel (although stood at ease) on my immediate horizon, the gate was happy just to wait, for my decision to push or not to push, to wait for its eventual retirement and decay.

This was stupid. I was prevaricating, I knew, with all the comparison, this invocation of metaphor from my surroundings. But I still could not open the gate. From a distance I looked around at the gravestones, but remained myself outside the churchyard wall. I put my hands in my pockets and waited, like the gate, wondering what I might be able to force myself to do next.

I passed through the village. It looked healthy in the dry autumn. Leaves swelled and puffed in one final attempt to photosynthesise before their daddy trees gave up on them, cut them off from their inheritance. Houses exploded with jagged, unevenly cut bricks, a stopped explosion with mortar padded into the cracks. The main road forked in a gentle "Y" and the lesser route headed up to the church and its churchyard. Up this road I walked, and stopped at the gate. Without a word, knowing that I was not particularly wanted there. I let myself be pulled back the way I came, away from the church and the graves, by a weight of indifference.

I had resolved to go up there, meaning to do so for some time. The village was beyond the eastern outskirts of the city. There's not the space any more for graveyards in the centre, and anyway the only dead we have time for is those that are still moving around. A wheezy bus

Charming, elegant, old-fashioned Cotswolds village, seeks upwardly-mobile inhabitants for love-hate dance towards overdevelopment, and weakening and ultimately death of humble spirit. Must have own cars, at least one each. Box 01/01.

Are you a bipedal F? I'm the same but M, with own hat and luxury bedroom. We could get together to eat chips, fuck blindly, pop out bairns and argue in Poundstretcher's. Opportunity knocks but once, but I'll knock you up AND about! Box 01/02.

Kierkegaard, Plath, Joyce, Woolf. Am an arts student but don't show it at all. Looking to meet similar arts students indefinably different from those on course. Anything M will do, as the ones here all out rowing. F, 20, anorexic and always tired. Box 01/03

Nobody. Nothing. Nowhere. Seeks similar. Do not get in touch. Ever. Box: n/a.

went to the village and back once an hour. By the time it reached the “please drive carefully” sign, two girls were my only company in an echoey bus. They talked about nothing at all and stayed on when I got off at my stop, which was in the centre of the village near the monument. For all I know they stayed on all the way back, for want of something to do.

Looking round, I swayed a little as I tried to get my bearings. I had seen the church from the A-road, and tried to find it again. It had no spire, though, was neither modern enough nor old enough to have one. After half an hour, I had made enough mistakes to know where I was going. There was a gentle gradient, and I hadn't realised the church was on a hill.

I pushed open the complaining gate and strode purposefully on the gravel, and turned off onto the grass near the newer graves. It didn't take long to find his name, and I laid a few flowers on the stone. I paused for a few moments, trying to think myself into solemnity.

I hadn't mentioned the flowers before. I had to be carrying flowers. I heard only a few days ago that he had died. From a mutual friend. It's strange how these things touch you. I hadn't really thought about him for years. Even when we were at school, he wasn't really part of my social group. No, that's not true. In my class for a year or two, he was: I remember. I remember because I can picture Gail, only fourteen then, turning her acidic wit on him. She etched him to the bone and I laughed.

And now he has become the first in my generation to die. First of those I knew, of course. People die every day, and if they all made us stop and think then we'd get nothing done. That's what I did, though: I stopped to think. I had the sensation of the earth turning under me for a brief time, as his life, the edited highlights of it that impacted on me, passed before my eyes. When I got back onto the world, I found it had moved just slightly too far without me. I wasn't in the same place I had been.

That's what drove me to buy those flowers, catch that bus, and forget to sneer at the girls' empty conversation. I wanted to get my mind back to where it had been, to the right time zone. And all the way there I had to formulate my plan, how I would walk through the village and look at the church and.... It needed to be planned: my first grave-visit as an adult. I wanted to set it in the story of my life. It was all selfishness, of course, and I knew as I approached the dry gate that all the planning was useless. Only now would I be able to see what I was going to do.

A quick Welsh lesson

Welsh is a rich, historical language. It was invented in 1953 by the Welsh comedian and astronomer, Griff Rhys Jones. His basic premise was to confuse American tourists who can barely speak English. As part of the fabrication of Welsh, Griff Rhys Jones wrote the “Teach Yourself: Welsh” book, which is colloquially known as “Tyw,” a Welsh word meaning “without a grammar section.”

The Welsh language consists of 22 consonants and over a hundred vowels. It is important to distinguish between the “typical English” pronunciation of any vowel, and the actual Welsh pronunciation. In Welsh, the “e” is pronounced like an “e”, whereas the “u” is also pronounced like an “e”, although closer to the German “ü”. The “a” is an “a” unless it has a caret above it, in which case it is pronounced like an “a”. “O” is pronounced like a “u”, and “y” is either pronounced like an “uh”, “i” or “e”. “W”, being a vowel in Welsh (except when it is a

consonant), is pronounced like a “u”, being a different “u” to the “u” that “y” is *not* pronounced like.

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In addition are certain double-consonantal sounds, some of which do not appear in other languages at all. “Dd” is a voiced “th”, “ff” is an unvoiced “v”, “ll” involves breathing through your hard palate, and “tbd” is a sound rarely-used even by the most expert of Welsh speakers. The pronunciation is similar to the “zh” sound in “pleasure”, but as it would sound at the precise moment of death by drowning. Incidentally, many native Welsh speakers are of a taciturn disposition.

Welsh grammar is surprisingly simple. In Welsh, there are only nouns and adjectives. Verbs are frowned upon and articles and conjunctions eschewed entirely. So, for example, the sentence “the cat sat on the mat” would actually transliterate from Welsh as “Cat sittingness mat uppermost surface” (“cathi eisteddfod y

carped caead”). Past tense is indicated by the word “y”, as is possessive, motion-towards, motion-from, position and metaphorical statements. Therefore “it was the best of times; it was the worst of times” could be “Times (past) equivalent fraction best; times (past) equivalent fraction worst” (“Amseriad y rydwyw ffracsiwn gorau; Amseriad y rydwyw ffracsiwn trechu”). No entire book has ever been translated into Welsh, although several prefaces have been managed to date.

As I have already learned from “Tyw,” Welsh is applicable in hundreds of everyday situations. It can get you a seat next to a pretty nurse who likes white coffee, or can let you tell people you are from Lincoln (even if you're not: they can't tell the difference!) And soon I hope to be able to announce my desire to try on a white skirt that is hanging in the shop window there, and looks very nice, but it is a little small, do you have one in my size. See what you're missing: why not take up Welsh today?

Higher and higher

This was the country of dead things, of circles worn thin in the sky by birds of prey, lazing and looping out of genetic habit rather than the prospect of something among the rocks yet to be killed. Were the heartbeats of tiny things still tap-tap-tapping their fear in the grass, they would have been stopped by the swoop of talons and beak. The rock, the steppes and the shelves, all yielded nothing except bits of scrub, roots gently grinding the lichen and the half-food. This was his favourite mountain, and he climbed it whenever he could.

Far in front of his gaze were the foothills—rippling away, gradually greener—towards the calm of the distant horizon. Though his eyes were steady the undulations seemed to be heading off away from him, like waves. These hills quivered motionlessly; they were petrified by the sight of the jagged mountain, an axe-head stuck in the side of the earth. Trees rooted in the grey rock separated on the hilltops and clumped inbetween, as if the lower landscape were covered with a thick pile of green, stubbly carpet that its maker had not fitted so as to account for the gradient-in-gradient.

The wind blew past him. It buffeted against his boots, ran along his trousers and jacket,

caressing his torso and shirt before ruffling his hair playfully and moving on towards the cliff face. The air it carried past him was far too clean, so clean it scratched and took away. It was as dead as the rocks around him. Odourless and without body: like distilled water, yes, but with an ionized smell from thick storms, one of which was congealing towards the north face of the huge crag, clutching its side with clammy fingers. Ozone, oxygen, and nitrogen was all it had. The minerality of healthy air without the pollution of organic disease. It took heat from him, and left him with these basic vapours.

Two hundred yards above him were his supplies, where he had left them. Crampons and a pick, grey metal with brushed matt surfaces that matched the buckles on the rucksack that contained them all. Recovering them from the ledge where they lay, inert and useless, was a difficulty he no longer turned his thoughts to.

His top three shirt buttons were undone. Their loss was a failure in mechanical trickery, of the teasing of a clasp through a narrow eye into wider space beyond. It was a microcosm of his much greater problem, which eclipsed also the loss of his climbing gear. If he could only notice the mess of his shirt, with his head bent forwards, far forwards, too far forwards, then maybe he would have noticed the irony of his shirt's lost grip, and would have smiled grimly with the mouth now parted like the door to an empty house. But.

His stare, taking in the whole landscape with its fixity, could no longer divert itself towards the particular of buttons and fastenings, but looked out now from the mountain he had embraced like a mother, a lover. Its sides had only moments ago passed him swiftly, like the summary of a life story. The quick, cold rush of wind had not chilled him as much as the sudden stop. The adoration that he had felt for this dead thing had been repaid in its own bleak coin. For this had been his favourite mountain, and he had climbed it whenever he could.

She watched television

The kettle began to react, trembling a little, and then the water was boiling, wisps of steam padding out to become clouds and then a mist, which condensed onto the shelf of spices, opened and spilled and tired. Packets of biscuits, cereal, a few tins and caddies: they kept a respectful distance of worktop from the kettle, cowering like primitives before fire. The switch clicked off by magic as a figure in jeans reached the kitchen. She found a cup, closed a cupboard door, shook out some dead coffee into the cup, poured water onto it and stirred.

She brushed black hair away from sharp, Roman features, absorbed in making the drink, and started as the telephone began to ring a shrill bird call. Picking up the cup, she tripped out of the room into the hall, leaving the kettle to sigh and relax, and the condiments to shuffle a little closer in sympathy.

The living room faced south, and was bright and sunny. A blue felt sofa half-covered with the Independent was opposite a television, and a coffee table nestled into a thick-pile rug. The contents of a bookcase against one wall were sparse, and an occasional table with a green glass top carried a small lamp and the telephone. The telephone handset was singing brightly and loudly as she entered the room—barefooted on bare floorboards—and picked it up as she sat down on the sofa. The talk button was squashy to the touch and she pressed it till it went click. Ssh, now.

Hi. *[slow, broadening smile]*

Hi, you.

Yeah, just making a drink.

She called a few minutes ago. Something came up. At work.

Ah, I'll just watch TV. Chill. *[stretch, and sit back]* You?

Poor you. I'll send pizza round.

[grin, then laugh] OK, I'll get them to send a salad.

Yeah.

I think so, yeah. I mean, Jan' might want to go out some other time, but I can keep tomorrow night free.

That'd be great. Anywhere special?

Yeah. I'd like that. Okay. See you then.

Bye. *[bip]*

The phone was returned, more or less, to its cradle. A green LED switched on as the handset homed in on the electrodes and slept. She reached for the television remote, almost identical to the phone, The brushed plastic was rough in her hand, unyielding as sandstone. She pressed randomly. The television hummed and whirred melodramatically for a half second, then warmed up. For a second or two there was the lone voice of someone inconsequential on the local BBC news. Then the sound was followed shortly afterwards by a smooth, focussed picture. It was perfect, balanced colour, and somehow more real than the rest of the room, a painting of a disaster surrounded by the mundane.

She watched television. Outside, the sun set. Street lights came on. She didn't remember turning on the table lamp. Programmes came and went. The phone didn't ring again, but she wasn't expecting it to.

Long black lashes crept over moist eyes. She was staring at the television screen but showed no recognition of what was on. Her skin rumped where her hand propped her head up at no small angle. The light of the television threw broad sweeps of colour onto her face. A cushion was in her lap, protecting her from stomach cramps, and her legs were tucked up under her.

The coffee cup sat on the table in front of her, long since cooled and sticky with three or four drops of liquid. Her eyes blinked slowly three times, then closed. Her head nodded forward; she pulled it backwards and took a deep breath, lips not wanting to part. She reached for the remote control, took it in a warm, sleep-fuzzy hand and switched off the television. She unfolded her legs to the floor, switched off the light. In the drips and splashes of street light, she fumbled her way to the door, closing it behind her.

One drink too many

It goes all swimmy in your head as you stand up and move towards the staircase and the party. A dream lies heavy across your shoulders, a stole made from fuzz and lead. It forces you groundwards, pulling you from one marble step to another; you are like water finding its own level. As your feet move alternately (as far ahead of each other as your long skirt permits) your head seems to follow the line of the bannister, two feet above it, a smooth spiral that swoops at the last minute, propelling you into the people that stand around, clutching their drinks for dear life.

Drinking game for Christmas parties: "I have never"

Here are some suggestions:

- ... had an alcoholic drink before 10am!
- ... noticed your hangovers getting steadily worse!
- ... given up smoking more than twice!
- ... smoked pot or hashish to impress!
- ... claimed to have used class A or B drugs (when I hadn't) to impress!
- ... had recurring nightmares!
- ... watched someone from afar, knowing nothing would ever come of it!
- ... seen someone I love leave with someone else!
- ... seen my parents fight!
- ... had a nervous breakdown!
- ... laid in bed for more than twenty-four hours (NB not with flu!)
- ... argued with my partner!
- ... lied to my partner!
- ... shouted at my partner!
- ... hit my partner!
- ... waged a hate campaign against someone!
- ... tried to get someone sacked or otherwise excluded!
- ... bullied someone!
- ... been bullied!
- ... hit my children!
- ... felt no compunction to mourn for a close relative!
- ... schemed!
- ... publicly wished a debilitating or terminal disease on someone!
- ... been sick, broken down, had a seizure, or been otherwise ill in a public place!
- ... felt hated, cheated, downtrodden, unnecessary, or overworked!

Now make up your own!

Your feet touch the polished floor. Edward, in the closest group to you, says something inconsequential, a remark that lassoes you to his conversation. He's always been sweet on you, has Edward, and now he's talking, and you can feel your smile shining out like diamonds as you make some reply that you did not even give conscious thought to. At the end of a joke from one of his friends the rest of them sway as if caught in the wind, and billow towards you and away. You laugh too, watching yourself laugh and then make your excuses and guide your feet, or they guide you, across the hallway and into the living room.

Here the crowd is thick and viscous, yet it parts miraculously before you, You wonder if it's something to do with how you look, like the mark of Cain upon you, but now you're seeing yourself from the outside and you can see you look fine. So you're now outside of yourself and you don't feel like you can get back. All your mental muscles feel weak and flimsy, no pull. You take the chance to have a longer look. The eyes aren't quite all there but that's probably the drink; you move towards the table for another but before you reach it or reach out for it Owen has placed himself in your path.

You could never resist talking to Owen, that brilliant smile, better even than your own. Even now, when your thoughts barely inform your movements, a muscle memory brings you sidling up next to him. You both talk and he gives you the full wattage of his teeth and his bright, bright eyes. You think perhaps he thinks maybe—there's something wrong—and he steals a glance to your left but says nothing. The words coming out of you are witty enough but you know they lack life and there's nothing you can do about it. You feel far away. Stepping over tangles of farewells you slowly retreat from him, as from Edward before him, and head towards the balcony for some air.

The stars stab through the blackness above you, letting in a cold whoosh of vacuum. It rolls across your brow, drying the sweat but not relieving your fever. Your thoughts are just pushed and blown through the trees as you stare, dumbly, at the too-clear sky. Behind you is the noise of the party, and individual voices and laughs push past you to leap from the balcony

into the bushes and the night. Absent-mindedly you push your bracelet around over the skin on your wrist, brushing the light blonde down first flat and then bristled. As the wind travels past you one last time, the hairs bristle further and then further still as I look over your right-hand shoulder and, breaking the silence between us, start to talk. You: you just nod.

I guide you again, this time back through the party. Without really knowing how it works, I manage to share with you the natural modesty of gait that makes me easy to ignore. We slide and hover through the talk and chatter, heading towards the front door. My hand is on your elbow, moving you gently forwards. I see your coat on the racks by the exit, strained tight by other clothes leaning on it. Putting your coat round you, I step to the door and open it. As you walk through, can't help but walk through under my command, I look back and see the glass, on the table by the bottom of the stairs. The glass I gave you, with white grit mixed amongst its wine dregs, before we had gone upstairs to talk. Softly, so that nobody saw us leave, I close the door.

To pass the time (II)

He had seen her while he collected dead cups, some forty minutes after she had come into the shop. She had struck him and his twenty-year-old hormones as pretty, but—distracted. In the ominous, archaic meaning. Someone else served her and, after looking uncomfortable by the cappuccino machine, she went to sit alone, letting swathes of misery drape themselves over her table.

His shift was almost over, and she was still there. She was untouchable, though, shrugging off each pretext he had used to try to approach her: conversation slid away at the last minute, a physical repulsion. He wondered what was on her mind. Maybe romance. An affair gone wrong. Cheating on her, or by her? He lost interest a little then; he would be the last thing she wanted. Maybe. He didn't know how to play these moves and, resigned to a confused but uneventful end to his shift, he left the shop, head spinning. He did not notice, but wondered later, if she saw him going past her window.

You old fucking bastard

The whole school, a thousand non-individuals, faded out obediently as she walked to the lectern. At the edge of her vision, she saw the headmaster's exophthalmic glare and realised that he was bulbously staring down the chatter. She remembered her time as a student, all the names he had been called—she had called him—behind his back. Frogger. Marty Feldman. Bog-eye. Wondering how many in the audience were secretly thinking similar nicknames and worse, she shuffled her notes on the wood. Even from a few feet away, it had the varnish smell that took her back to classrooms and chalk dust. She coughed, trying to keep it quiet but aiming it into the microphone.

“Most of you in the audience have probably never seen me before,” she stammered. “Those of you that have were almost certainly too young then to recognise me now. My name's Jane Harker, and I've been asked back by Fuh-Mr Trueman to talk to you about applying to Oxford—”

“No, no, no,” croaked a voice, interrupting her. Halting abruptly, she let the whole stream

of thoughts break and fizz in her mind. What on earth? Who was that? Did she recognise the speaker? What did he think he was doing? And why, of all things, did nobody seem to acknowledge what an amazing faux pas it was to start heckling, heckling a guest speaker, for goodness' sake?

Indeed, nobody seemed to hear the interruption at all. The faces she could make out looked expectant and slightly puzzled, apparently wondering what this odd visitor was doing, pausing mid-speech as she was. Deciding to entirely gloss over it, Jane continued.

“I know this school doesn't often send candidates to Oxford, but I wanted to come and let you all know that there's no harm at all in trying. Maybe if I give you a few ideas of what life is like there, and dispel some of the myths—”

There was a sigh. “God, girl. Is that really how you've been taught to speak? Project, damn it,” croaked the same voice. This time, she caught sight of the speaker. Sitting lopsidedly and paunchily in his chair was Mr Hackett, her old English teacher. But she'd heard on the grapevine—decreasingly giggly ex-schoolgirls, all from Tatham Secondary School, mostly with families of their own now—that he'd kicked the bucket. Thank Christ, too. He was, in Jane's opinion, a misogynist prat. “You're not talking to your murine chums in the playground now, girl,” he croaked out, almost reading her mind.

What *was* going on? Why was nobody else reacting to this? At worst she'd expect a laugh or two, a reaction against her. But nothing. There he was, though, sat next to a few year 11's, one of them brushing against him. Large as life, and making her remember all her antagonism for the old fart.

“In my first week in Oxford, I remember that I felt completely out of my depth—”

“Useless,” came the interruption. “Useless girl. Speak from your *Ab Doe Men*,” he enunciated, talking as if to an imbecile. “I'd like to think, just once, that all my life hasn't been wasted training you idiots to absolutely no avail.”

She fidgeted on the stage, not knowing where to look or what to do or say next. Nothing in her life or in her world of actions and reactions had prepared her for this.

In a small bedsit in London, she thrashed and thrashed against her bedclothes, sweating a storm, a sea, a pillar of salt. Her teeth ground and her eyelids twitched. But she wouldn't wake up yet. No, not yet. Her mind was not at all finished with itself yet, resolving its past failings and omissions and “what ifs?” It was to be a long night. Next there was Cross Country, she thought with a perverse entwining of love and loathing. After that. After that. After that was Naked Fashion Parade.

Stay calm

You wake up and everything is wrong; you can't understand it but everything is wrong. The shock of it propels you into an upright position, like the horrible last second of a nightmare, and you look around the room. Surely you're simply muggy with sleep? Isn't the tail end of a dream wrapped round you still, twirling the sense of the world into a spiral every time you turn your head? Well?

Stare towards the window opposite the headboard and the pillows. The net curtains are

drawn across it, and each casts a half-shadow with a brilliant gap in between. The light coming through the netting is too pale, and the thin block of glowing floor that echoes the gap is bright white, like moonlight. Or... fluorescent light. Artificial. Now look down. The duvet feels lumpy, and the cover looks different. The pillows in their cases are brand new and crisp under your skin, and plumped up as if you've only just dropped your head onto them.

You swing your legs out of the bed that, you now realise, isn't yours, isn't the one you bedded down in. Your feet both pad onto a carpet you don't own. The pattern: how is it different? It is, isn't it, but how? There's something wrong with the print. Perhaps it's slightly deregistered, like a newspaper where one primary ink has slipped by a millimetre. You can't be sure because it isn't that obvious. But the designs and florets still swim before your eyes. What has actually changed about it?

What's going on?

Half-straighten yourself into a half-crouch and gangle gollumlike over to the wardrobe. You're not scared yet, or at any rate not petrified, but you've been made wary. Yet even the wardrobe is... wrong: you can tell before you have a chance to click open the double doors. The mirror set into one door has been changed, the silvering no longer corroded as much as it was. As you looked closer even the plywood frame is a different mix, paler wood, less tightly packed. Pull on the handle—the unexpected waxiness of it makes your stomach twitch and your face seize into a cringe, and the catch sounds weak and plastic—and the door squeaks open.

There, confronting you, is a row of someone else's clothes, someone who dresses *almost* the same as you. They sway mutely, patiently. They make you think of carcasses in a cool-room, waiting for whatever happens after physical death. Closer to the floor the fabrics blend into an obscene tangle of partly distinguishable items, layered with the straps of smelly sports bags and studded with sweaty shoes: someone else's smell; someone else's sweat. In an orgy of fabrics the arms of jumpers cling to the legs of trousers, which wrap themselves around the necks and hoods of sweaters. A boot you don't recognise sticks out of a mass of blood-red wools. Its tongue and eyes leer at your incomprehension. Finally fearful, you back away until your shins touch the bed, and the shock sits you down too quickly onto the sheeted mattress, hard and clammy on your skin.

How? What has happened? Have all these little swaps been made over a long time, and only now the scales fallen from your eyes? Or have you spent the night doped up, as maleficent armies, devils and Rumpelstiltskins, trooped through the room? You feel dozy and headachy, and wonder. Can you remember the last few hours of last night? No? Perhaps that was what had happened. Who has done this to you—

What time is it? Shouldn't you be at work? Quick: plough through the strange bedclothes, fighting the waves of nausea, to reach the alarm clock. A present from your grandfather, a clacky old thing that kept you awake when you were only five or six, but has sent you right off to sleep every night since. Yet, as your hand closes on the clock you want to burst into tears: it isn't the one you checked and wound last night.

Seven seventeen, the face says. So you're early for work. But, you wonder, what day is it? If you've been drugged, then for how long?

Once again you look round, this time frantically. Your head swishes from side to side and you feel as if the walls are closing in and you try exhaling at the same time as inhaling and it

doesn't work properly and it's only by chance that you see a piece of paper on the bedside table, under the alarm clock, a note in your own scrawly handwriting. It reads:

"Zitupafralam—expect weirdness! Dr says mild cognition probs may occur. STAY CALM. Me."

Read it. No, no, no, a voice is telling you. No. This note is as wrong as the rest of the room, it says, all wrong, one big mistake, and—but scan through it again. And a third time. Take a breath, in, out, and re-read. Each repetition leaves you more relaxed, like some meditation manouevre. This note: it is *you then*, telling *you now*, not to worry.

You feel the last vestiges of sleep evaporate, and dimly, *déjà vu*, you remember writing the note. You even remember the consultation at the doctor's; or, at any rate, a scene in his office presents itself, scented with antiseptic. It must. It must have been. It was. It was. Yesterday. Yesterday morning. Not that long ago. But you had taken the day off like so many days recently. This one, though, wasn't spent lying in bed and calling in sick (sick in your soul); instead, after the doctor wrote a prescription, you took it straight to the chemist. It was worth it. Anything was worth not waking up again so very, very unhappy. This was a better option than some you'd thought of, in darker moments.

You took the first dose last night, early on. You felt fine, absolutely fine; only, sleepily, you sloped to bed soon afterwards. And, this morning, you were *happy* for that first half a second. Weren't you? Before this side-effect manifested itself, and that's all it is, a side-effect. Nothing more. So ssh, you say to yourself. Ssh. All those anti-depressants are the same, really: loose cannons rolling around inside the head, and along with defending your sanity they can blow holes in its side. Some squeeze the personality into a dumbbell-shape, two ridiculous, heavy poles linked by a delicate joist; some make you chew like a rabbit. The zitupafralam is responsible, must be responsible for this—you wrote so yourself, remember?—*weirdness*.

Your heartbeat slows and subsides in your ears. The novelty of waking up, for the first time in two years, without depression crushing your first few thoughts of the day begins to dawn on you. At last! and it has worked astonishingly well, considering, and so quickly: overnight. In a different frame of mind you see that sunlight redden, becoming a joyful morning orange that zings off the net curtains and the tiny strip of floor. Now scan the room again. See? Each object divests itself of your distrust, sheds and sloughs all its sinister trappings. And you can feel your heart lifting further. Once again, here is your home, surrounding you and keeping you safe.

Finally, in a spirit of exorcism, look at the alarm clock. Your grandfather's poor, maligned alarm clock. Someone else's indeed! It is your clock and always has been. With each tick this machine has marched its way into the deepest forests of your consciousness, setting up camp and dependably marking time. Can you not hear it, and remember hearing it ten years ago, and in your mind's eye see yourself sitting up in bed listening to it then as you do now?

If anything in this room is real then this, your oldest possession, has to be.... There are markings on its base. Scratches? You could never have noticed them before: only from this angle are they visible. They can't be scratches, as they look too regular. A hallmark? A logo? Turn the clock fully upside down. Two words, in a typeface eighty years younger than the clock ought to be.

“REPLICA CLOCK.”

Look, we should talk. About these stories...

The contents of this booklet have been selected from *Quiet little Lies*, an online short-story repository maintained and largely written by J-P Stacey over the period 2000–2006. They have been tidied up for print, but the originals are all still available on the site. In addition, a PDF of this booklet will be published there in early 2007, and the maintainers plan to rebuild the current site later that year.

QIL aims to provide short stories, satire, poetry, vignettes, whines, rants and a smattering of politics on the web, all completely *free of charge*. For more of what you've read in this booklet, point your web-browser at:

<http://www.quietlittlelies.com/>

... and the chap who wrote them....

J-P Stacey has been writing fiction for some ten years, although many of his friends, family, teachers and other acquaintances would agree that he has been fabricating lies of one sort or another for much longer than that. His fiction reviews, archived on *Spineless Reviews* (<http://www.jpstacey.info/spineless/>) have also been syndicated in the newsletter of Oxfordshire publishers *Reverb*: (<http://www.readreverb.com/>)

In his real life he is a programmer and web developer for a company which specializes in charitable websites. He also has a DPhil in physics. With both of these background details in mind, he would like to point out that very little of *A Pocketful of Lies* is science-fiction. However, anyone wanting more aliens and spaceships should get in touch sooner rather than later, so that future work can be rewritten with that in mind.

He is married, with zero children, one car, one iPod and many, many spoons. Tradition also dictates we mention colourful previous employment at this point, but space is tight, so: sewage, wardrobe/ankle, electrocution (twice in 5 mins), carrying crockery over sliding floors, and explaining the IPA to Indians. Further details available on request.

... and everyone else....

Thank you to Kate Griffin, and to Andrew Chapman at Reverb, for all their help and advice. Thank you to Colin Batchelor, James Davey, Pete Gillin and Janet McKnight for past contributions to *Quiet little Lies*. And most of all, thanks to everyone who asked for a copy of *A Pocketful of Lies*. Without you I'd still do all this rubbish, but I'd be the only one to suffer.

Feel free to drop me a line, and let me know what you think. Be honest. You know, ish.

JPS <jp.stacey@gmail.com>, West Oxon, December 2006

... it's none of it my fault, OK?

Fiction is a succession of well-meant little lies.

This collection of ten short stories and even shorter vignettes, studded with tiny, throwaway caprices, will not change your life, either utterly or irrevocably.

It is unlikely to save your marriage, your relationships with your family, your career, sanity or soul.

Nor will it alter particularly your understanding of the very concept of the “short story” as a literal, cultural and socioeconomic construct.

It might entertain, and enlighten, a little. Anything else is due to your efforts in the capacity of reader, which we can only humbly and politely applaud.

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