

I've had a planetful.

Impending owner: old, obese, oooooorotund. Only one hundred and one hairs for his barber to worry about. Jowly. Flesh dripping off his face, melted by age. Balloon. A fat filled balloon. His belt is nearly longer than he is. Lugal. Lugal number ten thousand four hundred and sixty twoooooo.

“Smedley will be in touch with you,” he says.

Present holder: auctioneeress. She sells the world the world. Red cotton from India under ruffled blue tweed. Ten denier stockings. Tomato-red lipstick. An expert with one child; she has rigid thighs where big men have whimpered like small dogs, but she is still lonely.

“I thought you only used him to sue members of your own family,” she replies.

Lugals aren't strong on humor. Power rarely has a use for humor. They don't have much interest in being entertaining or popular. This one tries to act as if he does: a project perhaps to help him imagine that people are drawn to him for his charm and wit and not his integrity-crushing riches. There are lugals like that.

“No. No. Not just that.” He exposes twenty-three percent of his teeth as a smile. “That's if all the checks verify it's genuine.”

Genuine? The genuine ones don't look as good as me. I'm better than genuine. I'm the original, so genuine, the genuine ones look like copies—which, of course, is what they are.

“I have a good feeling about this,” she says.

“And you'll use Rosa?”

“I'm going straight to Rosa's.”

“Good. I have a lot of faith in Rosa. A lot of faith.”

Street: paved. Called King. W.1. London. England. It's been two thousand and sixteen years since I've been near the Thames. Can't say I've missed it, though I could lead you to some fascinating burial sites. Surroundings don't matter much to me. Everything's been under or near a river. Rivers, if you watch patiently enough, flicker

and jag like slow, dull lighting. Water, like a lumbering drunk, has pissed and slouched all over this planet.

“It’s going to rain,” he says, quite concerned. There is one tiny, feeble cloud in view. With the information available to me, I would reckon the odds on rain in the next hour as 5,000 to 1 against.

“If I get caught in the rain, I bleed,” he says in a tone that is aiming to hook sympathy.

She nods, slightly oddly. He probably interprets this as sympathy because that’s what he wants, so he can take a little odd-looking sympathy. I, on the other hand, interpret it as the auctioneeress biting the inside of her mouth to stop herself from laughing, because he is, in addition to being a lugal, a clown, a multi-story car park filled with jalopies of laughability, soooooo preposterous, a baboon of prodigious risibility; I adjust his position from the early ten thousands to bring him up to just outside the supreme thousand, though I am well aware that if I am in his company for much longer, he will penetrate the supreme hundred laughingstocks. Of my collectors, he is already the most mockable.

The auctioneeress looks up to the sky as if pondering its cruelty, but more likely to give her teeth the chance to hang on to her cheeks. He is, to the core, a lugal, loaded. He has lots of money; she doesn’t. And while he might feel obliged to take some ribbing, outright contempt might sour relations. She needs the money, otherwise she wouldn’t be conducting an unauctioned sale for a backhander. Child-thinking-of. Her lips have the unmistakable pursing of someone with much knowledge and little chance of making money. So much and yet so little, that is what she is thinking.

With all my medical experience—greater than any three teaching hospitals you could care to name—I have never detected a condition where drops of rain can be traded for drops of blood. And besides which, it is a mark of the lugal that whatever their quirks, they bounce like balls. You can drop them from a great height, dump them into a volcano, clobber them with a whale. They never tire in loafing their egos and feeding them grapes. No lugal ever perished in drizzle.

He signals to a car waiting down the street. It is a vehicle fit for a lugal, a limousine with smoked windows so that he need not be sullied by passersby’s gazes.

“I don’t like taking the car. Cars are nothing but metal missiles hunting each other down on the roads. Huge metal monsters hurtling at each other. Designed to kill as much as a gun. Crazy invention.” He is getting panicky; he has to walk to the car and thus expose himself for eight feet to the risk of rain, and his ear wiggling betrays the thought that once he reaches the car, he will be signing up for the risk of a pile-up. The great pity about the absurdly rich is that they become absurd because none of them have the foresight to buy a wanker alarm, someone who would accompany them and just toll at apposite moments: “You are being soooooo wanky.” That is the danger of wild wealth, it frees you from gravity. They could hire the poor for the job. They’d have to be changed every so often like batteries, because their good sense would be dissipated in the plush restaurants and chichi boutiques.

“You’re so lucky not to have money. So lucky,” he says, the foreignness in his diction rising from eighteen percent to a peak of twenty-nine. “When you have money people are simply after you, all the time. All the time. You know, I have seven teams of accountants working for me. The second checks the first, the third checks on the second, the fourth checks on the third. And so on. The first also check on the seventh. And even if they’re not stealing, they might as well be for the fees they charge. And as for my family... there’s no end to it. This bowl is just what I want.”

“So why are you looking so miserable?”

“I’m afraid it’s a trick to get my money. Someone must have heard I want one for my collection.”

“You can give me some of your money, Marius.”

“I wouldn’t wish it on you. And what can you do with it? Banks go bankrupt. Companies go bust. Even top-notch banks in top-notch economies go kablooeey. Civilizations drop dead like flies. There’s no safety. You have to watch all the time. You have no idea how bad it is. Say hello to Rosa for me.”

You could take his words and grind them down to quarks and you wouldn’t find the slightest trace of irony. I have now slotted him in at number one hundred and fifteen. He waddles off, his gait topped up with ridiculousness by the gold ingots he is carrying under his shirt. Gold, the shining shunner, so beloved of the rich and the poor, play-

fellow of the learned, so ungiving of itself. I wonder why he doesn't employ someone to carry the fire extinguisher he has grasped in his left hand.

The auctioneeress and I get into a rickety car and drive south, across the river. "Why?" she asks. "Why?"

She says this sixteen times on our journey, the word rollercoasting from bitterness to amusement. A prime timeburster. In the index of the billions of vocalizations I have catalogued, this is the import that occurs most often. A sound that's been around, too. Unripe apples here, soul's sigh there. If you wait long enough, any word or sound gets to mean everything.

But I can't help her with her inquiry.

## **Rosa**

Everything. Been it. Seen it. Mean it.

You think you've had a demonstrably hard time? Your job, let me guess, is made of solid odium?

Now, I've been *used*: abused, disabused, misused, mused on, underenthused, unamused, contused, bemused, and even perused. Any compound of used, but chiefly used: shaving bowl, vinegar jar, cinerary urn, tomb good, pyxis, vase, rattrap, krater, bitumen amphora, chamber pot, pitcher, executioner, doorstep, sunshade, spittoon, coal scuttle, parrot rest, museum exhibit, deity, ashtray. If you're quiet, don't fuss and take it, it's staggering what people will dump on you. If it's vile, I've had a pile—and I know more than five thousand languages (even if you want to get dainty about what's a language and what isn't).

She puts me down on a low table, folds her arms, and looks down at me sternly.

"Talk," she commands.

This is an idiotic, if not deranged thing, to say to a bowl, even to a bowl like me, thin-walled, sporting the scorpion look of Samarra ware that was the rage of Mesopotamia six and a half thousand years before Rosa was born. Pottery, after all, isn't

renowned for its chatty nature, so why futilely address a vessel thus—even me, the bowl with soul? But Rosa is far from being unhinged.

Inevitably, I've been talked to, more than anyone would credit. Being inanimate doesn't earn you any dispensation from being buttonholed. People prefer people, will accept pets, but failing all else, they will unburden themselves to the crockery. And, naturally, supplied with sonic tools, I could chatter. I could chatter until this young lady, her flat, and her city were nothing but unremarkable dust.

I'm not sure what's going on here. Lately I stick to collectors of note. Moneybags. Lugals. Those deformed by excessive wealth, those who will lay down reverence all around me. The trials of being a utensil didn't bother me for a long time, but I've become soooooo tired of indignity, of some dullard keeping terrapins or busy lizzies in me.

Reverence is my quarry, and giving a hint of my pedigree achieves this, age and a dash of the flash equalling venerability in the pottery game. Old? How old? Oooooold. Old before old was invented.

Does this make me a snob? Yes, I do like my collectors destructively rich and obeisant. Granted, the oofy are goofy, the disgustingly rich are often disgusting, but that's an epithet that doesn't turn up its nose at escorting those who have only moderate amounts of money and those who have none.

Rosa: cordial, respectful, relaxed.

She is, I educe, some expert, scrutinizing me; this because my last few carriers have been poorly presented individuals from a region not enjoying a reputation for probity or rectitude or any of the qualities that make a buyer feel better about a transaction—especially when it comes to pottery worth a lottery.

The vogue for savants is white coats and frowns, slipping some solemnity under their métier to raise its importance. They like props: gauges, drills, beakers. Their investigations don't fluster me; if you have no idea what you're looking for, you're not going to find it.

Rosa's home appears to be her place of work. She doesn't blend in with the scrutineers I have encountered. There are a few books, nowhere near enough to suggest outstanding scholarly competence, and as she grades me, she wears only minimal black

underwear, which would, in isolation, be deemed unprofessional in most professions, unworkable in most workplaces.

She scratches the small of her back with her left thumbnail and then, straightening herself. places her hands on my sides, But this is entirely different from her grip on me before. I'm not expecting this.

She's live.

This is a touch I've never experienced before; it is much more than a touch.

Imagine you've been living alone for a long time and suddenly you hear the door open when it shouldn't, you hear footsteps in your bedroom where you know there shouldn't be any. A light comes on by itself, your clothes fall off by themselves, a breeze trespasses. For the first time, I know what it is to be naked.

She's through, she can hear me. Rosa's in.

Fooled. But this is only the four hundred and twelfth time. She isn't a catalogue turner, a contour crawler, a holder of a magnifying glass. Rosa is a silence taker. A diviner. A vase tickler. An intruder.

Diviners—like everyone, I've heard about them, but to be frank, I've never been much convinced about their trade. Before Rosa, the tally of my dealings with those ostensibly having abilities to receive the hidden: three. A former rope maker in the Indus valley, a footman in Siam, and a color explorer.

As to my dealings with those purporting to have abilities to receive the hidden but who were flimflaming the flam, they number one hundred twenty thousand, four hundred and forty-two. The youngest being an eight-year-old shaman who had his head kicked in after his tribe had everything they owned washed away in a flash flood scouring their encampment—an encampment decreed by the shaman. The oldest was a ninety-two-year-old fortune teller in Byzantium who had been predicting winners in the chariot races for seventy-five years and had never got it right once. However, the perfection of his errors established, after twenty years he became greatly patronized by the gamblers, since his choice, while not a shortcut to winnings, could be used to eliminate one element from their calculations.

As for the true soothsayers: The ex-rope maker had been much in demand at the more vulgar celebrations at that juncture when modesty and decorum have been wholly dissolved, when, using his chosen agent of insight, his tongue, he would muzzle himself with the nautch girls and then delve into mysteries such as their places of birth, their fathers' occupations, their earliest memories, their favorite colors, their dearest aspirations, the names of their closest friends, their most loved jewelry; the answers to which, garnered solely from his bridle of legs, earned him unbridled applause. Notwithstanding his redoubtable gift, I have to remark that the same information could well have been obtained by anyone using tools such as civil conversation and the odd bauble.

The footman: could always guess, unerringly, when it would rain. This gained him a popularity with many street traders and hunters, but he was never invited (in the bounds of my knowledge) to any rousing debauchery. A pity he couldn't boost himself from the status of rainteller to the more lucrative level of rainmaker (twenty-two bona fide on board, nineteen dubious, four hundred and ninety-eight frauds).

### **The Best Rainmaker**

She came to the thorp near Colonia, where there hadn't been rain for nearly a year. The people were seven-eighths starved. The second *n* on their extinction was being fixed on.

"I will make rain," she proposed. "But only if the men of my choice make love to me for three days. Then I will make rain for three days." There was skepticism, mixed with a willingness from the venerous of the thorp, until she gave a free ten-minute sampler, bringing down rain within a three-mile circle of the place. Some of the women were unhappy about this arrangement, but the men did their duty. Afterward, having smoothed down her skirt, she brought rain: a few puny drops first, then a steady downpour, and finally a storm so powerful that even unfornicated-out men could not have stood in the deluge. The ground grew mollified, barrels brimmed, puddles ponded, rivers started to prowl. The rain stopped exactly seventy-two hours, twenty minutes, and twelve seconds after it started, perhaps reflecting the fuller's extra efforts to make sure the three-day mark had been passed.

“This is great, but we haven’t had rain for nearly a year, and who knows when it’ll rain again? How about another barter?” The same covenant was agreed. Some of the women had to help out since the men were so etiolated and emaciated by drought and fornication that they were good for nothing. Drops with no stops for seventy-six hours, perhaps reflecting a discount for repeat custom.

She was about to leave to locate more parched territory when they stopped her and confided: “Supreme pleasure, gratitude for the rain, but you are undeniably in league with the Evil One, so we’re going to have to burn you. This is very difficult for us.”

They tied her to a stake, but they had trouble lighting the kindling since it was raining rivers. “Couldn’t we just hit her over the head?” It rained for six days, so heavily people couldn’t see more than three feet in front of themselves. The rain stopped not long after the rainmaker drowned along with the slower, frailer, and less wanted inhabitants of the thorp. A lake, whose waters were long claimed to be noxious, cleaved to the spot for many years until I was fished out. The fifth least propitious fishing out I have endured. . . . Enough.

### **The Vase Tickler**

Rosa’s caught me unguarded, she’s unblind in my mind. I’ve never even thought about guarding, but Rosa progresses slowly enough for me to shield myself with one of my suitable pasts. . . .

I do: a genial stretch of sunny Sumer on a good day, the day of a public execution, myself a lowly utensil, open wide to serve, a family retainer retaining the evening meal, a delegation of local smells and colors, the bickering of the fish friers. A distant lugal.

I do: circularity.

I do: utensiling along.

Yesteryearing with an uncommon vengeance, I become this shred of antiquity because disguise has been my custom, and because if she tapped into the full me, her brains would shoot out of her nose.



To the ninety-one types of surprise I have identified, I now have to add a new branch—that of the thinking ceramic caught naked for the first time in millions of years, in a two-bedroom flat in an inexpensive part of South London.

“You original you,” Rosa proclaims, letting go of me, visibly satisfied with the platter of ur-Ur I rustled up. She is glowing after her stroll in a bowl. Her infiltration of my being has been an effort for her, which is pleasing since I wouldn't like her to make a habit of feeling my feelings. She can only hold her breath in ancient depths for a few minutes.

She scopes me, but looking at me will tell you nothing; it is her touch I fear, her hands which can finger me. She toys with her tourmaline in her helical silver earrings, which signify a common story operating under numerous aliases: the lone swordsman holding the pass. She doesn't know this, but she senses it.

For irises, there are ten thousand, nine hundred and forty-nine principal hues. Rosa has mostly the gray I term mullet gray. She is probably assigning me a price (she works for the auctioneeress, so she must know how much money it takes to stop a bowl with my features).

I do the same for her. Rosa. Twenty-six. In vogueish measurements, five foot four, one hundred twenty-five pounds. Hair, of the fifty-two shades of chestnut, she has what I term Genoese. On the block she wouldn't fetch a great price, men needing some drastic beauty or the likelihood of near fatal pleasure to throw their gold. Rosa's qualities of warmth and humor would not grasp the buyers' looks, though no doubt in the cold and dark, those semi-simian creatures would welcome the comfort of her hugs.

She goes off to paint pictures of the past on the back of her eyelids, inviting darkness into the room where I have now been stationed, a bare, unfurnished cube, a cell for the interrogation of ceramics.

In the ajarness of her bedroom door facing me she is squeezed into a column of light, where she dismisses her attire. Of bosom, there are two hundred and twenty styles; of buttocks, two hundred and eighty-four. I order. I know. I do my job. Her navel is type sixty-seven of two thousand, two hundred, and thirty-four, the buried bald man.

To date I have catalogued twenty-five assorted dirt pushers, nineteen unknowns, fifteen herdsmen, fourteen warriors, ten maids, nine seamstresses, seven bakers, six

strumpets, five cooks, five members of the nobility or lugalling classes, three discoboli, three singers, three users of ink, two ferrymen, two flute players, two lace makers, two monarchs, two slaves, two wine scientists, a beacon minder, a carrier-home of drunken revelers, a chandler, a collector of barbed wire, a dolmen fixer, a fowler, a henna maker, a martyr, a mateotechnist, a meresman, a nothing, an oryctologist, an ostreger, a peacock breeder, a reproofeer of vice, a rubber of backs, a sambuca builder, a seller of ribbons, and a sutler who have possessed this navel. It is one of my favorites. My view disappears in a burst of blackness.

Blackness sprawls everywhere; the lesser household sounds beneath daytime hearing now reach their moment of audibility. The inanimate, with the help of night, can move over to the other team. Wardrobes groan and tut, chats flinch. floorboards fidget, I take the readings.

Two hours and fifty-three minutes elapse. The buzzer then fires a slumber-clearing missile of jagged sound, jarring even for jars.

Rosa, hunched under the weight of sleep, sways slowly to the intercom.

“Hello?” She summons all her powers to make the word.

“It’s Nikki. Sorry to be so late.”

“You’ve got the wrong flat,” Rosa responds.

“Is that Rosa? Didn’t Cornelia talk to you?”

Springy steps in the hallway and the newcomer is admitted. I catch a slice of her. Diminutive, lithe, carrying her rucksack with verve. No more than a few months either side of her thirtieth year. Still hoping for one hundred and sixty-seven, I find that Nikki’s nose fits into the one hundred sixty-six classes I have already identified. It’s number eighty-eight or the begonia. It’s the nose I used for a depiction of Laïs when I was forming a black-figure vase in the style of what everyone currently calls the school of the Gorgon painter (school of me, naturally).

Nikki carries the load of the road. She explains how she has come straight from Spain, hitching. A touch of foreign heat still radiates from her. I sense that Rosa, annoyed and sleepy as she is, relishes these wisps of adventure.

Nikki apologizes, says she can't understand why Cornelia, their acquaintance in Vienna, didn't clear her arrival with Rosa. She apologizes a lot, a quite embarrassing amount, but one of the things she doesn't apologize for is lying. There are ninety-one ways of telling the truth, and this isn't number ninety-two. This is number fifty-nine of the two hundred and ten ways of lying, the technique I like to call the wild strawberry.

Concerned with regaining her bed, burrs of Ur still clinging around her, lacking my authority on untruths and simply not that fussed, Rosa shows Nikki the spare room and hands her some bedding.

"How long can I crash here?" asks Nikki, well aware that the question will be shooed away for the moment, obtaining a fair reprieve. We are in the presence of an operator whose oooooonly truth so far has been her name.

### **Nikki at Rosa's**

Light alights on the city. Rosa debeds and days herself, making no attempt to thwart the sounds of her preparation, but Nikki doesn't emerge from her room, no doubt influenced by the belief that no chance of conversation means no chance of conversation about when she moves on.

Leaving a note with the prominently placed breakfast items, Rosa departs. After counting off five minutes (in case Rosa might return for a forgotten item or might pull the pretending-to-return-for-a-forgotten-item ploy) Nikki attacks the kitchen and tucks in with the special appetite people reserve for other people's food. This is not merely breakfast with shoddy mass-produced crockery, this is storage. She works through the croissants and cold cuts, stalling on a jar of pickled beetroot whose lid won't budge. Then she starts rummaging through the flat, rushing for those nooks where you would expect the most personal and blush-making items to be; she is flipping disappointedly through a diary when the buzzer goes.

In a resident's manner, Nikki attends to the intercom, listens to the voice, peers momentarily out the window that gives her a glimpse of the caller, mutters "Four minutes," then admits a black woman, twenty-two, dressed like a sales' woman, carrying seven copies of a magazine, wanting to talk about security, slightly taken aback

at being invited in, as overcast Tuesday mornings usually find people unreceptive to an explanation of the universe's purpose.

Not the most skilled of mind flavorers, she launches into her prepared evangelism, clanking her sentences like ill-fitting armor; Nikki makes no interruption but mounts a thin smile.

Four minutes, twelve seconds after she entered the property, the Jehovah's Witness's clothing starts to be removed. At six minutes, nine seconds her clothing covers only the carpet. I deduce that the Witness doesn't protest much, owing to the speed and surprise of the feat. Things she has never imagined and may well never have heard of are taking place—with vehemence; and indubitably, the suggestion of pleasure and pleasure itself are two different commodities to rebuff. Perhaps there should have been illustrations in the Bible to make it clear what's on and what's not.

In this year, in this topos, the Witness is not of such beauty that photographers would be handing her their cards in the street. Of the six hundred and forty forms of allure, nevertheless plainness makes up twenty of them.

Nikki: wiry. She has been either a dancer, a gymnast, an accomplished swimmer, or had a very active outdoor youth. Slight with bite. Her body is her office. An eater of small pieces of fruit, a nibbler of grain unless the food is at someone else's expense. She is the one who dodges plagues, endures sieges, comes out of the jungle, crawls from burning wreckage, who chatters longest in frozen waters.

The Witness is turned about by Nikki as if she were a blouse that needed intricate ironing; very reminiscent of a scene I adopted that got me purchased by a collector in Luxembourg and resulted in my being locked in a safe, the dread of any serious work of art (and how baffled and furious he was when I deformed and dedesigned in the dark, emerging as the dullest Wedgwood I could imagine).

With equal dispatch Nikki repackages the dazed evangelist and bundles her oooooout of the door. Fifty-nine minutes, the lot. Practice. For one of Vanity's true troopers.

A long bath, long phone calls to places a long way off deal with most of the afternoon. Nikki does two loads of laundry in the washing machine, the items from her rucksack and person being so grimy that they are able to stand without the aid of a body.

She counts out her money from a pouch. I make it seven pounds thirty-three pence and a hundred peseta note.

The washing machine kicks the bucket during the second load. Nikki sucks on the spectacle of the defunct machine for a while.

But Rosa takes the news of domestic disruption lightly when she returns.

### **Cup of Tea: One**

Rosa seems to have only a caretaker consciousness to respond to Nikki's chatter. The apologies niagra out.

"I'm so sorry. Everything just... goes wrong," Nikki says. "Everything I do...I...I...I..." Her words transmute into a soft whine. Her face topples forward into her lap. She knows the value of tears striking the hard surface of a kitchen floor. I have seen women cry gently like this over a billion times. I decided to stop counting on the fourth of May, 1216. Certain things go on: the plying of drinks to aspired-to lovers, women's tears, Nikki is clever enough to be more inventive; Rosa is intelligent enough to spot a ruse. Just because the dull know about it, doesn't mean it doesn't work. No trick is so old it loses its efficacy.

"This is awful.... I'm being an awful nuisance.... Give me a few minutes and I'll be off."

But naturally, Nikki stays on to purvey lorries of sorries and then ranks of thanks when Rosa offers her continued shelter. Nikki drags into the kitchen fitfully, slowly, like a stubborn dog not very keen on being dragged, the holey story of why she is destitute and how she attempted suicide.

Rosa has to shoo away the truth: "I'm being a pain in the arse." "I shouldn't burden you with this." "I should go." Nikki's fiction is like her, lean and supple. She lies without effort, like a seam of anthracite, cool, deep. She, judging from the other people-surfers I have encountered, would only consider taking her life in circumstances of the most outrageous pain.

Sobs on. A failed bar in Spain, savings vaporized, a swine in the form of a man, beatings and extra-Nikki use of his manhood. Sobs off.

“So what’s your job?” asks Nikki, shifting her campaign from the heart to the head.

“Art consultant,” says Rosa. Nikki oooooos her eyes to show her admiration and to express how lucky Rosa is to have such a job. Her approval would have been as fierce if Rosa had declared her trade to be street sweeper or chicken gutter.

“What’s that all about?”

“I authenticate works of art. If someone finds a painting or any work of art that looks a bit suspect, I’m brought in to see whether it’s genuine, what period it’s from, and so on.”

“That sounds fantastic.”

“You get to meet some interesting bowls.”

“And how do you get a job like that?”

“I started off as a secretary in an auction house. Then you... pick things up. But it wasn’t easy. It’s a business run by old, bloated, bitter, and impotent men, so they don’t like someone half their age and female coming along and proving them wrong, because when you’re old, bloated, bitter, and impotent, your expertise is the only thing left.”

“It must take years to learn the business.”

“Years.”

“That’s my problem, I’ve never found the right thing. I’ve done dozens of jobs, dancer on cruise ships, waitressing, driver, box office, security guard—in a word, anything badly paid or really dreadful, but they’ve all been jobs that didn’t go anywhere. You’re so lucky to have an interesting job. But I mustn’t witter on, I’m sure you’ve got things to do. A man to attend to.”

“No, at the moment, that’s one problem I haven’t got.”

“Enjoy the peace and quiet while you can, then. One’ll blunder along any moment in need of coddling.”

Rosa goes to have a bath. Nikki does the dishes as the dishes have never been done before; surfaces are scoured. A promise has been made of a mushroom stew for the

next day. Rosa vacates the bathroom, Nikki enters, studying Rosa's legs, swallowing a thought.

Rosa goes for the phone: "Yes, it's genuine, but . . . I don't know how to put this, I'm not sure what sort of genuine it is. I'd like to hang on to it for a bit longer." Silence. "It's difficult to explain." Silence. Listening. "Well, you'll think me crazy, but I have the feeling the bowl is lying."

This will be hard work.

### **Nikki: Second Day**

"You're sure I can stay?" Nikki trills. "I really don't want to be a nuisance."

"No, it's fine. When you live on your own, it's good to have the occasional intrusion."

Departure: Rosa. Staying behind with money left by Rosa, waiting for the washing-machine repairman to call: Nikki.

Nikki has pulled the let-down-by-a-friend-who-owes-her-money scenario; it may well be that there is a friend who owes her money, but there are doubtless many more friends to whom she owes much more money. She sits by the table, calculating her options, when the repairman arrives.

Repairman: well-proportioned, full of himself. No woman or washing machine holds any challenge for him. Tight trousers. Full connoisseuring by Nikki of his privities.

He up-ends and eviscerates the washing machine and swiftly locates the deficient part.

"How much is it going to cost?" inquires Nikki in the tone of voice women use when they know a tapping is on the way but they have to pretend they don't. She is loosely clothed, knowing enough to allow the promise to do the work, rather than simply opening negotiations in the buff. She does tug at her nipples in a way that someone very, very stupid might mistake for her adjusting her top.

“Fine,” he says. “But I haven’t got much time and you’ll still have to pay, if that’s what you’re thinking about.”

Tapping: six minutes, twenty-one seconds, I have never seen a washing machine used like that. Despite the obvious discomfort of the venue, or perhaps because of it, they nuke chryselephantinely. Nikki looks at the repairman with shining respect. He returns the washing machine to its rightful place, gives her a nod of accolade, and walks out slowly without the payment. “You win.” Two minutes, fifteen seconds later there is the distant sound of a car driving into a lamppost.

Nikki redoes her hair and steps out to get the mail. She instinctively casts aside the circulars and the junk. With exquisite care that is a pleasure to watch, she steams open the communications that might contain something stimulating or advantageous.

“Dear Box 59,” she reads. “Worry no more, here I am, knight in shining armor in the guise of an outrageously young forty-eight. I work in the film industry and have a knockout lifestyle and electric personality...” She puts down the letter, an unfeigned despair on her features.

“Why? Why are there so many wankers in this world? Where’s the factory? I’m not even going to bother sealing up your letter, wanker, I’m not even going to bother ripping you off, just up.” She goes to the bathroom, shreds the letter, and flushes it away.

I get to see the unflattering side of people. Not necessarily the worst side, but certainly the side people don’t want others to see. Things are done in front of me that wouldn’t be done in front of pets; who wants to lose the respect of their hamster? We, the inanimate, are treated with disdain and are subjected to ordeals that few hamsters could face. What the husband doesn’t want the wife to see; the wife, the husband; the master, the valet; the valet, the master; the officer, the soldier; the soldier, the officer, we see. Ministers thumbsucking. Heroes nail-biting. Underwear run for days. Judges pretending to be goats, badly.

Nikki resumes her reading, putting aside one letter with the remark: “Phwwwoarr, I’ll give you one.” It is the last letter of the collection that incites some major attention.



“I am currently moving, so it would be easier for you to contact me at my work number,” she reads and then remarks: “Just the job. Married man looking for a quick florida, I can see you.”

She enlists the phone: “Hello, Brian. Box 59 speaking. You can call me Fiona. Loved your letter. Your letter made me... come over all funnee. Why don’t we meet? No, I mean right now. Okay. Okay. Oh, I could be there in an hour.”

She applies a few of Rosa’s unguents then leaves. “You better carry lots of cash. Brian.”

Return: six hours, forty-eight minutes later, carrying two large shopping bags. She opens up her pouch and counts out bills with satisfaction and then unbags some medicinal looking containers. She boils some water, and placing some tablets into a piece of paper, folds it up into a small square, then grinds it with a rolling pin: she then withdraws to her room where, leaving the door slightly open presumably so she can hear any approach, she strains the mixture through a series of syringes until she finally injects it into her right foot. Immediately, a look of profound satisfaction takes up residence behind her portholes. Nikki is unequivocally a young lady who needs a vast amount of entertainment.

Return: Rosa. She finds Nikki cheery and domestic. Supper is ready along with the two replies that Nikki deemed suitable for her; one from a retired town planner who wrote that his wife had been encouraging him to take up new interests in retirement and that his buttocks, although sixty-six years old, were round, firm, and no possible source of embarrassment to her and that he would consider his chief merit to be experience. Experience indeed since the dots of his writing reveal him to be eighty-six, but even the gaga want to gogo. It is impressive that Nikki instantly realized that the concept of blackmail would require too much explanation to this gentleman.

The other letter is from a blacksmith in Ipswich who doesn’t enclose a photograph of himself but of two wrought. iron fruit bowls, and speaking as the law on bowlwork and beauty (after all, I invented it), I’m far from bowled over: stercoliths. Nikki makes a cup of tea as though she hasn’t inspected every comma in Rosa’s correspondence. Rosa doesn’t seem unduly disappointed by her haul, though she does mutter “Another one” as she tears up the letter and the enclosed order form.

She locks me in for a session. I give her some elephant racing to keep her amused. A natural crowd pleaser. I'm now ready with a string of colorful diversions to prevent her from finding the treasure trove. though I wish she'd hand me over to my prospective owner. The fingering is unsettling.

With a brief good night. Rosa seals herself into her bedroom. In the half-light, Nikki looks into the hallway mirror and lets her lips form the word "Rosa"; then she sticks out her tongue, which extends out and away like a creature that has been hiding in her, further than many would believe credible, wide, weighty, and wet. Inch for inch to the face it lives in it is the nineteenth longest and fifth widest tongue I have ever seen, and mouths are one of my specialties. It oscillates prehensilely, polishes the tip of Nikki's nose, then shoots back.

### **Nikki: Day Three**

Rosa slips out first thing. Her mind is elsewhere, and she leaves the lounge window open a fraction. Nikki, rising an hour later, ponders the open window for a while. Then she gathers up a number of small, eminently portable but valuable items and deposits them in a bag.

Departure Nikki. Return Nikki.

The bag no longer contains the items. While secreting some money in the frame of her rucksack, she phones the police to report a burglary.

The police turn up just before Rosa. Everyone concurs that the culprits entered by the open window.

Rosa is only moderately exasperated by the incident, which could really sink others. Curiously, an air of relief plays around her, even when the policeman gravely informs them that there is little possibility of the stolen items being recovered. His words fall into Rosa's breasts.

"It's all my fault," insists Nikki. "I should have checked the windows before I went out shopping."

"No," says Rosa, "I was the one who left it open."

Nikki cooks her courgette special while Rosa checks her insurance to see whether she can claim on Nikki's behalf for the rings and earrings, given to her by her grandmother, that she says are gone. "I'm really bringing you bad luck," she remorsees.

Rosa comes to me for a session. I haven't grassed for a long time, so I give her the story of...

### **The Collector of Jericho**

He had grown a passion for ceramics. I entered his collection (as a bull vase) when it was already fully developed with dozens of flasks, bowls, double vases, juglets, ewers as well as such curios as Bes jars, hedgehogs, ducks, a woman suckling, and some misshapen accidents of firing that he thought were works of genius; in my view, the finest pieces were two wavy-handled jars and a ring flask. But collecting at its best.

Regrettably he discovered parrots. A mania for any and all parrots. There was no such thing, as far as he was concerned, as too many parrots or too much money spent on parrots. If there was money it meant more parrots. I wasn't the only one in the household who felt the world was being unfairly deprived of its parrots. But being a bit lugal, he didn't pay any attention.

After years of this obsession, he acquired a loud blue parrot, a parrot no one had ever heard or seen before. Cost a granary—for it came from beyond the end of the world, two shipwrecks away. This squawking blue pest became the center of his pride, so one morning when he discovered a parrotless perch, he hovered with rage. There was no doubt it had been stolen, since its chain, large enough for a boisterous dog, lay cracked on the ground. Wrathfully, he offered huge rewards for the recovery of the parrot.

In the event, he only had to wait a few days. The parrot was spotted by the Great Gate, playing dice for money; unusually for this sort of mountebank show, the parrot was losing heavily, much to the annoyance of the parrot's backer, an Eblaiter.

The Eblaiter was brought to judgement and swore by seventeen gods that he had known the parrot since it was an egg, that he had known its parents since they were eggs, that he had seen its grandparents as eggs, and he was a poor showman only

coming under the weight of this terrible accusation because he was of humble station and from a distant land, that he had a ghastly toothache and that in Ebla, blue parrots were so numerous they fell out of the trees because there wasn't enough room for them all to perch.

Three Eblaites then entered the court and testified that they had never seen parrots, let alone blue ones, in Ebla; on the other hand, they had seen the accused before, who was known for his sticky fingers and, despite using loaded dice, always losing.

The accused shouted that these three had proved they weren't Eblaites since they didn't know about the parrots, they were in fact Elamites, notorious for their traditional hatred of the Eblaites, who were only testifying against him because they fancied an impaling.

The tribunal asked him to handle the parrot. It bit him. The collector was then summoned, and the parrot settled on his arm, repeating his name and the name of his wife. The Eblaite invoked twenty-five gods, including all of Jericho's favorites, and two fetishes he had in his pocket to swear that the parrot was his and merely sulking because he had remonstrated with it on its dice technique. He tried to get the parrot to repeat a phrase, any phrase, and attempted to give it a playful stroke. The parrot bit him again, drawing blood.

After being sentenced to lingering death for theft, perjury, and inventing gods without a license, the Eblaite offered to make a full confession in exchange for clemency and to recount six other crimes committed in other cities that he was sure the tribunal would find droll.

"You may have the gift of gab," he cursed the parrot as he was dragged away, "but you're shit at dice. They were right when they said I should have stuck with the monkeys."

The Eblaite, as it turned out, wasn't the only one who cursed the parrot. Not long after the Eblaite's bones had been picked clean, the collector discovered that his best friend was carrying out the repetition that people rarely find repetitive with his wife as the result of graphic imperatives repeated by the parrot, coupling the most intimate parts

of his wife's anatomy with his friend's name. If you're snitching you should know what you're doing.

His best friend didn't have quite the lugaling position the collector did, so he ended up having him killed, exposed with the parrot inserted in his bottom. It's the eighth slowest form of death I have encountered (for humans, that is), essentially dying of thirst with massive discomfort. I'm not sure how it ranks for parrots. There was a maharajah who tried to insert, one of his irritating courtiers into an elephant's posterior. "You're the biggest turd I've ever met; there's only one place for you." However, the elephant wasn't acquiescent and broke the courtier's neck shaking him out, for which, in all probability, the courtier was grateful.

The collector, to be honest, never really enjoyed anything again—his parrots, us crocks, or his life. Relish banished. *Nisaba zami*, as we used to *dubsar* in Lagash.

## **Rosa**

Rosa is sitting on the ground, overhistoried, pasted by the past. "Phew," she emits eventually and stumbles toward her bedroom.

"Are you all right?" Nikki asks.

"No. Yes. I'm not, but I am. Don't worry. Good night."

## **Day Four of Nikki**

First exiting: Rosa. Second exiting: Nikki, wearing leggings and a leotard under her topcoat, having fired in a partnership of benzedrine and methadone. First reentry: Nikki, five hours, three minutes later, visibly having indulged in vigorous physical exercise. She is accompanied by a hefty, quiffed youth. She identifies some larger, heavier items, which are for the purloining and which he consents to take down to his van.

"What about this flower pot?" he mutters. "Oh, it's cracked," he says chucking me on the floor, breaking me into three pieces. I am richly vilipended by their refusal to consider me marketable. By the meanest of assessments I am worth his van, thrice. He

conveys out the microwave, the television, a fine-looking suitcase, Rosa's collection of music, lamps, a bookshelf, the answering machine, plants, the washing machine, and chairs while Nikki gets out of her moist clothes. Reenter the remover, who tries to act as if naked women are an everyday occurrence in his crimes.

"I forgot to ask, sweaty or not?" she asks.

Apparently sweaty's acceptable, but he can't understand why she wants to situate the tapping on the table by the window and not the bed. "People can't see us there." Chryselephantine pleasure for seven minutes, sixteen seconds, culminating in Nikki hanging out the window, barking, and one of the table legs collapsing.

"A pity about that," remarks the remover. "Could have got a few quid for that table." He counts out some bills for Nikki, who watches him drive off before reporting the burglary to the police. Shattered unbeknownst to Nikki, I reassemble unbeknownst to Nikki, carefully re-creating my former cracks.

The same policeman appears. Nikki's physical exertions help give credence to her pretence at being disheartened. "They sometimes come back like this. Was there a set of keys taken last time?" He asks after Rosa. Nikki explains that she won't return till the evening.

Later, Rosa calls. Nikki unleashes a brilliant incoherent-with-distress routine, scarcely managing a complete sentence, bewailing the thefts and claiming that her underwear was interfered with during the action. Rosa has apparently broken down in her car and tells Nikki not to wait with supper for her and takes the time to soothe her specious suffering.

Nikki goes to the cabinet in the bathroom and checks the bottle of aspirin to see how many are in it; you can see she's contemplating pulling the I-can't-go-on ploy, but you have to be certain you don't take too many, that you'll be found punctually and you can see she isn't in the mood for stomach-pumping. All in all, it's odd that with such guile, a glut of unscruples, and glee in destroying others' lives, she has no more to her name or names than a rucksack full of clothes; she should be running a country somewhere.

After dark, the policeman reappears. "Is your flatmate back?" he asks politely.

"No," says Nikki.

“I should say I’m here off-duty. In a private, nonpolice sort of capacity, if you see what I mean.”

“That’s a bit cheeky.”

“Well, we’re only human.”

“No, you’re not,” says Nikki, then grinning. “Come on in and wait for her if you want. An hour.” Her stamina is admirable, you can see she’s tired, but she still, like a true champion, responds to any challenge. This girl can go. She is, of course, voracious enough just to rip off his breeches, an approach that has only been refused by men to my knowledge twice in the last six thousand years, but she wants to see how his timidity can be dismantled. She flutters her eyelids, evinces admiration that is too much for her face as he recounts the things he has found on the other side of the public’s doors; bad acting on a stage might earn you harsh notices, but it nearly always works offstage.

The policeman must have been quite keen on Rosa, because it is in fact fifty-six minutes before he takes the plunge into Nikki’s mouth. He is unpackaged and read like a gas meter. He stares down fixedly so he has a chance to believe what is being done to his statuette. After three minutes, eight seconds, she looks him in the eyes and says, “Come.” He obliges, one seminal expedition ascending to the ceiling: he is maxed out and offers Nikki some drugs that he takes to schools to lecture on the evils of narcotics; Nikki partakes liberally. He tries to unscrew the jar of pickled beetroot. “I can’t understand,” he says on the way out, “I’ve had my cock for twenty-eight years but you can do it so much better.”

Rosa turns up. Nikki offers her the remaining chair. You have to admire her resilience in the face of misfortune, quite blighting. Something else is keeping her from expending time in gnashing of teeth. She is lonely; it is a faint smell, too elusive for a human nose, but I can detect it. Worn, forloooooorn, but not by what has happened in the flat.

She comes to me. Her fingers take my sides; she is, I sense, not keen to take out information, but desirous of coming in. I choose for her. ...

## **My Favorite Shipwreck**

The voyage to Byblos: when Troy still had joy. The sailing had been a mistake. It was dark even for a winter night, a storm. Various needs, greeds, and idiocies had launched the ship.

There were two young people on the ship: the Mop (I call him such because of his long thick hair) and the painter's daughter, whose beauty would have enthralled any city let alone a small boat.

The Mop was bursting with youth and made his money by stunt swimming, butterflying from island to island, racing against galleys, doing aquatic tricks. It was a small boat, and I can't have been the only one to have thought how wonderfully they would have linked.

The painter's daughter was friendly and joked with the sailors, was nice to the emaciated idea-merchant who spent most of his time in his thought plantation, asked about the knots, and chatted with everyone except the Mop, who couldn't manage to get his mouth to work. He would sneak up to her with his eyes, but he was so keen on getting in right, that he would do nothing wrong. Two days out and he still hadn't addressed a word to her—quite an achievement on such a small boat; he sat under a pile of rags as if this were something important and needful for him, while everyone else discussed the weather, how to prepare tuna, the price of grain, and the earrings of Caphtor.

The truly frightening weather was sudden, but not sudden enough for the occupants not to have time to think about it. The skipper started to cry. There was talk of which gods to go for. The all-over look was all over. Everyone there in that cold, dark valley of waves would have murdered their family to escape; death comes in more cuddly forms.

The sea frolicked on the deck and fondled the ankles of the skipper and the helmsman, who were busy employing their hands to throttle each other. One of the crew grabbed a goatskin, as much use in that storm as going into a forest fire with a glass of water.

“Come on, the boat's going to try and drink the sea,” he shouted, offering another goatskin to the idea-merchant now seated in the sea.



“Nothing happens,” the idea-merchant riposted.

“The ship’s going to be shafted by the deep in fifty-seven positions.”

“That’s your interpretation, not mine.”

“We’re sinking.”

“Why must you look at things that way? It won’t do you any good.”

The painter’s daughter casts off her bracelets, reaches for her earrings—gold with dolphin terminals—then, thinking those who might find her body might treat it better if she carries funeral costs, leaves them and looks impassively at the sea of icy ink. The moon couldn’t bear to watch. The water follows her robe up her body as she takes it off. Then a hand stretches out to her.

“Wait. Let’s go together,” says the Mop.

They held hands and they managed a few swirling steps before the ship bade farewell to their feet. Having seen two million four hundred thousand nine hundred and twenty-seven couples hold hands, I have never seen such a touching touch.

I pendulumed down to the quiet of the seabed, letting out oooooos of air fleeing back to the turbulence of the surface, mixing with the other oooooos of the talker, who was fitting into those little bubbles bits of the exclamation: “Nothing happens.” Certainty pays all bills.

(Are you wondering, Rosa, what happened to the Mop and the painter’s daughter? Would you like to know what happened to them? So would I. I have looked for traces of them in every face I see.)

Lullabied, Rosa sleeps the sleep of those of us who’ve known the deep.

Though she pulled out before the thirty years of mackerel, sea lizards, and turbot. Let’s not get started on the turbot. There’s no one here who knows more about turbot than me, A million turbot aren’t as turboted up as me. Let’s not even mention them. Turbot city. The turbot dark age. The turbot more than anything else were behind my return to the surface. The only good turbot is one that’s working its way down a digestive tract. You try and lurk in the murk, but you get no peace. However, the conger

eel with the earring was worth meeting. To date I have only encountered one conger eel with an earring. Silver it was. Wonderful workmanship.

### **Nikki: Day Five**

Rosa continues to depart betimes. She produces a catalogue from her bag and leaves it on the table on her way out. I wish she hadn't. It boasts a rich reproduction of a vase with a Gorgon's head on it. A copy of a copy of a copy of a copy. Maybe a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy. One of the Athenian ones. Not that that will save it. I go for them as far as a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy.

Nikki picks up the catalogue and, to my intense annoyance, looks with favor on the cover vase. Her approbation unfortunately reminds me of . . .

### **The Endless Hatred (That Never Ends)**

It was in the workshop. "Someone must have done it," said the master. "Or someone must have brought it in. Vases don't just stroll in because they like the look of the workshop."

"It's not possible. No one went in or out," insisted the apprentices, who had slept there throughout that hot Corinthian night.

"Well, what's it doing here?" snapped the master, cuffing him. "Some rich ordure will come in and claim it his. We are being aligned with misfortune. We will be punished as thieves. Go and tell everybody in the other places that we've found a vase."

"Why's the gaffer in such a foul mood?" asked one apprentice.

"Rotten teeth," the other replied.

They didn't notice that the old water pitcher was gone. I was now resplendent as a double-handled amphora with a Gorgon's face. I fancied a change of scenery, and there's nothing like getting flash for getting the cash. Everyone came to have a look at me, and there were suitable gasps of amazement at the rendering and the color.

Naturally, everyone in the workshop was determined to pave a go at imitating me; once you know it can be done, it's easier. They all tried, but it was the youngest

apprentice who went audaciously with the glaze who did best, although his Gorgon was feeble.

But when it came out of the kiln, they all gathered around ' and clapped, much more than was deserved, I thought. Then the competition came in, the dimpled potter in the lead, and instead of denigrating the ware and highlighting any flaw and ignoring any flair, they shook their heads in disbelief.

“The vase you found, that was nice, but this, I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s alive. You know, in the evenings I love to come and belittle your wares, and I’ve spent twenty years doing that, making the most disparaging remarks about your general appearance, the company you keep, and your family; but I can’t do that now. This is a glory that we all benefit from.” The other potters stood around, murmuring in agreement. “No one in our lifetimes will produce finer work.” The apprentice was unable to stand, he was so overwhelmed with praise, and I was getting a bit tetchy. “The lines on the vase you discovered are clumsy and amateurish,” said the Dimple, “whereas on this they have the strength of life.”

Then the moneybags who hadn't gone to the new-look games at Olympia arrived and oofed all over them. The whole workshop, not to mention the surrounding workshops, went wild knocking out Gorgons. They were ropey Gorgons, but the purchasers turned up and forked out prices that had never been invented before. I wasn't sold. It would be nice to vote here that the workshop master held on to me out of a sense of gratitude, but this wasn't the case. Every day he tried to unload me. “I don't want a cheap copy” was one of the more polite refusals, even when I was being offered at a derisory price.

I declared war. Having invented beauty and the enslavement of light, I don't much care for my work to be disparaged. It was my prompting that took memory out of the mind and onto surfaces, made the private public. Cadmus has his lines, I have mine. I showed them how to make the beauty traps, and the third-rate should be punished.

Here's the score of crushed Gorgons: 1,648.

## **Nikki Resumed**

Nikki casts aside the catalogue.

Finally, ineluctably, it's my turn to be stolen. Insultingly, Nikki holds me and says, "Bet it won't be worth carrying this to the shop." This is the three thousand two hundred and ninth time I have been stolen, not to mention the one hundred and two occasions I have been borrowed in goodish faith without being returned.

Despite having just perused an auction catalogue, Nikki has no thought of considering me as an antique. That's the problem with art, indeed, many other things; you have to fit in with the expectations. Pity the priceless things that have been dumped in the trash, the treasures that have been melted down, the master thoughts that have ended up wiping the arses of the ignorant.

I am stuck in a carrier bag with a food mixer, a small lamp, a red alarm clock, and a garish ashtray. Nikki has clearly decided to move on from Rosa's and to milk the last few coins from the property. Rosa left, saying she'd be away for two days.

Nikki carries us down a high street where we pass a black couple copulating in a doorway next to a bus stop; the man shrieks at the people in the queue: "What are you looking at?"

We enter a junk shop and Nikki presents us to the proprietor, who regards us with contempt so undisguised it might as well have been on a trampoline, not just because he is building up to making an insulting offer, but because like nearly everyone who works in the secondhand trade, he works in it because he revels in inflicting cruelty on others, especially the desperate or the needy.

Nikki has approached with a pathetic, tear-stained face and, not to leave pity to fight the battle on its own, her cleavage more open than the cool weather would invite. The Tatman's pulse immediately races, not at the sight of her sternum, but at the prospect of distress.

He holds the objects one by one, reluctantly, as if they had been licked by bad-breathed lepers.

"I wouldn't sell that if it weren't for my son's needing an operation. My mother gave it to me just before she died," says Nikki as I am pawed. "I think it's an antique."

Respiration increases: he rocks on his feet with excitement. His member shuffles in its fabric silo.

“I think it isn’t.”

Biting the inside of her mouth to get a good watering in her eye, Nikki says, “It must be worth something.”

I am held gingerly between pollex and finger as if I were a dried cowpat.

“Yeah. It’s worth something. It’s worth fuck-all. There isn’t much call for really ugly flower pots. Can’t remember the last time I had someone in the shop saying I want a really rough flower pot.”

It’s hard to imagine anyone coming into the shop even if they wanted to buy something. The air is moldy, and even with the detraction of rot, the items are the worst sort of rubbish, unloved, unlovable artifacts, most abandonable trappings; anything with any value would shoot out of here like a bubble of air going toward the surface to rejoin its friends. I make a note to do him a major disservice should I get the chance. He lines us objects up on the counter, adjusting us slightly here and there to get what he considers a straight line. The food mixer is new.

“Short of some cash, eh darling?” He wants to hear it. She trots out the son-in-hospital-without-toys patter. His heart goes to maximum.

“A pound.” He almost swoons as he sees the look worth a book on Nikki’s face. He construes it as pain, but it is, truthfully, anger. It’s not an offensive offer, it’s not an offer at all; it’s offering offense, it’s someone pissing on your shoes and thinking it hilarious. Which is unwise, since whatever else Nikki is, undangerous she is not. I wonder if she will go for the knife carried expertly in her boot and help herself to the till. The Tatman has no fight, only malice in him.

She gathers us up and gets as far as the door. Tatman, sensing that the fun is over and that he’s not going to get her to whimper and blub, coughs up a tenner because she has such beautiful eyes; Nikki doesn’t see this as worth the effort of walking to the shop, but she has had enough of this final attempt at cashing in on Rosa.

I am placed next to a velvet giraffe carrying almost as much life as a real giraffe, a helter-skelter of mechanical penguins that don’t work, and a ceramic badger wearing

cricket flannels. This is a unique artifact. It cannot have been owned by anyone. It is unownable, it is constantly in search of appreciation, appreciation it will not get. To look on it is to despair. It is a pariah, passed from hand to hand, though oddly enough not to a bin. Made to be rejected. It will have been left here, not bought. The Tatman hasn't changed his underwear for three days.

### **The Mummy That Cried for Earth**

The velvet giraffe reminds me of the mummy I was entombed with. When the grave robbers broke in, I have to say I was grateful; we all like a break, but a thousand years is enough. The mummy was no one you'd care to know about: a moderately successful oil supervisor who managed to die of natural causes, having reproduced and earned enough for me and other objects to be sealed up with him.

It was a few owners later that I met up again with the supervisor. When I was lifted from the tomb, they weren't interested in the mummies. It was through Wondernose (One Hundred and Sixteen), who was one of the wildest grave robbers, that I was reunited decades later with my tombmate. To be accurate, he wasn't a grave robber, he was a grave-robber robber. He didn't believe in laboring away digging or wandering thorough labyrinthine passages, sneaking through cracks or bringing down the wrath of long-gone but maybe not dead gods. He would wait till some other malfasants had looted a site and were almost back at the city when he would appear and help himself.

"Where's my reward?" the tipper-offer asked when I was snatched from the snatchers. "You have it already," Wondernose said. "Think about it, you're still breathing." Wonder nose would then return home, wary lest anyone decided to try and become a grave-robber-robber robber.

He didn't get much trouble over his nose. Firstly, because while people are prepared to die for an idea, they're not, in my observation, keen to die for a joke. Besides which, his nose was of such magnitude that it was too obvious to make a joke about it. Exaggeration can make an ordinary thing funny, but overexaggeration brings it back to the unfunny. It was rather like saying the sun's shining today and expecting people to laugh. He had a nose rest for it and would store small fruits in it.

Money was Wondernose's torment. He did good business, but at night he would find sleep elusive; what needled him was the thought that others would be making more. If he sold a blue hippopotamus to a merchant in Alexandria for five, he would, with the sight of night, see the merchant smirking selling it again for fifty. Then he could see someone across the waters selling it for a hundred and guffawing. Farther on in the icy wastes, someone selling it for five hundred, and finally, in the farthest north, someone selling it for a thousand and coiled up in pain from extreme mirth. "They're laughing at me."

It simmered for a long time. "Five," a merchant would say. "Ten," Wondernose would respond. "Seven then," the merchant would cede reluctantly. "Twenty," Wondernose would retort.

"I said seven," said the merchant.

"Thirty," said Wondernose.

"Look, I need good luck to find someone to sell it to for ten. I've had these blue hippopotamuses for over a year."

"Forty," says Wondernose, getting angry. The merchant had to call on several members of his family, including his wife and two of his daughters, in order to eject Wondernose, who was snarling: "You think you're funny, don't you?" His old buyers would have nothing more to do with him since they found it was impossible to contract a price with him and throwing him out disrupted the cooking of the evening meal.

Wondernose went to Tyre. He asked for merchants who dealt in these things. Having introduced himself to the first one, he punched him in the stomach and then started kicking him around the floor: "So you think I'm funny, do you? Thought you could have a laugh at my expense. A plague on your money."

He hadn't even managed to show the second merchant a blue hippopotamus before he decided to bang his head vigorously on a charming mahogany table, remarking, "Why aren't you laughing now? Aren't I funny anymore?" As soon as he saw the third merchant, he swung for him, shouting, "Fuck your money, fuck your money." Word spread.

Because of this and because he had long harbored the ambition of stopping the man in the frozen north from laughing, he took passage on a ship to Constantinople with

his favorite goods. He had with him the mummy, since this was the time when Europeans were amusing themselves at their tea parties by unwrapping mummies, and he thought he would clean up with this cargo. He didn't notice that the crew were sniggering the whole journey because they knew he had been charged five times the normal rate, about a pyramid's worth of grave robbing.

In Constantinople, he tried a number of merchants who spoke Arabic; they offered him the same prices he had scorned in Alexandria. He went farther on to Venice, where they offered him even less. He sold some things to get money to go farther, but he received adulterated coin, and he was arrested when he tried to use it. Then most of his stock disappeared in an earthquake, reclaimed in a snap by the ground.

With the bribes to get out of prison, a fee for a letter composed in Latin by a scribe—which Wondernose believed described him as a man of high estate and import, but actually labelled him a dangerous ruffian who should be cudged on sight (scribe joke)—Wondernose had nothing left but me, a blue hippopotamus in his left pocket, and the mummy. Nevertheless, he struggled on northward, with no shoes and severe toothache, adamant that the great sale was nigh.

Finally, we reach Helsinki. We are ushered into the chamber of a lawyer, a collector of curios. He has been sent here in the snow because the collector is famous for purchasing any exotic rubbish, so as soon as Wondernose appeared in the vicinity, he was pointed in the right direction.

As we proceed in, Wondernose knows he is in the presence, finally, of the Great Sniggerer. Wondernose doesn't pay much attention to the two-bodied lamb, the rat kings, assorted terata, mammoth's tusks, and other poorly arranged rarities. Wondernose forgets about the months of hardship he had endured, the three toes he has lost from frostbite, as he unveils me and the mummy. You lash yourself to your idea and you sink or you swim.

There is one hunger nearly as great as the need for sleep, food, or water but because its pangs are not so acute or debilitating as physical needs, its power is sometimes overlooked: The mind needs rules. Rules are the true rulers. And one set is only thrown aside when another is ready. The sun rises, the sun sets. You give your gods nidor, they give you health. Trade: You go to the wish shop and buy. One tidal wave less, please. One bumper crop more. As a child puts everything in its mouth, so man



puts everything in rules. If your favorite pig dies, there must be a reason. Nothing is more frightening than no rules; people will cherish the worst rules as long as they can avoid the prospect of a sky that spits in their face for no reason. The sensation that nobody wants to feel: Fortune is off the leash.

That's my nickname for all of them: the rule makers. No matter where, no matter how they differ, they make rules. Don't eat this. Don't eat that. It's improper to wear more than six earrings at once. Don't kiss on a first date. If an *ubarum*, a *naptarum*, or a *mudum* wants to sell his beer, the *sabitum* shall sell the beer for him. Balance the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. Luck, the fuck. The propagation of rules is abetted by the prosperous flaunting of their rules as if they had something to do with their success. Hence also the allure of secrecy: deluxe rules under the counter.

The lawyer (Bloodsuckerissimus the Five Thousand Four Hundred and Thirty-Second) picks at the mummy. The former oil supervisor is not looking good, having been left out in the rain, dropped in mud, with a fungus of a stimulating green hue sprouting on his shoulders.

"I've got two already," says Bloodsuckerissimus. "I bought them last year. Though the fungus is very tempting. As for the blue hippopotamus . . ." He gestures to a shelf where there are three lesser but indisputable blue hippopotamuses.

Wondernose is standing there, wishing he understood a word of what is being said. However, when the unmistakable international gesture of noooooo-take-your-goods-elsewhere-the-door-is-over-there is made, he is demolished, the last masonry of the soul crumbles.

At this point, in comes an excited peasant, burrowing into the carpet with his groveling. "Your illustriousness, I have found a marvel beyond belief." He unpacks a huge, frozen iguana. "A dragon, your illustriousness, a young dragon." Bloodsuckerissimus is unimpressed. He goes to a book, opens to a page with an illustration of an iguana, and shows it to the peasant.

"What's this?" the lawyer demands.

"A dragon, your illustriousness,"

"No, it's not. Let me introduce you to the letters *i*, *g*, *u*, *a*, *n*, and I'm sure you remember our old friend *a*. The iguana is a reptile from the distant Americas."

“But what would such a creature be doing here? This one has no wings.”

“I’m sure the iguana’s last thoughts, on an iguana sort of basis, would have been precisely that. I surmise if you look hard enough, you’ll find a drunken sailor wailing for his lost pet. It’s good of you to show me this, but I already have two larger specimens.”

The peasant looks at his dreams spilled on the ground, Wondernose’s patience snaps. He goes for the frozen iguana and attempts to clobber Bloodsuckerissimus, but his target is not unfamiliar with people wanting to inflict grave physical injury on him. He dodges and takes up the femur of the former supervisor to fend off his assailant. They flail around, exhibits are dented or cracked, the peasant has his four remaining teeth sunk into Wondernose’s calf in a new project of ingratiating. Servants appear, and still using the frigid weapon, Wondernose fights his way out, rushing away into the Great White.

Outcomes: Wondernose was discovered in the spring, when he thawed and fell out of a tree he had taken shelter in. Bloodsuckerissimus took a death mask so people would believe him when he talked about the nose.

Myself as blue hippopotamus: taken into the collection, discreetly, by lawyer.

Mummy: No one really wanted it. Unearthed, passed from robber to robber, snubbed by merchant after merchant, it had traveled thousands of miles, only to be shunted back into the ground. Posthumous failure. Local priest heard about it, took it from authorities, decided to christen it and bury it. He had a thing about converting heathens and had welcomed the opportunity on the doorstep.

Frozen iguana: vanished as bizarrely as it had appeared. A strand that appears often, the unbelievable. The unbelievable occurs a lot. Granted, it isn’t always as exotic or as farfetched as an Egyptian grave robber clubbing a Finnish mouthpiece with an icy saurian, but it is no less unbelievable for being boring or dreary or bereft of frozen iguanas. The unbelievable doesn’t just come in frozen-iguana flavor, it comes in never-loved-furniture flavor too, never-left-home flavor, still-not-met-anyone-interesting flavor, can’t-get-a-job flavor. But finally, the unbelievable is the hallmark of the believable.