



by  
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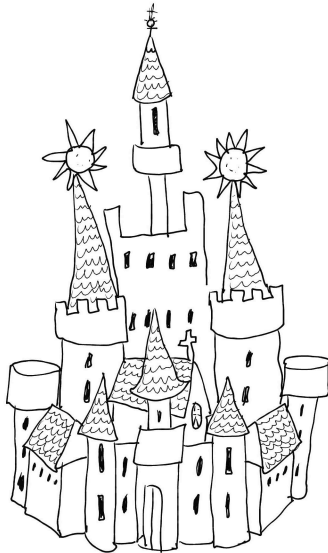
“Where is there time enough to tell my grief?  
Where is the patience to regain belief?  
Where is the luck to waken me, or move  
Love’s idol to reciprocate my Love?  
Where is the reason that could rescue me,  
Or by some trick prove my auxiliary?  
Where is the hand to pour dust on my head,  
Or lift me from the dust where I lie dead?  
Where is the foot that seeks the longed-for place?  
Where is the eye to show me her fair face?  
Where is the loved one to relieve my pain?  
Where is the guide to help me turn again?  
Where is the strength to utter my complaint?  
Where is the mind to counsel my calm restraint?  
The loved one, reason, patience – all are one  
And I remain to suffer love alone.”

The Conference of the Birds

Farid ud-Din Attar

Illustrations by  
CELIA CANNING

Dedicated to  
CURT MEPHURDO, ALICE, MARGARHITA  
AND ETRETAT BEACH



## CHAPTER 1

Far, far away, somewhere deep in the desert we call the Sahara is the desolate kingdom of the southern wind known only to the nomads as the Land of Sarq. King Sarq reigns supreme over this barren land where only the sun dares to travel. Each dawn the sun creeps over the horizon, her fiery fingers caressing the sleeping wind's back. He growls, scampering into the shadow of the mountains that mark his domain. As the sun continues to trace her way across the sky, her warm caresses transforming into scalding fingers that burn the old wind's back. Soon, he can take no more of this rude invasion of his rest and so he calls out to the clouds,

"Save me from her insolence, my grey cousins and I will cool you." But the clouds just laugh at him, knowing him to be a liar.

He tosses and turns in the shadows, which in turn, retreat from her blaze, squeezing him under the rocks. With nowhere to hide, he bellows, twisting high into the sky, snatching at the sun.

"One day I will catch you and on that day, I swear I will blow you out!"

Yet however hard he tries to blow the sun out, she always seems to be out of his grasp.

Furious, he thunders back to earth, venting his anger on those poor mortals who cross his path.

Sometimes he will turn east, other times west, yet wherever he goes, one is sure that destruction soon follows.

On a particularly hot Wednesday morning during the longest drought that even the sun could remember, he was even more bad-tempered than usual.

"I will pay a visit to my cousin the blistering wind of the North."

Spiralling high into the sky, he gathered his strength, and with a roar, he blew down the dusty flats of his kingdom, across the cold mountaintops before turning north. In the swirl of dust and sand wrapped in the destruction at Sarq's heart was a fly called Yandu. Yandu, very much loved by his family of a thousand brothers and sisters, had had no intention of leaving the desert calm for a whirlwind trip north but fate had chosen otherwise. Sarq thundered across the arched dunes of the Tuareg, blasted the Arab villages of the coast before galloping across the Mediterranean. He danced across the emerald sea, inciting the wave to follow on his crusade northward. The sun watched from on high as he swirled through the idle port of Marseilles, blowing the abandoned ships back onto dry land. He howled through the Calanques to the west, before funnelling up the delta of the Rhone, tearing the delicately trimmed vines from their roots. On he rode, tearing the spires off crumbling churches, down the empty avenues of Hausseman's dream; across the brisk beaches that kiss the grey sea and rushed towards the imposing white cliffs of the island of drizzle. Unable to smash them, he soared high into the sky, screaming at the grey clouds, which made them cry.

Sarq's cousins, thunder, lightning and driving rain were unleashed, the three horsemen storming across the once green and pleasant land towards the silver city. On the horizon glistened the new town, a Babylon of glass and silicon climbing out of the wasteland. Riding ever harder, coughing his pestilence on the little people in their silver boxes, Sarq galloped towards the highest tower of them all.

In the distance, standing defiantly on the balcony of the tallest tower, stood an old man. From the luxury of his penthouse view, he puffed lightly on a large cigar, admiring the approaching storm.

"And when Alexander saw the breadth of his domain; he wept for there were no more worlds to conquer." he muttered.

The wind rose and the clouds enveloped the silicon tower but the old man defied his better sense.

'Nothing left to conquer.' he thought as his scarf flapped in the howling wind. Sarq beat and kick the old man as he rode overhead, but true to form, the old man stood his ground, his chest out and his cigar tight.

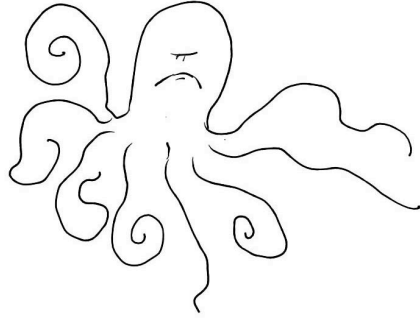
"I laugh at you." he shouted as his scarf unravelled itself and was sucked into Sarq's heart. But suddenly, as if a door had been opened to calm her self, the old man stood in the most complete silence. Before, above and behind him there was mayhem, but inside Sarq's heart, it was peaceful. The old man stood defiantly, unimpressed at Sarq's display, as he slowly lifted his fat Havana to his tight, grey lips. Out of the silence came a dull buzz, zigzagging like a punch-drunk boxer. It was Yandu, the marooned blue bottle of the Sahara, its thousand eyes desperately searching for a way out.

At full speed, it hurtled blindly towards the old man. At the moment that he took a deep puff on his monstrous cigar, Yandu was sucked in. In the suffocating smoke, it careered passed the old man's larynx, down the oesophagus and crash landed deep inside his putrid lungs. The old man coughed uncontrollably, his lungs filling with blood. Struggling to catch a breath, his eyes rolled back and he gasped desperately tearing his shirt open, trying to scoop out his heart with his bare hands, yet the pain crippled him. Falling to his knees, Sarq roared over his gurgling body, the old man closed his eyes and was enveloped in an abyss of darkness. The physical pain disappeared, replaced by a terrifying fear that erupted before him. The old man recognised this dark face instantly as the fear he had only seen in the eyes of others. Now it exploded inside him.

In a moment;

In an eternity;

He was gone.



## CHAPTER 2

To say that Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald was a king was to underestimate his importance. He was the chairman of the largest enterprise on the planet, which in turn, controlled all the souls of its time. He was a man whose whims changed markets, whose opinions steered ideas and whose power made governments. There was a president, a Prime Minister and Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald.

You may be wondering how one man acquires so much power and more importantly how he keeps it. It is not such a difficult thing to do, as long as you are prepared to pay for it. So imagine in a blink of time, man had become his planet's hostage. In this post hydrocarbon world, the sky no longer protects you from the sun, the lungs of the planet are a black marshland and the seas a cesspool. It is certainly not a world that you believe will really happen, but somehow it does. There, people live in glass cities to protect them from their own greed.

Yet before nature was eaten by overt consumption, one industrialist realised that mankind would vanish if it did not find a new way. His name was Lord Horatio Spencer McDonald. After having a vision that the world was on the brink of disaster, he bought the desert of the Sahara once the United Corporation of Accountability had audited, liquidated and assimilated it. Horatio was sure that the secret to the future survival of mankind lay in these vast tracts of sand. For many years, his researchers tried to find a use for all this barren asset, working on far-fetched schemes such as building an underground world connected by oasis. Time marched on, capitalism collapsed under the weight of a global depression, all the natural resources of the world having been squandered before the great god of Choice. But at the same time, by a stroke of luck, a silicon isotope was discovered that would eventually save humanity. It had the force of an atomic bomb but none of its inconvenience. The bye-product of this complex chemical reaction was enormous amounts of glass, which Horatio used in the construction of new cities to protect people from the sun. The countryside was abandoned as the citizens of the world cocooned themselves in glass and air conditioning. Naturally, this new life created many restrictions but the people were happy. Their leaders, the politico-industrialists, created a new corporate democracy based on the

K.I.S.S. economic system (no one knowing exactly what it stood for) and from that moment, mankind turned its back on nature.

K.I.S.S flourished for two decades, Horatio investing all he had in his dream of returning the earth to its former glory. But his fellow leaders were less scrupulous and with time the old man lost his control on them. Yet where lies and greed nest discontent soon follows, the people rising up when they discovered the meaning of K.I.S.S. or 'Keep the Individual Simple and Stupid.'

There was outrage, people clamoured for revolution, but it was not to be. Instead, marshal law was declared and the industrialists consolidated their power. By now, Horatio was a frail old man and his dreams of saving humanity were out-moded. He declared in his will that he would give all he owned back to the people but he died tragically before he could sign.

Destiny (amongst other things) played its hands in favour of his first-born Jerome.

Mister (as he liked to refer to himself) Jerome Spencer-McDonald was a man who had neither faith in religion nor faith in human nature. His disdain for humanity was profound; he saw them as cattle, to be fed and satisfied. He believed that humans had failed the meritocratic selection process that had, in turn, led to weakness and the destruction of the world. He concluded that it was necessary to return to a more dictatorial approach of leadership.

As a young man, he had been driven by a vision. He saw a future that demanded his firm hand, a shepherd to distribute the world's dwindling resources. With marshal law in place, Jerome easily assumed power, 'assimilating' all his fellow industrialists and dissolving civil liberties. Now, the citizens worked for the company (which was supposedly theirs) and in return were fed and housed, given vouchers that they could use in the company shopping mall.

"All desires are quelled, all needs satisfied." Jerome often proclaimed proudly to his political friends.

Yes, dear reader, these maybe the common themes of a grim fiction, but all the same the people embraced him, secure in his strong arms. (Admittedly they had long ago lost any interest in their future.)

Those that wanted to escape the system were effectively dissuaded. Those that questioned were silenced.

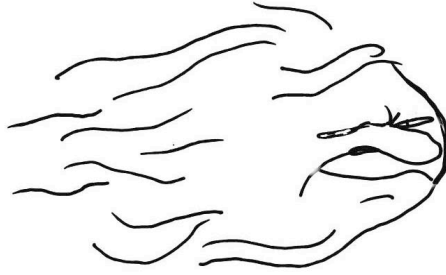
'It is bad for moral.' He would declare on the Saturday execution television show.

Jerome was proud that his simple system kept most of the people happy most of the time. He was the saviour who had brought a 'natural order' to the world. But his 'natural order' was a ravenous black demon deep inside of him that drove him to conquer all. The demon was his conscience and it fed on the weakness of others. He had no use for the weak in his society and the weak had no use for him. As for his own weaknesses,

"I have mastered them all!"



That Wednesday afternoon, the planet lost its leader. The funeral was transmitted into every home on the planet; his body was cryogenically frozen for the betterment of mankind and the people mourned for three days.



### CHAPTER 3

Jerome had been standing naked in the blistering sun for sometime. Before him stretched a grey pebble beach, fenced in by a white cliff that was so high that it seemed to melt into the deep blue sky above. Behind him, the waves broke with a serene regularity whilst above him the sun beat hard on his pale, flaccid skin. Neither crab scurried nor a seagull squawked on the empty beach, the horizon broken only by the inanimate Jerome, a pillar of worn out skin and bone.

But Jerome was quite unaware of all this as he could not see the beach. In his mind he still stood in the peace that was the eye of Sarq. Lifting his arm to his dry lips he drew a last puff of a cigar that he clasped in his bony fingers.

"Lucy. Another one." he demanded as he let his fingers drop.

Puffing on cigar after cigar, he continued to live the vision of his past.

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Jerome fell to the ground and crawled up into a tight ball.

"Ohhhhhh. James." he yelled. "James! Is that you there?"

His whispered cries were lost in the light rumble of pebbles that marked his new world.

"Lucy. Stop kicking me!"

His nose started to bleed and bruises appeared across his naked body.

"James, my son! Please! I'll give it all to you." he squealed but instead he saw a black boot cocked and,

**BANG:**

his head rocked back as he fell into darkness.

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Startled, Jerome opened his eyes very wide.

"He's dead dammit. DEAD!" echoed the wind.

"Dead? Not yet, James." mumbled Jerome.

"Damn you old man. Damn you!" cried the wind.

"James, I always treated as my own."

"Give me back my life, selfish old man!"

"But it was never yours!" Jerome scalded.

Jerome reeled on the bloodied pebbles protecting his face from James's imaginary boot.

But the wind spoke no more leaving his concussed mind to swim in a blurred pool of hallucination. Staring idly, he started to count the pebbles that lay before him.

"Damn pebbles!" he muttered as he soon lost count.

Jerome felt ashamed of himself. He hated swearing and regarded its practitioners with contempt.

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"Where am I? Who am I?" wheezed Jerome repeatedly, clasping his hands over his mouth, closing his eyes and holding his breath.

"Damn, Damn, Damn!" he yelled from the deepest parts of his empty heart.

Jerome was not so much enraged by the manner of the outburst as much as by the shock of having asked the questions at all. Left in the hands of ageing professors or pretentious students, this line of hopeless questioning might even seem relevant, but this was not the case for the once great Jerome. So perturbed was he by these philosophical sneezes that he jumped to his feet.

"Right. It's time to leave!" he exclaimed as he surveyed the beach before him for the first time.

Looking to both sides, he took his first stride towards the white cliff that stretched before him.

"AHHH!" He yelped as the arch of his foot met the scalding pebbles, spontaneously darting back to where he had come from, digging his feet into the beach.

In that second, his memory was wiped clean. He was now a living carcass who functioned on only his most fundamental needs. When he thought, it was his subconscious that blurted whatever it felt appropriate. He was a blank slate with an undiscovered past and an eternal future.

Jerome spent the rest of that day standing absolutely still, a hostage of a pebble beach.

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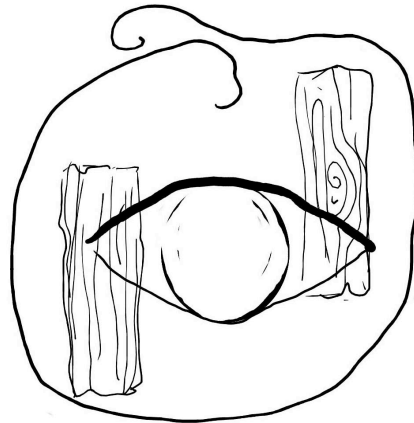
A brisk wind broke his mental hibernation. The sun was setting, the retreating heat giving him the energy to move.

"Home!" he grunted spontaneously.

He had been staring at a cave for some time and so he felt this particular cave was his. Fixing his eyes on the hole, he tentatively dabbed his right foot across the top of the pebbles, then stretched his leg, his burnt calves strikingly painful. Gritting his gums, he took a deep breath and he lunged forward.

"OWWWWW ...EEEEEEEE ... AHHHHHHH..."

Eventually, after a lot of yelping and stubbing his toes at least twice, he attained his objective and sniffing the air tentatively, stepped in. As his eyes accustomed themselves, he saw a large, flat rock that dominated the centre of the dank cave. Having walked twice round it, caressing its cold walls, he slumped on the rock fell quickly to sleep.



## CHAPTER 4

The seventh swell washed high up the beach, leaving two broken planks of wood and some string behind it. On the horizon, there were no dark clouds, no cold wind, no logical reason for this abnormally high swell; it was just another sun-dried morning as all the others. I am sure that this extraordinary phenomenon would have seemed bizarre even to Jerome's addled mind, had he been awake but it was not usually like him to sleep late. During the previous night, he had suffered a long trial of nightmares that had left him exhausted. The sun was high in the sky when he emerged.

'With nights like that, what is the point of sleeping at all?' his subconscious grumbled as he tried to remember the dreams.

He lay on his cold bed, wanting so desperately to moan, yet unable to. Something deep inside of stopped him, roaring contempt at his weakness. Yet for all his macho bravado, neither was he the great adventurer. By nature, he found no pleasure in discomfort and had always hated all outdoor activities, particularly camping.

'But I'll be damned if I'm going to cry over this!' he exclaimed.

His pride protected him; it was his armour. But all the same, it was still a pathetic sight to see, a thin old man curled up on a rock, his naked body smarting with sunburns.

His gums tightly clasped, he crawled his way to the mouth of the cave.

"James. I'm ready for my breakfast now." He pronounced to no one in particular. Crawling back to his rock, he remained there for a good half-hour, waiting for someone that he could not conscientiously remember ever meeting, as there was no one to meet on the beach.

Once he was quite bored of waiting, Jerome made his way back to the mouth of the cave. As he scanned the desolate beach for his erstwhile manservant, he noticed the two small planks of wood on the shoreline.

"James." he grumbled menacingly.

Taking a deep breath, he danced over the hot pebbles until he reached the shoreline but as the wash covered his feet, his body froze, petrified. He instinctively hated water and his body

juddered as it washed about his feet. (Since his childhood, Jerome had always disliked water. He had never learnt to swim and insisted only on showers. No one had discovered why he had such a phobia but most assumed it was because of his older brother's drowning.)

Jerome waited for the waves to retreat as far as possible before he dared to venture towards the planks. Bending down, his sunburns tore but continued all the same, his dark heart rumbling,

'Take the pain, you pathetic scoundrel.'

His back about to tear in two, his fingers caressed the string when he heard crash of another wave. Startled, he looked up to see the wash rushing towards him and spontaneously, he turned scrambling back up the beach empty handed.

'Jerome, please don't play near the water.' whispered a beautifully soft voice.

"Mother?" blurted Jerome sheepishly, looking either side of him.

But the voice had disappeared; stifled by an evil that was his heart of darkness.

It took him three attempts before he made it back to the cave with his prize. Sitting on the flat rock he called his bed, Jerome stared at the planks and string.

"Two planks of wood and a bundle of string?" he wondered.

Jerome was naturally inquisitive by such challenges but without a memory, he had only his instincts to rely on. Holding a plank in each hand, he first tried to tie the planks to his head to make a hat, but they slid down his wispy hairline making wooden earmuffs. Dissatisfied with this first attempt, he tied them to the rock to make a seat. But as he sat down, splinters lodged themselves in all sorts of unpleasant places. After an hour of scrabbling with his backside where he had managed to pick out the worst offenders, he then tied the planks over his nakedness, this time, with the grain going in the right direction.

"I found it!" He exclaimed, standing with a plank hanging from each side of his mid rift. The daylight beckoned him, it was time explore the beach. He marched confidently towards the light, only to receive a terrible whack from a wobbling plank to his privates.

The old man crawled back to his bed and rested.

Lying on his back, he tried to find the most soothing position. First, he sat up and then rolled on both sides but nothing would make the pain go away. In despair, he lay back and lifted his legs up straight.

"Feet. Hmmm. Feet! Eureka!"

He slid off the rock, grabbed the planks, his old fingers fumbling as he drew the string around his ankles into a knot.

Jerome was overwhelmed on taking his first steps. He jumped and kicked, admiring his own creation.

"This is the proudest moment of my life!" he exclaimed as he skipped in circles, fascinated by each step.

The sun beckoned him as he strode towards the light.

'Conquer, Jerome. You will conquer!' rumbled his heart.

He stepped out into the blistering sun and scanned the beach that stretched incessantly before him, dissolving into a heat haze on the horizon.

"Conquer what? There's nothing here." Jerome grumbled. 'Conquer the beach. You fool.'

"Yes, absolutely. Conquer the beach!" he growled.

He looked either side of him and found the left attracted him more. Why he decided to go left he knew not, but that was not important; it was the conquering that was important.

For the first hour, he walked purposely, examining every cave, turning every stone, yet all he found was pebbles; and more pebbles. He scanned the horizon for that which was not cliff, beach or sea yet they seemed to endlessly stretch before him.

By the end of the third hour, he was beginning to tire. He decided only to conquer the biggest caves.

By the sixth hour, his feet were covered in blisters.

By early evening, a cold breeze began to bite as he stumbled on his bloodied shoes. When he could stand no more, he made for the nearest cave.

Sitting down on the large, flat rock that lay in the centre he was disappointed that it was a cave like all the others.

"I have conquered a kingdom of stones and I get blisters in return." Looking at his feet, he did not dare touch them for they were so disfigured. "It's just not right. Not right at all!"

As the last of the sun skipped across the roof of the cave, Jerome gazed at the floor trying to find anything to take his mind off the cold. He examined the cave in the greatest of detail and there, lodged under his feet, he saw a strand of string. He examined it very closely before his mind broke out of its haze.

"Oh no, no, no!"

His body tensed uncontrollably, gums chattering as he fought his frustration.

"JAMES!! What kind of hell is this?"

At that very moment, thoughts flooded into his head, memories, desires, ideas, sensations, all running wild. His mind was alive with vengeance.

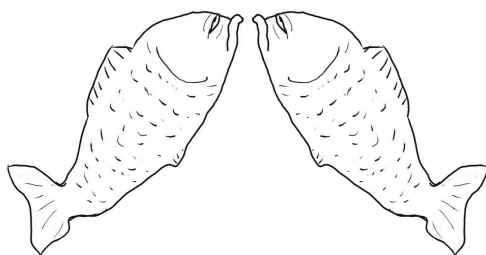
"Why me? What have I done to deserve this? What?!" He cried.

He felt duped and loathed himself for it. Shouting names late into the night, raving insanely as his head turned, sucked into a hurricane of hate and self-pity.

The moon was past its apex when his rage quelled, his shouting had turned into incoherent mumbles. He slumped against the large rock, his stomach tight, his naked body shivering

uncontrollably. He was unable to face the fact that he was a prisoner on an island. At that moment, sleep was his only salvation.





## CHAPTER 5

The number three is a magical number that inspires the future. It is the first incomplete number. There is one, the whole; two, the couple and three, the crowd. It is the open number that begs more numbers to follow. It is said that beautiful things come in threes, the earth rose from the sea on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead on the third day and Jerome's stomach started to rumble on his third day.

As he made his way down to the beach, Jerome felt it was a positive start to his second day future on the island.

"Right! Breakfast and then cliff climbing!"

He felt that he could eat a whale and then run a hundred miles. In short, he nearly felt young. He strode confidently down to the shore, the string from his new shoes tearing open his blisters, but he did not care because he no longer wanted to. Self-pity was a waste of time. Standing far enough from the shore to be sure not to get wet, he saw a large fish flapping in the wash. The fish, the size of a small tuna, made Jerome's stomach rumble even more.

"You can rumble all you like but I'm not getting any closer." Resisted the old man, scrutinising every movement of the sea. But his stomach replied with another grunt. The fish was becoming irresistible to him as the break receded away, bile rose to his mouth.

Unconsciously, Jerome overcame his fear, taking the last the few steps towards his first breakfast.

"I can't eat this. It's alive." He wanted to go back to the cave, but his stomach would not let him.

As the wave crashed before him, his stomach nearly tore itself apart he tucking the fish under his arm, its thick tail flapping with all its might, slapping Jerome's backside as he ran as fast as he could back up the beach, the wash snapping at his feet. With one big kick, the fish fell from his arm into the water. As the wave receded, Jerome begrudgingly dragged the fish to the dry pebbles.

"Never again, I tell you. Never!" he shouted at his stomach.

'RUMBLE.' was the reply.

The drowning fish flapped desperately, its black eye staring up at Jerome.

"What am I to do with you?" he pondered as he bent down and snatched at the fish with a concerted jab.

"I hate fish." he exclaimed, disgusted at the beast's slippery texture but his stomach rumbled urgently.

"Damn you stomach."

Controlling himself, Jerome sat on his haunches and stretched his arms out, his fingers bent like claws.

"Just like an eagle." he whispered repeatedly, his arms gently flapping, circling his prey. But his prey was quite oblivious to this strange ritual. Jerome's eagle dance honed his killer instincts on a single burst of energy. Lunging, he grabbed at its head, his hand slipping and he fell head first. The fish flicked out of the way, slapping Jerome hard on the face, as it buried itself in the pebbles.

His stomach made another body juddering rumble.

"Hurry up! I haven't got all day yer know." gurgled a voice with a heavy cockney accent.

Jerome jumped back, his head darting from side to side.

"Who was that? Come out from where ever you are, come out now!" he insisted.

But there was no reply as the fish continued to flap as vigorously as ever.

Jerome resumed his eagle dance hovering over his prey.

"Gordon Bennett! All yer got to do is hit me on the head with the stone." exclaimed the invisible voice.

"Come out!" Jerome shouted furiously grabbing the stone.

"Scallop head! What else are yer goin' to hit over the head with a stone. Another stone?"

His arm cocked back, Jerome slowly looked down at the fish.

"Look. I'll even make it easy for yer. But only this once." said the fish as it stopped still. "Now get on with it!"

"I'm sorry. Are you talking to me?" Jerome was less shocked by the fish talking, than by the manner with which it addressed him.

"Have you always been this stupid or is it just when you talk to fish?"

"I wouldn't push your luck." Jerome said firmly.

"Oh I'm so scared. Quivering I am."

Jerome turned to walk away.

"Oi! Where are you going"

"I'm not wasting my time with you."

"Don't be like that. All you gotta do is eat me!"

Jerome's stomach rumbled.

"You're hungry aren't you?"

"Yes."

"So are you going to eat me or not?"

"Oh yes."

"Well then, what are yer waiting for?"

"How do you suggest I kill you if you don't stop wriggling?"

"I'll stop wriggling, but only this once!" the fish replied exasperated.

"But you've already said that."

"No I haven't."

"Yes you have."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"No!" Jerome retorted at the behest of his rumbling stomach.

"So, I'll stop wriggling, but only this once!"

"Thank you."

"Then, hit me over head, tear me to pieces and eat every last bit of me. Easy eh?"

"Even your eyes?"

"Everything."

"Why everything?"

"It's a long way up those cliffs, ain't it."

"How did you know I might climb the cliff?"

"It's obvious. I might only be a fish but I'm not stupid, yer know."

"That's debatable."

"Oh shut up. You people think fish are all stupid but we're not."

"Yes."

"But that's what you thought. Did you know that I can lip read in five languages? You see, I used to be a gold fish once."

"Really." Jerome replied flatly.

"The amount of times I saw people say, 'Don't you think fish get bored in them tanks?' Of course we get bored in tanks. Even a gold fish knows when he's done the same circle five hundred times."

"So what. I'm hungry!".

"I wasn't always a fish. I'm a pedigree from Bow."

"What?"

"Used to drive a sherbet."

"Shut up."

"Sherbet dab, cab!"

"Cab. I thought your accent seemed familiar." Jerome said turning away. "Do I know you?"

"What me?"

"Yes, you."

"I'm not sure?" replied the fish sheepishly.

"Answer me!" Retorted Jerome angrily. "I thought I recognised your voice."

"We could've met... but it was a long time ago." said the fish pointedly. "So are you going to eat me or not?"

"One last question."

"What?"

"Where am I?" whispered Jerome.

"Ohhh. Don't you worry your sun-dried brain with such temporal rubbish? My advice to you is, get yourself a plan, get yourself a purpose."

"Purpose eh?" Whispered Jerome eagerly.

"Yes, a special purpose. I'd start thinking about how you're going to escape."

"But I was conquering."

"Conquer what? This place. You've done that already. Escape is to conquer somewhere new."

"Escape to conquer." he pronounced as his stomach rumbled.

"So what are you waiting for?!?" Shouted the fish. "Eat me, you blockhead. I'm you're next step to freedom!"

Jerome cocked his arm back as far as he could, the stone weighing heavy in his palm. He looked into the flat, black eye of the fish and for a moment saw a man at the steering wheel of a limousine having his head beaten by a baseball bat. Jerome stopped. 'It's Gerald the chauffeur.' He exclaimed to himself.

"I told you we would meet again." Sniggered the fish.

Jerome saw himself crush the cabbies head with a single blow of the bat, and at the same moment, he grabbed the fish's head and crushed it to a pulp, tearing the corpse apart.

An hour later, Jerome had finished all of his breakfast.

He lay back and rubbed his full stomach, satisfied.

## CHAPTER 6

"Hmmm. It is... high!" sighed Jerome and indeed it was. The white cliff was so high that it seemed to blur into the sky like a painting.

Motivated, Jerome scanned the horizon looking for an obvious route up but even though there was a large number of little paths they always led to a dead end. He strolled up the beach, trying to remember who Gerald was, but as with family reunions, he just could not remember. As he stared at the cracked face, a route seemed to appear before him, winding its way up as far as he could see. Spitting in his hands, he took a firm foothold and started to climb, but when he looked up a second time, somehow his route had disappeared, the cliff face having changed. So he climbed back down.

"Bloody fish." he cursed. "Bloody Gerald!"

He continued up the beach, searching for another route yet when he looked back, he realised that the cliff was perpetually changing. Understandably, this constant deception became increasingly frustrated.

The sun had passed its zenith when Jerome decided that the moment had come to get on with the climb and hope that the changing cliff would evolve in his favour. He picked an arbitrary spot, spat in his hands, took a foothold and started to climb. Why he chose that very place was not clear. Firstly, there was no apparent path, the start was overhanging and there were no tufts of grass to be seen. But Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald felt sure of his choice and even if he was not, he was certainly not going to admit it to anyone, least of all himself.

'To admit failure is to face defeat and that is unacceptable.'

Jerome, naked as the day he was born, his emaciated arms, sagging stomach and puny legs, started the long climb. The midday sun beat hard on him, his blisters filled with chalk but he accepted all the pain, determined to succeed. His single-mindedness spurred him upwards, somehow quietly revelling in the pain that he endured.

'Pain means something.' This was his mantra, his energy, his justification; the motto that drove him towards his own success. He would quantify his success by the amount of pain he (and those around him) had had to endure. So climbing the cliff was not a hardship or a question of survival to him. It was a question of success.

Jerome made good headway, finding that a path was falling into place before his eyes. Wherever he placed his feet there seemed to be a hold and soon he had climbed some thirty metres. He stopped to catch his breath and admired the view, the distant heat haze melting the deep blue sea into the sky.

"And Alexander saw the breadth of his domain..." but he could not remember the rest. The wind had started to blow a little stronger, dust blowing into his eyes, as he continued to climb. On a couple of occasions he lost his grip, his eyes looking down, a vertigo throwing him off balance.

"Never look down. Never."

The beach quickly faded away and the sea lay far beyond, flat to the horizon in every direction and on either side of him, the cliff tapered away to the sky. Up there, he began to feel vulnerable and that made him double his efforts.

The sun was beginning to ease as he scrambled to find another foot hold on the never-ending cliff. The chalk had become more fragile, rocks breaking away as he touched them, dust swirling about his face with every step. When he looked up, he was no closer to the top.

"Nine hundred and forty nine, nine hundred and..." He lifted his right foot up, looking for a hold when, catching his shoe on an outcrop, the string broke. Jerome yelled, slipping backward as the shoe fell away. Fighting the pain, he pulled himself back against the cliff.

"Help me!" he roared. A tear rolled down his chalky face. "Damn fish!"

He heard a snigger through the wind. "Gerald?!" he whispered, but there was no answer.

On he climbed, the higher he got, the harder it became. Every step was heavier than the last, as he fought the thought of failure.

"I won't die here." Jerome repeated as he looked about him for a new route, but death was becoming a comforting alternative to the harsh climb. As he lost his strength, so his footing became unsure. Soon enough the other shoe fell away as he slipped off a grassy knoll that he was trying to eat.

Dragging himself back onto the knoll, he rested.

Far off on the horizon, he distinguished a silhouette that had not been there before. On closer examination he realised it was another island.

'I told you there was an escape from here.' Rumbled his heart. 'It is ours.'

His spirits revived, he continued to climb for another hour, but as the sun faded so did his hopes of success. Despair welled up in him again, over taking the pain in his legs. His fanaticism had become the denial of his situation; pointless climbing was to escape the inevitable question. It did not take long to manifest itself.

'This is hopeless Jerome.' he told himself. 'Your only chance is to climb back down...'

'Never!' his pride declared. 'You're not that sort!'

Jerome looked down and realised he could no longer see the detail of the beach. As he stared, a tunnel of vertigo dragged him down towards the pebbles, his stomach jumped into his mouth, a cold sweat rushed through him.

"Hold it man, hold it." He took a deep gulp and closed his eyes. "It's not that far. Just a couple of hours of climbing and it will be all over."

With his eyes still closed and bile swimming in his mouth, he took the first tentative steps back the way he thought he had come but the path had moved, the crevices had disappeared. His foot swayed precariously, desperately searching. He swung his leg over to a nook but it was too far, his only hope was to let himself drop a couple of inches and hope he would find a grip.

"One, two and..." He forced his hand to let go. "Three." His foot was but an inch from the nook, his toes dabbing the chalk.

"OHH HOOO." echoed a distant cry.

Jerome's head darted about him, tightening what was left of his grip.

"OHH HOOO." The voice echoed a second time. Jerome looked down to see a dark figure standing directly below him.

"Are you alright up there?"

"I'm fine!" replied Jerome angrily.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm alright!!" Jerome shouted.

"Only asking."

"Well I wouldn't."

"I could give you a hand, if you want."

"No thank you." replied Jerome curtly.

"Well, I'll be off then. Good evening."

Jerome hung precariously, struggling to find the footing that somehow danced around his feet.

"Wait a minute!" Jerome cried.

The distant figure turned.

"Yes."

"Can you tell me what time it is?"

"Sorry old man. Don't have much need for time. Mind you, I think it will be dark shortly."

"Oh really. Do you think so?"

"Oh yes. The sun has nearly set." replied the figure earnestly.

"I can still see it from up here."

"Really. It's quite gone from down here."

"If that's the case, maybe I could do with a hand after all."

"Ohh goody!!" answered the figure eagerly.

"But I'm not sure what you can do, you being down there."

"Good point old man. Let me think."

A very long moment passed as Jerome struggling to keep his grip.

"I don't know how long I can hold on here you know. So hurry up!" Jerome shouted curtly.

"Well if you're going to be like that!" The figure turned on its heels and began to walk away.

"No wait, No. HELLLP!!!

"Being rude is not going to make you any friends."

"I'm sorry." Jerome whispered.

"What was that?"

"I said, I can't hold on much longer."

"I'll tell you what. I'll climb up."

"I can't wait that long."

"Don't you worry. I've done this before." The figure shouted. "Just hang on."

"I can't!!!"

With a super human force, the black figure leapt up the cliff face, it barely touching the chalk. Jerome quivered, unable to distinguish exactly what form was able skip so eagerly onto the ledge from which he was hanging.

"Oufff. Need to do more exercise I'd say. What do you say?" asked the silhouette that towered above him.

Jerome speechless.

"Well. Cat got your tongue?"

Jerome shook his head, squinting at the figure through the fading light.

"What are you?"

"I'm your saviour. La la laaaa!" it sang. "Good aren't I?"

A closer inspection of his companion revealed that it was not a foot that stood before his face but a paw and it was also not a hand but another paw that grasped an out crop. The man in black was not a man at all, but a big black cat.

"You're a cat." Whispered the bewildered Jerome.

"Dix point! Could you at least close your mouth when staring."

Jerome's did so.

"I think the best thing is that you climb onto my back. Do you think you can manage that?"

The cat thrust its paw out towards Jerome.

Jerome kept staring, his body shivering uncontrollably.

"Well. What are you shivering for? Are you man or mouse?" it growled.

"Man."

"Well act like one. Grab my paw."

Jerome shuddered at the thought.

"I'm waiting." Sang the Cat in a gay falsetto.

Jerome looked down, closed his eyes and thrust out his right arm.

"No no no! That's no good. Look at what you're doing man!"

"You won't drop me?" Jerome whimpered, as he took a deep breath.

"That is very much up to you. Now grab my paw."

Jerome thrust out his arm again, trying to reach the paw but it was too far away.



"Nearly." commented the cat. "Just a little further."

"I can't."

"There is no such thing as can't, man."

Jerome looked at the cat, its eyes as black as night, its whiskers twanging, its small mouth sparkling with sharp white teeth, a slight grin creasing its moist nose.

"Jump!!"

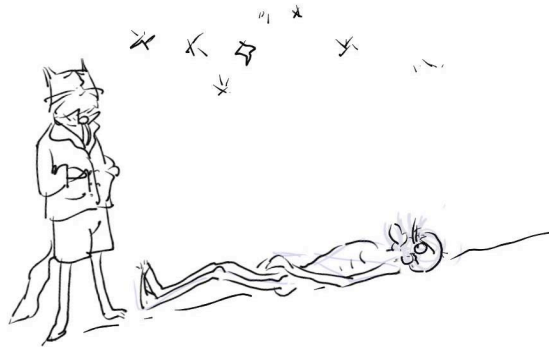
Jerome lunged blindly, his fingers brushed the waxy paw before...

Oh<sub>hh</sub> No<sub>oo</sub>. AHHHH!!

Jerome began to fall, his eyes locked on the shadow as he fell slowly away. Then everything became a white blur as the cliff rushed passed him. Yet as he fell, the cliff tore away in the blur of his fall revealing a terrible nemesis of hell. He heard a billion screams pierce this apocalyptic nightmare of fire, misery and pain. Monsters danced on heads of their victims, pouring lava into the open mouths as they lay trapped in a prison of buried bodies. Snakes slithered through the shrivelled remains, tearing at mummified corpses.

In a moment, the vision had vanished and Jerome saw the beach was upon him.

"Mother



## CHAPTER 7

Jerome lay star shaped in a shallow grave, his peeling nose pointing towards the last glimmers of the setting sun. Next to him were his shoes; above him was the cat. Jerome instinctively hated cats, so he felt particularly uncomfortable when confronted by this grossly over sized version. It wore a white shirt with a burgundy cravat, a brightly coloured waistcoat of the finest silk, a tight black suit with tapered trousers and a large cape. It was all of the best possible quality, faultlessly arranged. Yet this dandy ensemble revolted Jerome all the same.

"Sorry about that old man!" said the debonair cat. "Was a bit further than I thought."

Jerome tried to throw a punch at the cat's feet, only to yelp with pain.

"Damn you... cat!"

"Look, I said I was sorry. I tried my damndest."

"I could have been killed!"

"Highly unlikely old man. Anyway, I had no intention of killing you. That's quite unfair."

"You will pay for this you... you..."

"Frankly, I don't know why I'm even talking to you. You've been nothing but ungrateful over the whole episode."

The cat turned his back and waited. Jerome stared above him, searching the skyline for his escape.

"Was I near the top?" whispered Jerome.

"Well, you were a lot closer to the bottom." The cat replied delicately.

"Point to where I got to."

"Please!" insisted the cat.

"Please." Replied the exacerbadated Jerome.

Jerome's eyes followed the cat's paw towards a point not more than a few metres above his head.

"That's impossible!"

"I promise you. How do you think I climbed up so quickly? It was not more that five or six metres."

"But you were tiny on the beach and... and I also saw an island."

"That's not very surprising. I can see it from here."

Jerome cocked his head forward to the sea and indeed there lay the dark silhouette of an island.

"So why was the island not there before?" croaked Jerome.

"You do ask an awful lot of question for a man in your condition."

"Answer the question... please." Whispered Jerome forcefully.

"Because you wanted it."

Jerome slumped back and sighed.

"Fish that talk, cliffs that change, islands that appear. It is... What is it?"

"Haven't you ever seen a fish talk before?" asked the cat.

"I can't remember having seen one before today." Whispered Jerome. "But then I can't really remember anything much before today."

"Oh, that is quite normal. What you need is a good night's rest." the cat pronounced. "The fall can't have done you any good. Tomorrow will be another beautiful day."

"Beautiful. You think this is beautiful?"

"It has a sort of simple charm I suppose."

"But it's so hot here, hot as hell itself."

"Not exactly. Anyway, sleep well my dear mister Jerome." The cat swivelled on its paws and with a debonair skip in its gait it walked away.

"How do you know my name?" shouted Jerome but the cat did not reply.

Dusk soon turned to night.

"Five metres, eh. Impossible!" he repeated under his breath as he stared at the stars dotted across an iridescent sky.

With the sun's departure, the cold arrived but Jerome was too tired to shiver. This was the moment of peaceful nothingness where true slumber lies, where time has no meaning, but, with a boom, Jerome was thrust into a dream, one that had already started without him, but all the same, it was his dream. He was in a house, a very ordinary house. A very ordinary looking couple stood before him. The man trembled, his face bleeding and bruised, the woman sobbing uncontrollably into her bloodied blouse. Jerome saw himself walk round the couple, inspecting them with a disdainful glare. Then he turned to a monster of a man that was standing next to him, whispered in his ear, stood back and blinked. The large man started to circle the couple, as if a beast stalking its prey, his eyes black as opal never blinking, his pointed nose sniffing them, as if trying to suck their very souls out. The couple trembled uncontrollably, petrified. Round the shark went, slowly, surely, expressionlessly. The anticipation was overwhelming, his body taut, his fists tighter, he could not control his ecstasy any longer. With a nod, the large man swivelled round and with a skip, threw himself

on him, his enormous mouth gleaming with the sharpest teeth. His head flipped back, dislocating his jaw, his eyes sinking into his skull leaving only the tender flesh of the sockets. The monster's jaw crashed into the man's legs, buckling under the force of the attack. With a flick of its head, they were torn off. Blood spurted across the flowery wallpaper as the man briefly screamed. The beast threw the legs aside as the man lay on the floor, his body convulsing uncontrollably; his stumps pouring blood. The woman fell into a ball on the floor as the beast stood above her, its head reset. Jerome watched on, euphoria swimming through his veins. He wanted to clap but he controlled himself. The monster looked round and Jerome smiled. It lunged close, inspecting its prey. She screamed, begging Jerome for mercy but he could not hear what she said as it all seemed to come out in a glorious slow motion, but it did not matter because he was far beyond listening. The beast grabbed the ball by her hair and pulled her high into the air. She dangled from his arm, her toes scraping the carpet, she desperately grabbing at the beast's arm. Again, the beast flicked its dead eyes to Jerome. Jerome savoured the moment one last time, the woman hanging in mid air. He took a deep breath, held it, then thrust out his clenched fist, his thumb pointing downwards. The beast turned to its prey, slowly opened its mouth, its jaw dislocating, to reveal a blood red gullet, flesh still hanging from the razor sharp teeth. It plunged into the woman's sternum, its flipped back head vibrating through the flesh, shredding organs, blood washing its face. She screamed then fell silent. Jerome could no longer hear as he let out a deep, orgasmic sigh. Then, his head dropped to his chest.

The severed corpse fell away from the beast's mouth as it stood between the corpse and the unconscious man, blood pouring from its face. Jerome walked over to the woman, crouched and sniffed, savouring the sweet, bloody aroma. He turned to the man and stared into his glazed, half-dead eyes.

'It is at this moment that I see what it was to be a man.' he said.

It was the anger and the hate that he knew so well within himself. It exhilarated him to witness the last moment of suffering before the eyes glazed and the body fell limp. As the man came close to his last breath, Jerome was euphoric. He took his head in his hands, stared deep into his eyes, searching for his soul.

'I eat your soul.' he exclaimed as he kissed the man on the lips, sucking the life out of him.

The lifeless eyes batted and the hate was gone; only a pure strength remained, as bright and strong as the largest sun; a power that brought a shudder from the darkest parts of his soul.

The stare of the corpse seemed somehow alive, hard as granite, clear as water.

The corpse juddered and Jerome recoiled, as a last gurgle spat out across his eyes. The blood was like acid, burning him. He covered his face.

"Help me! I'm blind!"

Through the blur, he saw the beast approach, flick back its head, its eyes sinking away, revealing its bloody white serrated teeth. In a moment it lunged forward.

Jerome woke up bolt upright. He panted erratically, sweating profusely as bile filled his mouth. He knew the event to be somehow true but he did not know from where.

'Don't fight me Jerome. I am the only one who really understands.' rumbled his heart.

Jerome closed his eyes and fell back to sleep.

The sun was already high in the sky when he woke the distant sound of a fish slapping broke his daze.

"Go away!!" Jerome shouted.

But soon enough, there was something tickling at his feet.

"Oi, I'm not doing this forever. I know you're awake!"

Jerome propped himself up and parted his legs. Before him he saw a fish nestled between his feet, much smaller than the previous one.

"I'm talking to you, sonny." Shouted the fish.

"Go away I said!"

"Ohhhh that's fine!" it replied with sardonically. "Here I am flapping away for Lord Fontlaroy and you can't even be bothered to eat me."

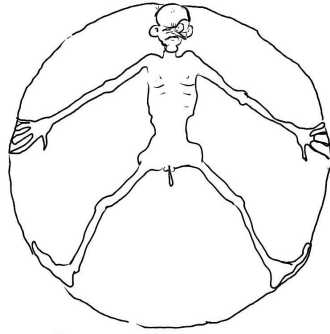
"I'm not hungry!"

"Okay! See if I care if you starve to death."

"If only." Jerome whispered.

In a moment, silence had returned to the beach.

'Jerome. There must be more to life than this.' He thought as he lay back in his shallow grave.



## CHAPTER 8

"I say old man, not even Englishmen stay out in a sun like this."

Jerome cracked open an eyelid to see the huge, very debonair, black cat towering above.

"What are you doing here?" sighed Jerome.

"I've come to see how my friend is getting on."

"I am not your friend."

"I understand that it has all been a little difficult for you here but there is no need to be rude."

Insisted the cat.

"And where exactly is here?" Jerome sighed nonchalantly.

"I can't exactly say." The cat skipped a little dance, sniggering at his own little joke.

"What's so funny?"

"You lying in a hole wondering where you are."

"Would you please leave me alone?" sighed Jerome as he fidgeted, trying to find a comfortable position in his pebble grave.

"I'm still here you know?" said the cat, prodding Jerome's side with its paw.

"I know."

"Well, take your time man. You've got until the end of eternity to wake up!" pronounced the cat sarcastically.

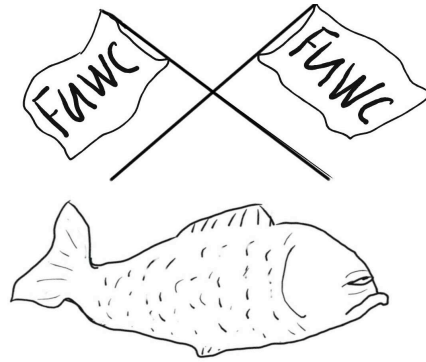
'Eternity?' The word echoed through Jerome's sun dried mind, making the few hairs that had left on his body jump up.

"Eternity is forever!" he whispered.

It took him a few seconds to realise the enormity of eternity.

"I might never find a comfortable position."

"That is very much up to you." hissed the cat.



## CHAPTER 9

Jerome did not see the Cat again for sometime. I cannot tell you exactly how long but it was certainly many months.

During this time, he did not move from his little grave. He tried to make himself comfortable on his pebble bed and hoped that good fortune or death would take him, but they stayed away. The only break from the monotony of hoping was his breakfast but he was often too tired to eat it. Day after day he lay there, cocooned in a coffin of pebbles, his eyes closed, willing himself to die. On good days, time would disappear in a haze of inertness, on bad days his mind would twist into terrible knots, repeating the same questions.

'Where are you?, Who are you?' and 'What is eternity?'

Naturally, it was not long before he was chasing his tail, but as Jerome was extremely stubborn, he persisted.

He started with 'What is eternity?' which quickly led to 'How long is eternity?' then 'What is beyond eternity?' finishing with 'What is beyond the beyond of eternity?'

'On a clear day, I can see forever and sometimes even further than that... But there is nothing beyond forever... but, there is eternity. So what is the difference between forever and eternity? ... Perspective!'

And so it on went.

Salvation from this mental torment invariably came from a pebble that had miraculously lodged itself in an awkward part on his body.

One afternoon, months later, as he was waking from another marathon siesta, he noticed something flying above him. Too weak to sit up, he followed the blurred silhouette far above him with his finger. He focused on the end of his finger then focused on the empty space just beyond it trying to reach it.

'There is eternity,' he sighed. 'Always just beyond... It's time to go home.'

Dropping his arm, he wiped away the pebbles that had protected him for so many months and tried to stand, but he too weak.

'If I can't walk, I'll crawl.'

He found the cave unchanged, dark and dank, rocks piled up like ancient gravestones. Jerome had become accustomed to the hardships of the beach and more importantly, he had come to terms with the idea that he was not leaving it in a hurry. His first project was to reduce the over sized entrance to the cave with a wall. It took him many attempts but he eventually succeeded. Admiring his wall, he repeatedly stepped in and out, appreciating the quiet of his home. For his next project, he built himself a rock chair and padded it with sea weed.

"The sunsets will be so much finer from my chair." he sighed.

By the end of that month his home was complete. He sat in his chair and watched the sun set and the moon rise. He did not question why the sun never moved across the horizon or why where ever he went on the island the sun always remained in the same place. But these minor celestial quandaries were of no concern to Jerome, as he knew no better.

His life became a routine. In the morning, as the sun rose, he would walk down to his spot on the shoreline and find a fish in the shale. It was almost always a fish, yet occasionally he might get a squid and once he even had a lobster but he did not care for it. He found the flat fish to be the most unresponsive, particularly plaice, as they did not open their mouths when they spoke, seeing as they are pointed into the sand. The plaice, with its eyes propped on top of its flat body, always looked so stupid so Jerome had no problem killing it.

The cod, on the other hand, were far more resentful of their thankless death. They would mumble unpleasantness on Jerome's arrival, flapping half-heartedly, on occasion even laughing. Jerome did not care for their manners but he did respect them, as he also found them to be the tastiest fish of all.

"You know I was once a civil engineer. I've even got a degree!" a sadly muted cod once mentioned as Jerome tried to grab its tail.

"I don't really care if you were Queen Victoria herself." He replied curtly.

But as soon as he touched the fish, it would stop moving, as if dead before he had killed it. Jerome often wondered why they died so quickly but he always forgot to ask. Anyway, the fun part was the 'fish slamming' ritual that followed.

After breakfast, he would walk along the beach, exploring the caves, then have a sleep in the afternoon before going to the shoreline to pick up dinner. Yet the nights were what he feared most. In the 'comfort' of his seaweed mattress he would have the most horrific nightmares. The few that he could remember always revolved around him being kicked and beaten by a huge faceless mob. The beatings were unrelenting, each blow more than physical. He sensed that he knew each and everyone of the assailants, but he could not say from where or who or why.

In the morning, he would be bruised, often finding himself on the floor, exhausted. He once tried to talk to a squid about his nightmares but he did not get very far. Jerome felt an affinity with squid in general but the squid did not feel the same way. Out of kindness, he would



delay the ritual 'fish slamming' with idle chat, offering to let the squid go free and even throwing it back into the sea. Yet on the next wave, it returned. Eventually, he confided that he found squid rubbery and inedible.

"Suits me!" said the squid and with a flip of its tentacle it slipped back into the surf never to be seen again.

With his routine well in place, he had a lot of time on his hands. He did not find esoteric reflection very satisfying, so he kept to practical considerations. The island on the horizon fascinated him, dreaming it was a paradise then convinced that it was a paradise. He would dream of eating well-behaved fish on a sandy beach, served by an obedient black cat.

'That must be paradise.' he wondered as he gloated on his dream. But it was not the place that brought him the most pleasure; it was his desperate need for revenge.

He often asked the cod, as they seemed to be a bit brighter than the plaice, if they knew anything about the island 'paradise' but they were always too preoccupied with grumbling to give a useful answer. That was until one evening whilst Jerome was in particularly obtuse mood.

"Tell me, have you ever been to the other island?" he said with as much politeness as he could muster.

"What other island?" sighed the cod, disinterested.

"That one!" Jerome shouted angrily as he kicked the fish to look in the right direction.

"Oi!! Watch it!! How would you like it if I did that you to you?"

"Answer me, you cocky piece of ..."

"Watch your language. Do you know who you are talking to?" retorted the cod in an officious tone. "I am the district sub manager of the Federated Union of Cod Workers. FUCW for short."

Furious, Jerome lifted his foot to trample the fish's head.

"Tell me or I'll... I'll." Jerome was stumped. "I'll... I'll..."

"You'll what exactly?"

"Put you in a cage and keep you here forever." Said Jerome very quickly.

The cod took a deep gulp of air, its gills flapping more than usual.

"How would I know what it's like? I live in the sea. I'm a fish, stupid!"

"Don't be insolent!"

"Well, stop asking stupid questions then."

"Forever in a cage is a very long time!" Jerome taunted menacingly.

"Okay, okay. I heard talk about it once."

"And."

"It's much nicer than 'ere."

"How much nicer?"

"I don't know!! Much nicer!"

Jerome looked towards the island, getting as close to the break as he dared.

"Nicer eh."

"Now. Is your lordship hungry?"

"NO!!!" Jerome shouted, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

"My first day back from holiday and I get you." Said the cod resentfully.

"How far is it from here?"

"Look, I've got loads of things to do, so if you could get on, I'd be very grateful."

"Answer the question!"

"I don't know. I've never been there."

"What better thing have you got to do than go there for me?"

"Cor blimney! You think you're the only person. I get eaten five or six times a day!"

"By whom?"

"Others!"

"On the other island?"

"I don't know. One beach is much the same as another."

"Tell me where they are?" Jerome insisted.

"I'll tell yer what. You eat me right now and I promise I'll speak to my boss, the Great Lobster.

He knows what's goin' on."

"The Great lobster eh?"

"EAT ME!!!"

The cod fell limp as soon as Jerome touched it.

His dinner tasted rotten with resentment and he was sick all night. Through the haze of his nausea, his recurring nightmare cleared as he saw the blurred mob that beat him the previous nights were devils with cod faces, lacerating him with their razor sharp fins, laughing gleefully. They burbled chants, leaping like witches before him as he twisted on a spit, the flames boiling his skin in deep welts. Over the following nights, the dream developed each time more frightening than the last. Jerome now avoided sleep, petrified by the devils in his dreams, hoping for the Cat's return or better still, a meeting with the Great lobster.



## CHAPTER 10

One morning as Jerome was making his way to breakfast the sea exploded, rising up, then receding as quickly leaving in its wake a huge grey crustacean.

"Good God! It's a giant lobster." Jerome exclaimed at the sight of the super sized mass of legs. It lounged on a stone chaise-long cushioned on a bed of purple and gold seaweed. The lobster was mostly an insipid grey colour with a burgundy top shell dotted with black spots. On one of its enormous claws was tattooed 'love', on the other, 'hate'. Its two beady black eyes turned to Jerome as its antennae, as long as flagpoles, swayed in the light morning breeze. It was picking its mouth with its claws, thousands of fine vibrating filaments chiselling noisily.

'You'd better go back to bed.' Jerome's head advised him. 'Yes, I think you're right.' Jerome concurred. He turned around very discreetly and started back up the beach. He had not got far when he heard a gurgling boom, coming from behind him.

"Where do you think you're going?" said the lobster in a heavy Geordie accent.

Jerome ignored the question.

"Come back here, you miserable little man. If I have to move just one of my legs to get you, you can be sure you will regret it!"

Turning, Jerome confronted the monster from a safe distance. His head lifted high, shoulders pushed back and his eyes fixed; he felt no fear.

"How dare you talk to me like that! Do you know who I am?" shouted Jerome.

"Frankly, I don't care who you were. On the other hand you should care who I am!" it retorted.

"So who are you?"

"I am the Great Lobster!"

"You are a great lobster." repeated Jerome mockingly.

"No, I am the Great Lobster!" it boomed.

"And?"

"And I have been informed that you have made numerous complaints about the service here."

"What service?" flippantly asked Jerome.

"The service that my staff provide."

"Oh the meals!" Jerome exclaimed sarcastically. "Well I just don't like squid and the cod are very insolent... and I want more variety."

"But of course, sir." boomed the Great Lobster mockingly. "Anything you say sir!"

"Good. If you have any tuna, it would make all the difference."

"Ah... tuna." It sighed, its monstrously long antennas turning towards Jerome. "They are so much more difficult to come by, so we will have to negotiate."

"What exactly is there to negotiate?"

"Well, you might be able to do something for me."

"Such as?" Jerome wondered.

"Come closer and I tell you." hissed the vibrating fur of the lobsters mouth.

"No. If you wish to negotiate, you'll have to come here." Exclaimed the determined Jerome.

Begrudgingly, the Great Lobster tried to roll off the chaise long, but its huge bulk, Jerome presuming it to be a very over weight lobster, made it virtually impossible for it to move. After a few attempts and a lot of grunting, the Great Lobster fell back exhausted.

"I can't." it shouted.

"That's not good enough." insisted Jerome.

"I've got a terrible back problem. All me disks are askew. I had an accident whilst playing polo as a nipper, you see."

"Polo eh?!"

"I could have been one of the greats." It tossed a large stone high into the air with one claw, the other striking it hard. In an instant, it ricocheted just in front of Jerome's feet.

"I haven't lost me touch though, have I?"

Jerome had got the message.

"In that case, as you seem to be suffering, I will come to you. But I will not make a habit of this!"

He walked back down the beach, with as much dignity as he could find, his pride hiding his fear. The Great Lobster eyed every stride, its antennas swaying and its mouth vibrating ominously.

Jerome stepped closer, stopping just out of what he thought to be the lobsters reach.

"Come closer man. I won't hurt yer." Gurgled the Great Lobster.

"No. I'm just fine here thank you. So what is this proposition then?"

"I hope I don't make yer feel uncomfortable?"

"No, not in the beast... least." Jerome stuttered.

"Oh good."

There was an awkward silence.

"Do yer like games?" Asked the lobster.

"What games?"

"Games of luck and chance."

"No."

"What a shame. I find them the only reasonable means of making decisions." It said pensively. "I tell yer what. I will answer any question you like, as best I can of course, every time you win at scissors, rock, paper." it proposed with great enthusiasm.

"I'm sorry?" Jerome leaned forward in disbelief.

"You know, you shake your hand three times on the count and depending on what shape you make, you either win a question or lose a finger."

"Lose a finger!"

"What else have you got to lose?" the lobster sniggered staring at his nakedness.

Jerome turned to walk away.

"Do not ever turn your back on me, little man!" Boomed the beast. "I am the Great Lobster!"

"And I am Jerome, king of this island." Jerome pronounced.

"I'll show you my respect."

With the swiftest of movements, his 'hate' claw swung round and he snipped Jerome's middle finger clean off. It took a moment for Jerome to realise that the beast had even moved. The Great Lobster showed the digit to Jerome before flipping it into its furry maw.

"MMmmmm." It vibrated condescendingly.

Jerome made muffled cries clasping his bloody hand.

"Oh stop that. It's not that bad." The Great Lobster commented. "Stop it!! Stop grunting you slither of halibut dropping!... If you don't stop, I will do it again."

Jerome stopped instantly.

"Now listen to me Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald. I've been nice to you so far but that don't work, so listen good." The Great Lobster thrust his snapping 'hate' claw toward Jerome, who was now cowering on the pebbles. "You will eat what I give you and you will eat it all. Do I make myself clear Jerome?"

Jerome nodded quickly.

"As for answering questions, you don't need answers!" The Great Lobster thrust its 'Love' claw towards Jerome as he scuppered backwards. "Love is on your side; take it whilst you can."

"Yes." whimpered Jerome.

"Incidentally, there is no escape from your island."

"What about the other island over there?" He tried to point but his hand hurt too much.

"That is elsewhere." Sniggered the Lobster Great.

As Jerome opened his mouth, the 'hate' claw swung round menacingly.

"The next time I hear a complaint out of you, it'll be snip-snip downstairs." It gurgled menacingly.

Jerome turned and ran back to his cave, never looking back.



## CHAPTER 11

For six days Jerome struggled with continuous nightmares but on the seventh day, not even the nightmares could penetrate his exhaustion. Through his starved daze, a soft warm glow enveloped him.

'Mother.' he whimpered as he stretched out his arms. "Take me away mother."

A soft, reassuring voice called out to him repeatedly,

"Repent, repent, all is not lost."

The light soon disappeared, leaving an old man struggling in a bed. He could not see his face but he could feel the hate. Jerome knew it was himself.

Jerome broke out of this nightmare. In his soul, he felt the rumblings of another Jerome, a Jerome that he had always felt but had never been able to define.

'This is who you are!' roared his dark heart.

But Jerome felt uncomfortable with this discovered sibling as he saw only his darkness.

Soon, the 'old' Jerome's rumbling grew stronger; demanding to be heard. Jerome concentrated on a point deep inside his gut where the dream had come from; that place where your feelings live. He struggled, his hands clasp his head tightly, rubbing his stomach, lifting his legs up in the air, anything to get closer to this point of truth, yet he was unable to see into his darkness. Only when he beat himself did his gut rumble and the light appear in his mind. Then, for an instant, he would see through the keyhole of his own existence, into another world where he was the cruel master. What he saw did not displease him. For that moment he was happy, then the pain would charge back through his body, closely followed by the devils, pushing him back onto the island.

After another week of struggling, the pains subsided, leaving Jerome somehow empty.

It is quite usual, after having endured long periods of torture, to become base, even bestial, but Jerome had developed into a more complete being who had a connection with his passed. Dissatisfied with his primitive needs he now embraced those of a philosopher. The quality of his philosophy was debatable but all the same, he began to think seriously about what was tormenting him so and more importantly, why.

He started quite logically, making his first a priori 'I think therefore I am. ... If I am, what am I?... I am Jerome.' So this empirical line of questioning, continued, ranging widely across a large swathe of questions from why he existed, to his attempts to establish his age. Yet all this philosophising always led him back to the same question.

'If I am Jerome, king of the island,' he wondered, 'who is that Jerome that is trying to get out?'

Unable to find a satisfactory answer, he started again.

'Who am I?' he asked.

'Jerome.' He replied.

'But who is Jerome.'

This time, he was stuck. This question started to loop through his mind, ever faster, until it turned so quickly that it became a whirring siren that in turn became the blistering laughter of the devils. But through the laughter, he could hear himself whisper,

'I am immortal yet I am dead. I am all yet I am nothing. I am all yet I am nothing. I am all yet I am nothing.' It echoed into oblivion.

In the haze of hunger, Jerome fought a battle between the devils and the light. His voice hoarse from all the yelling in his dreams, but still he tried to find the answer to whom he really was. It was there and he would not rest until he had it. He looked for signs around him, maybe an inscription on the wall, a clue in the seaweed or if he could find the strength, he could ask the fish. Yet he felt condemned to suffer the anguish of the devils in his head and he saw no way out.

Even in hell, things have a habit of changing. In Jerome's twilight of what he thought must be the end, he heard the gurgling boom of a voice rattle his perpetual nightmare.

"Don't let me have to come and get you, you disgusting little man." it shouted.

"Don't let me have to come and get you, you disgusting little man." it repeated, the voice drifting in from the beach.

Jerome recognised the voice at once, it had eaten his finger and his sleep for as long as he cared to remember.

"Remember what I said. Snip, snip down stairs!"

It was all too much. With all the strength he could muster and the devils on his back, he rolled onto the floor and started to crawl towards the doorway.

"Hurry, hurry now. I'm getting impatient." Jerome doubled his efforts. At the doorway he looked up to see the Great lobster lying on his chaise long next to a large pile of rotting fish. It took no notice of the man of all fours struggling down the pebbled beach in the high noon sun. Often, Jerome would stop to swat the devils off his back but they always returned. After a momentous struggle, he slumped, face down as close to the Great Lobster as he dared.



"You haven't been eating, have you!" exclaimed the Great Lobster condescendingly. "And that's not very good. Is it?!"

Jerome was too exhausted to even listen to the Great Lobster.

"I've lost an awful lot of good employees because of you, understand!" the beast shouted.

"But I'm not going to blame you. I know you don't have to eat. It's your right."

"Who am I?" Jerome whispered.

"Speak up!"

"Who am I?!"

"Not eating and thinking. Not good at all, at all!"

"Answer me! I have a right to know!" mumbled Jerome as forcibly as he could.

"No one demands anything from me. Ever!"

The Great Lobster clasped Jerome's feeble body in its massive claw and lifted him up close to its purple grey face, its beady black eyes staring at him. Jerome looked up at them and felt an instantly nauseous.

"Oh, you lucky man. I would just love to eat you, your feet first of course, then your guts," one of its legs stroking the side of his stomach, "and lastly your head. But sadly I can't. Instead I am going to give you a chance to escape."

Jerome looked up.

"Yes, escape! You can to swim to the other island. There will be no obstacles, except maybe yourself, and I will even give you a head start. Goodbye little man. Good swimming."

"Wait." Jerome exclaimed. "I don't know how to swim!"

"As they say Jerome, if there's a will there's a way!! You'll find it if you are really as strong as you think you are."

With that, the sack of bones was catapulted high into the air, far out to sea. The flight was a blank, which cannot be said of the landing. With a heavy crash, Jerome plunged belly first into the ice-cold ocean. Unconscious, he sank and would have disappeared without trace had not a tuna pushed him back to the surface. There, he drifted unconsciously for sometime only being woken by the punch from the beak of a passing halibut.

"Oh damn, damn, damn." he gasped.

He lay on his back, drifting in the calm ocean.

'Escape! You must escape. It is your only chance!' came the voice from within.

He looked round to see the island was not far off.

Jerome's fear of water was his first obstacle but he started to paddle as best he could, his arms and legs flaying desperately yet instead of swimming he began to sink.

"God damn it, surely it can't be that difficult."

He tried a more co-ordinated combination,

"Right arm up, left leg kick. Left arm up, right leg kick." He repeated slowly but this was getting him nowhere. He flipped onto his back and closed his eyes.

"It's hopeless."

As he lay still on the calm sea, wondering how long he would have to endure the torture, he heard the breaking of waves. Flipping himself back onto his belly, he saw that he had, in a matter of seconds, somehow leaped much closer to the island, so close in fact that he thought he could touch it.

"It's a miracle. I'm saved."

He could now see the soft white sand of a beach in paradise, lined with lush overhanging palm trees and a waterfall surrounded by lush grass.

"Right arm up, left leg kick, Left arm up, right leg kick." He repeated with vigorous enthusiasm but however hard he tried, he did not seem to be getting any closer.

Half an hour later, he was exhausted. The island still seemed to be as far off as ever.

"Maybe backstroke is easier?" he pondered but he was too tired to lift up his arms, so he just kicked his legs. As he lay there, a brightly coloured cockatoo landed on his stomach.

"Excuse me." said the cockatoo with a perfectly silky voice.

"Yes."

"I noticed that you were paddling in circles and was wondering if that was really your intention?"

"No. I'm just paddling." Jerome replied.

"You must swim to our island; swim before the tide changes and pushes you back out to sea. You are nearly there, swim man swim!!!" it implored.

"But I do not know how to swim."

"I do not know either. But I do know that you must swim."

Jerome looked up at the island and saw that he was even closer but he could feel the tide was beginning to go against him.

"Swim before it is too late." Said the cockatoo as it hovered above him, then it turned and flew towards the island.

Jerome lifted his arms and began to wave them, his legs pushing desperately.

'Swim Jerome. Swim!' he shouted.

But Jerome was too weak to fight the tide. He was now being dragged backwards, back to his island. As the sun began to set, a wind started to blow making the sea ever more choppy.

'Swim man, swim! It is nearly over. Swim!'

With every mouthful of air, he took in more and more water. He spluttered uncontrollably, brine pouring from his mouth and nose. Soon his muscles no longer responded to his demands as he bobbed in the gusting sea.

Resigning himself honourably he stopped struggling, gagged his last breaths and began to sink.

"I am all yet I am nothing." he burbled.

As the water reached over his eyes, he forced his mouth open and filled it with all the brine he could. With a couple of heavy coughs, he had forced all the air out of his lungs, then convulsing, he let the sea take him away. The convulsing slowed and the darkness came; the devils left him and his arms fell limp as he made the long journey to the bottom of the ocean.



## CHAPTER 12

First came the terrible urge to vomit, then with a heave, his chest arched high above the shale, spewing brine. He convulsed, a second wave of brine and blood spurted as he coughed and vomited himself back to life. Jerome lay half-immersed in the warm sea, his head resting on the beach gasping for air. In a few minutes the worst was over and he lay back in an exhausted bliss.

'I'm free.' he whispered as he slowly opened his eyes to perceive the silhouette of the cat, standing above him.

"What are you doing on my island?" he spluttered angrily.

"So you are alive. Marvellous." Exclaimed the Cat, jiggling with delight.

"What are you doing on my island?" he insisted.

"I've got some good news for you."

"I don't want any of your good news!"

"You have been summoned before the Grand Poobah."

Jerome was not listening.

"I'm free from you. I have made it to paradise." Exclaimed Jerome.

"Paradise eh. That is a new one. Well, if you want to call this pebbly island a paradise, good for you." retorted the cat mockingly.

Jerome looked either side of him.

"Never."

Closing his eyes, he growled as his heart sank. But the brooding darkness within him was not going to rest that easily. It demanded satisfaction for the betrayal and it would not sleep until it was furnished.

"You have been summoned before the Grand Poobah!" shouted the Cat, a second time.

"It will have to wait."

"I warn you that it is extremely poor show to keep the Grand Poobah waiting." Prodded the Cat.

"The what?"

"The Grand Poobah. He is coming for your trial!"

"Whose trial?"

"Yours, you fool. Yours!!"

"But I haven't done anything wrong."

"I can't comment on your case. It is a very complex one but you can be sure that if you are here it is for a reason."

"What reason?"

"Jerome. As people go, I have soft spot for you but frankly, I wouldn't push your luck."

"But I haven't done anything wrong. It was all the Great Lobsters fault." Jerome retorted flatly.

The Cat bent down, its whiskers dancing across Jerome's leathery face and stared deep into his eyes. Fear gripped Jerome's flaccid body, paralysing him to the gaze of the cat whose humour had evidently changed. The Cat sniffed him as if he were prey, a paw dancing across Jerome's face for what seemed an eternity, before two long white nails shot out and with a hiss they drove up his nostrils. The Cat pulled Jerome off the shale and high into the air, his feet brushing in the wake.

"When the Grand Poobah requests your presence, that means you go!"

Blood poured from his nose as hung there, not daring to even squeal for fear of incurring its the new found wrath.

"Will you let me down please?" Jerome muttered apologetically after a minute of silence.

The cat closed his eyes and retracted his claws letting Jerome fall like a sack.

"I warn you Jerome, that the next sign of disrespect will be dealt with in an equally swift and dare I say, more painful fashion! I hope I have made myself clear."

He nodded, cupping his nose in his hands.

"Good!"

The sight of the old man made the Black Cat's stand back and pulled out a handkerchief.

"Take the it." insisted the cat begrudgingly. Jerome accepted it in silence.

"So you said that the Grands Poo..." mumbled Jerome.

"... Poobah will arrive for sentencing." Filled in the cat.

"But what have I done?"

"Obviously quite a lot. He doesn't waste his time with people that have done nothing."

"But I have been the victim of this terrible place!" Jerome pleaded, as he tried to stem bleeding.

"Count yourself lucky!" the cat retorted sternly. " Now, our rendezvous; what a lovely word, is some way down the beach so we must hurry."

The Black Cat charged off leaving Jerome struggling to get up.

"Wait. I can't get up." The cat went back, grabbed the bag of bones and threw it over his shoulder.

"Just don't get any blood on my jacket." It said coldly.

The sun beat down on the pair, the Black Cat striding gracefully across the large pebbles, his debonair gait unbroken by the weight of the frail old man.

"How far is the island on the horizon?" Jerome asked.

"I don't know but it seems far away to me."

"The Great Lobster said it was my only escape."

"Escape, eh. Is that what he told you?"

"He tried to drown me!"

"Think yourself lucky!"

"I don't think myself lucky at all."

"You can be certain that as long as you are here, you will not be lucky!" The cat retorted, picking up the pace.

"So then, where am I?"

"If I've told you once I've told a thousand times. You're on your own little island."

"So why can't I get off. And for that matter how can you get on so easily?"

"Jerome. After all that has happened to you, haven't realised you where you are?"

"On my island"

"And why are you on this island?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm asking you."

The cat took a large watch of his pocket and sighed.

"Yours is not to reason why, yours is just to do or die! ... Blast we're late!"

With that, the cat thrust its paw back up Jerome's nostrils.

"We mustn't keep the Grand Poobah waiting, old man!"

They walked for what seemed hours, Jerome being dragged by his nose. To dull the pain, the old man looked back on what had happened to him so far. There was his escape up the cliff, the terrible dreams, the pain, the talking fish, the Great Lobster, the island with the beautiful cockatoo and of course the debonair Black Cat. He wondered why he was being sentenced and what that actually meant.

Rationalising what he could remember, he became convinced that all that had had happened to him was part of a dream.

'The Great Lobster probably doesn't exist. Ridiculous thing! A lobster with backache! It must be just another one of those nightmares and I haven't woken up yet.' He thought to himself. 'Soon it will go away.'

With a jerk, for the Cat was now jogging, Jerome snapped back to his unpleasant reality.

"This is no way to treat an innocent man." Complained Jerome. "It's just not right. I am a man. I have a worth!"

"Oh stop moaning. Anyway, we're nearly there." said the Cat a little out of breath. "There are a couple of rules that you must not forget when meeting His Eminence the Grand Poobah. One, never speak out of turn, understand." With a jerk of its paw up his nose, Jerome nodded compliantly. "Two! Never break from your crouch unless I tell you to..." with another jerk, Jerome nodded, "...and lastly, never say that you are innocent."

"But I am!"

"That is impossible. You just don't know what you are accused of. The Grand Poobah sees all and knows all. His punishment is fair and nothing more. There are no mitigating circumstances, no lies, just facts and you must accept them."

"But what have I done?"

"As your legal representative, I have no interest in why you are here, only that your sentence is just. What you have done is your own affair."

"So why am I a prisoner?"

The cat's officious stare broken, it stepped back.

"Jerome, that is quite a leap forward. Now you have realised your real status."

"But I am not much of a prisoner if I don't know why."

"Also very good. I will ask the Grand Poobah to explain to you what you are charged with but I promise nothing."

"So who are you then?"

"Your representative."

"I would prefer to represent myself."

"I would not bite the paw that helps you, Jerome."

"You call sticking your nails up my nose helping me!"

"Absolutely, mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald."

"What did you call me?"

"Jerome Spencer-McDonald of course. That is your name, is it not?" retorted the Cat.

"No it isn't. I'm Jerome. Jerome Spencer-McDonald is the man I see in my dreams." said Jerome lightly. "Now can you take your claws out of my nose please?"

"Oh I'm sorry."

The Cat's watch alarm rang as Jerome tried to put his nose back in place.

"It is time. Remember what I said and if you're lucky, he might be lenient with you." the Cat whispered.

"But it's not me that is on trial." Insisted Jerome. "It is somebody else with the same name."

"Now tuck your face tight to your knees, arms out stretched in front of you and do not dare to look up until I tell you."

Jerome did as he was told. The Cat stood beside him in silence for a minute or two, before leaning down and whispering in his ear.

"Oh, before I forget. Think about the answer to this question: are you all or are you nothing? The Grand Poobah may ask you which one you are. I suggest that you have an answer."

"As my council, what would you suggest I say?"

"Whatever your heart tells you. The Grand Poobah will know if your answer is true or if you are lying. Never, but never be in denial, Jerome. Remember, the Grand Poobah is all knowing and all seeing. Now be quiet."

With a large rumble, the beach shuddered and the wind began to blow very hard, rocks being lifted into the air. The noise was so great that Jerome thought that his ears would implode. He cringed, trying to protect himself from the dust.

Then, a moment later, there was total silence. Jerome spat grit from his dry mouth and felt a chill fall upon him. Flicking his eyes towards the Black Cat, he realised he was in the shadow of a great object, a giant. The cat was bowed double, his whiskers skimming the ground.

Jerome did not dare look up so he closed his eyes.

'Are you all or are you nothing?' He pondered. 'I am neither. I shouldn't be here. It's obviously not me. I'll offer to find this Jerome Spencer-McDonald and in return I will have my liberty.

That's it.'





## CHAPTER 13

"Ի՜՜՜: ՄԻՐ ՄԻՆԻ՜. ՄԻՐ ՄԻՆԻ ՄԻ ՄԻՆԻ" boomed the Grand Poobah.

"What a marvellous pleasure it is to hear your lordship, again." replied the Cat.

The Grand Poobah spoke in a strange language that Jerome did not understand.

(Their language sounded like a mixture of Armenian and Portuguese spoken backwards and that is being kind. I have since discovered that it is a Babylonian dialect still used only in three villages in the Caucasus and, apparently, there is even a correspondence course one can take. As you may not be familiar with this particular language, I have taken the liberty of translating it as best I can.)

Jerome was often tempted to look up but instead, he contented himself by imagining what this monster looked like.

"Ah come, come, my friend. There is no need to bow your head so low. Come closer so we can chat. I have brought a very fine Chateau Laffeyte '32 that I've just been dying to share with you." Boomed the shadow that is the Grand Poobah.

"Nothing would please me more than to share a glass, your Eminence." The cat looked down at Jerome, still crouched in a prostrate ball.

"So far, so good." the Cat whispered.

Jerome's nose did not move one centimetre from the pebble it was touching. He heard the pop of a cork, the decanting of the wine, the pouring of the glasses. The pair laughed, the cat asking all sorts of polite questions, the Grand Poobah replying in his hell sent language.

Just as another glass was being poured, the laughter growing ever more hearty, a cramp started to tingle up Jerome's legs.

"Damn it cat." He mumbled to himself.

"Has anybody given you permission to speak?!" yelled the Cat angrily.

"No, but..."

"Well then shut up!"

"I am in great pain!"

"Good for you!"

The Grand Poobah and the cat laughed, chinned their glasses and continued to chat.

Jerome looked up just enough to see the cat's legs next to a splayed shadow. He focused on the cat's feet and let his imagination go,

"First, I'm going to pull out all your claws and stick them in your eyes, then I'll pluck all of your hair and whiskers make you eat them. And after that, I'll tell you why I'm the wrong man."

relished Jerome to himself, childishly.

In the meantime, the cat kept up the polite conversation until late afternoon.

"The '32 really does hit the mark, don't you think." Boomed the Grand Poobah.

"Every time, I'd say. Every time." Replied the cat merrily.

"Well, it's probably time that we got on with the proceedings."

The Cat stepped back to Jerome's side.

"Still with us I hope!"

A roar of laughter echoed across the beach.

"Get on with it!" retorted Jerome angrily.

"Your honour, the Grand Poobah, I present to you the case of one, Jerome Spencer-McDonald..."

"I'm not Jerome Spencer-McDonald!" Jerome cried as the Cat stamped its paw on his back.

"I'm sorry your honour."

"Continue my dear friend."

The Cat opened his jacket and unrolled an enormously large manuscript.

"Shall I read the charge sheet?"

"I am innocent!" shouted Jerome.

As the Grand Poobah roared, Jerome became totally paralysed.

"You are really not doing yourself any favours with out-bursts like that." Said the cat. Jerome tried to shout but nothing came out.

"I will now read all the charge sheet." continued the Cat.

It unrolled part of the scroll, placed a monocle to its eye and cleared its throat. After a pause for dramatic effect the Cat started to read the interminably long document. Jerome tried to listen but soon he fell asleep only to be woken as last charge was read.

"Thank you." Acknowledged the Grand Poobah. "This is a difficult case as the accused is in denial of his own existence and therefore cannot assume responsibility for his acts. Yet I find no reason to believe that he is mentally ill, or that there are any other mitigating circumstances. I propose that we continue under the assumption that the accused will realise his situation at a later date."

Jerome no longer listened to their strange language; he was blind with rage. He would have torn the Grand Poobah apart if only he could have moved.

"For the record," continued the Cat pulling out another piece of paper and putting his monocle back in, "I will read a character resume." The cat cleared his voice again.

"No my friend, that will make it too easy for him. He must discover the charge himself. Only then, will he be free." boomed Grand Poobah. "Does the defendant have anything to say before I pass sentence."

"Are you sure it is wise to let him speak. He has a foul tongue and absolutely no respect for authority."

The Grand Poobah nodded. In an instant his mouth was set free and his mind emptied itself.

"Revenge, revenge! You will pay dearly for this. Revenge."

"Sir. I protest. My client is doing himself a grave disservice."

"Shut up you filthy Judas!" retorted Jerome.

"Let him continue." Demanded the Grand Poobah.

"I do not accept this court. I demand to be tried in front of a jury." Shouted Jerome.

"And who would you like on your jury, Jerome Spencer-McDonald?" The Cat sniggers mockingly.

"This court is a sham. I demand a proper representation. I am innocent of all these charges. Innocent, do you hear me! Give me my freedom and I will find you the man that you are looking for."

At this point both the Cat and the Grand Poobah started laughing out loud.

"And how can you prove your innocence?" asked the Cat.

"Let me find you this Jerome Spencer-McDonald. It is my sole mission."

"Sole mission, get it, soul mission." The Cat punctuating its extraordinary word play with gestures before bursting into more fits of laughter. "Very funny Jerome. Very funny indeed." It chuckled as it wiped a tear from its eye.

"I haven't laughed so much in ages." Boomed the Grand Poobah.

The Cat turned to Jerome and whispered." It seems to have done the trick; he has taken your request into consideration."

"Good." Jerome muttered angrily.

After the Cat had composed itself, the Grand Poobah began to chant. In a low voice the Cat translated what was said.

"As the charges against you are grave, he has no alternative but to sentence you harshly. His Excellency hopes that by the time you have finished the sentence, you will have found the mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald that you claim you are not and will have resolved the situation to a peaceful conclusion."

"I'm innocent!!" shouted Jerome before his voice disappeared.

"Jerome Spencer-McDonald," pronounced the Grand Poobah. "you are here by sentenced to crush all the beach of this island to the finest sand. At midday of the first day of every thousandth year, you will present to me a sample of the beach, I will place it in this sand

timer and when the grains are fine enough to pass freely, you will be at liberty to leave. As a gesture of good will, I leave you a suit and a pair of crushing boots."

"What did he say?" gargled Jerome.

"Don't interrupt." scalded the Cat

"Lastly, the Black Cat is responsible for any punishment that is warranted under Charter 22. Any attempts to escape the island will be avenged with swift and brutal punishment. Do you understand?"

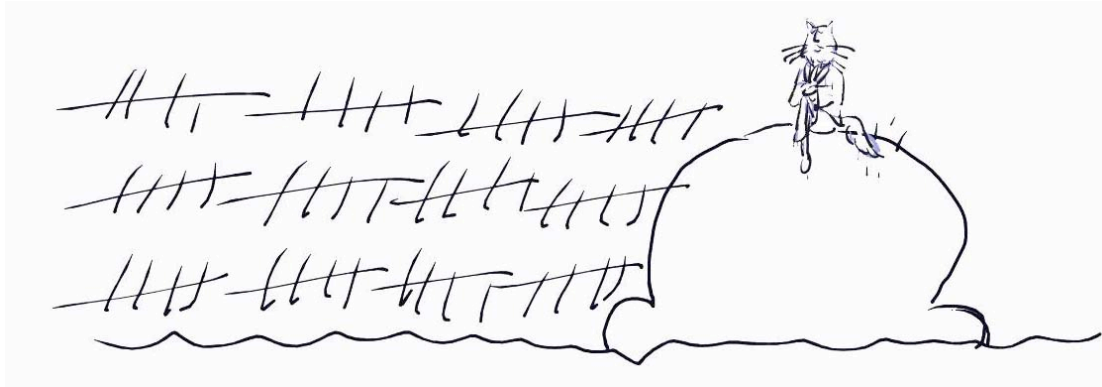
Jerome nodded.

With that, he heard the bang of a hammer landing ominously on a desk and a moment later, the tornado of the Grand Poobah's departure was upon them.

When all had settled, the Cat straightened himself out, brushing the dust off his jacket.

"Excellent. Now I must leave you, got a dinner date with Bartholomew. Be good and I won't be back."

With that, the ever-debonair Cat swivelled on his paws and walked away from the crouched Jerome, disappearing into thin air.



## CHAPTER 14

It is a well-known that all prisoners believe that they are innocent. Jerome was no different and in a certain respect he was. He had no real recollection of his previous life, of all the suffering he had inflicted, his enjoyment at demeaning the weak and the innocent so how could he accept the sentence? He was a schizophrenic in the dramatic sense; the Dr. Jekyll accused of being Mr. Hyde.

The first few weeks after the trial, Jerome found it impossible to reconcile his situation. Bitterness settled first in his head, then it quickly spread to his heart. He only left his cave in the morning to eat the fish, refusing to do anything until his appeal had been heard. The fish took the brunt of his anger he had no hesitation in boring them to death with his plight. The days dragged by as he lay on his bed, throwing stones against the wall, dreaming up tortures that he could inflict on the Cat; how he would tear a gaping hole through the Grand Poobah. But with time, he got bored of hating them.

By the second year, he was very bored with everything. He was bored of insulting the enemy that never replied and worse still; he noticed that he had begun to talk to himself, mumbling the same bitterness for hours on end.

"My twisted insides have taken control." He shouted. "It's no good just lying here. I am losing my mind." And he was.

He was standing on the edge of madness and it made him so afraid that he was obliged to change.

The lead boots and suit had not moved since the trial, a monument to his bitterness and a reminder of his salvation. On his thousandth day, he embarked on the long walk back to the site. He remembered the hours that he had suffered, being dragged around the island, the black cat's vicious claws pulling him like a bull to market. But this time, it took him not more than a quarter of an hour to find them. As he strolled apprehensively along the beach, he hoped that he would not find them and therefore would not have to confront his pride.

As he got closer to the pile of clothes, apprehension started to eat at his resolution.

'I don't believe it. You're going to give in.' cried his pride. 'You slacken now and soon enough you'll have the whole island trampling all over you.'

"The whole island is trampling all over me. I have fish that spit at me, lobsters that snip at me and an over-grown cat that abuses me. And I'm not getting anywhere."

'But that's their tactic; Crush you into submission. Think about it, what would you do in their position?'

"I would do the same."

'Fight Jerome, negotiate later. They will respect you for that.' rallied his pride.

Jerome looked down at the pair of boots and boiler suit as if he was looking over the edge of a precipice and it was his pride that was going to have to take the fall.

"But I'm in no position to fight. When the Cat returns, it will just drag me around the island a couple of times before doing God knows what."

'Take these clothes and you accept their justice!'

"The battle might be lost my friend but the war is not over." Jerome retorted knowing it to be true.

He untied his trusty planks from his feet and for the first time since his arrival, put on the blue boiler. As each of his legs forced their way through the undersized suit, he felt as if he was, for the first time, a complete individual, empowered with a purpose. Yet when it came time to put on the boots, they were too much for him so he retied planks to his feet and strode confidently back to the cave.

That evening as he waited for his dinner to appear, he stared at the island on the horizon and swore that he would some day escape, even if it took a thousand years.

"How long is a thousand years to a man who has eternity?"

I cannot tell you how he accepted his eternity or if he truly understood what it meant, but he knew that his solution was only a matter of time.

-----"

"Well said!" cried the cod with a heavy Australian accent.

"Mark my words, I am a changed man." Proclaimed Jerome proudly.

"And so you are! I'd say nice suit. Suits you sir!" The cod burst into gurgles of laughter at the rather ridiculous sight of Jerome in his tight blue boiler suit.

"Shut up!"

"Where did you get it from? Must have been very expensive." said the cod, barely able to control itself.

"I won't stand for anymore of your insolence." he shouted as he wondered whether he was going to grab the fish or stamp it with his foot.

"Calm down. So how come it's all change then?"

"I've decided to escape and this time I'm going for good."

"It's that sort of spirit that makes you the man you are. So what's the plan then?."

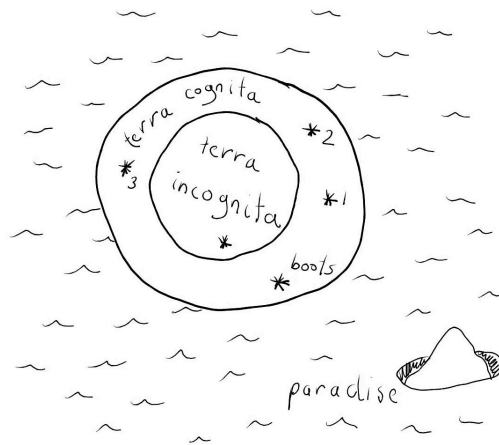
"I'm not telling you!"

The cod laughed. "Either way, you'd better have a good one."

"Don't you worry. Now I'm hungry thank you."

"Oh good." exclaimed the cod as it stopped flapping.

"Incidentally, good luck with your escape." With one blow, Jerome crushed its head with his foot.



## CHAPTER 15

The following day, Jerome went back for the lead boots.

"That is not conquering the island, that is to be part of it." Jerome repeated adamantly.

From the first moment that he saw the boots glistening on the horizon, he knew that they were his only way out. Waiting would not get him any closer to paradise. Blocking out the shouts of his pride, apprehensive of the future that lay within them, he dragged the boots back to the cave only to hide them in the darkest corner hoping that they would somehow disappear. After waiting an hour or so, he concluded that procrastination was not helping either. Picking up a pebble he marched towards the largest wall in the cave.

"Freedom starts here." He exclaimed as he made a single stroke of a pebble on the wall. "It is the first day of the rest my life."

He was proud that he had managed to turn his unproductive depression into the motor of his escape. He saw salvation before him and the swift revenge that it entailed somewhere on that dank wall. Where that point was, he knew not but he was sure it was to be.

For the rest of that day, Jerome worked on a plan to finish the sentence as quickly as possible. First, he drew a map of what he thought to be 'Terra Cognita' and calculated its space by the amount of time it took him to get to certain points. He then measured the width of the beach and from there broke the island up into small sections.

"If I work twelve hours a day on each section, I should be finished in five... three... ten... two thousand years."

Then, blocking the cries of his pride from his mind, he dragged the boots to his stone seat.

The upper part of the boot was a mixture of leather strapping over a chain mail form with thick, leather laces. The formidable sole was a platform of lead, a forearm high. After struggling to get them on, he stumbled about the cave as if he were a drunken trapeze artist.

"Nothing is too hard for the great Jerome!!!" He snarled.



After a couple of circuits, he made for the cave mouth. Before him was yet another sunny day, the crashing of waves breaking the silence that was his kingdom. He sniffed the air and it told him to turn left.

"Left! Nothing good ever came from turning left!"

He tried to lift his right foot but the boot seemed even heavier than before. He grabbed his thigh with his hands and lifted it as high as he could.

'Don't do it Jerome!' implored his pride, but it was too late, the boot came thundering down, crushing a layer of pebbles. At that very moment of impact, his eyes glazed over and he saw himself in a warehouse. He was looking up when he saw a foot come thundering into his stomach. The vision was so real to him that he doubled over on his platform boots. He vomited, wiping the sick from his mouth then recomposing himself.

'Better keep off the sole.'

With a great deal of effort, he took a second crushing step. At the moment of impact, the vision returned. Through his own manic laughter, he saw another boot kick his face. Again, Jerome recoiled like a punch bag as his dream hit him; blood spurting from his nose yet the moment he opened his eyes the pain disappeared and the blood stopped pouring. Looking down he saw the pebbles had been crushed to bloodied shale.

"Damn you... you weak little nothingness. You don't even have the courage to confront me, cat to man." He cried at the sky. The pain only strengthened his resolution, adding fuel to his anger.

He thrust down his boot a third time. On impact, the vision reappeared, a silhouette bringing a crow bar down onto his knees, crippling his legs. Jerome's knees bucked as he tumbled, his lead boots keeling on their side.

"What would you have been without me! Nothing more than plankton in the cesspool life! You should thank me, but instead you torture me. I am your hero. I am mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald!" blurted out a voice that came from the darkness deep inside him. This was how Jerome was introduced to his past.



## CHAPTER 16

The monotonous days turned into months, the monotonous months, into years. Every day passed like the single beat of a fly's wing in extreme slow motion; there being so many and they were so long. He was exhausted from the constant physical assault as he crushed each pebbles and in turn, he became ill. He fell behind schedule and that only aggravated his condition.

"I can lie in my cave and stare at the ceiling for eternity. That is about as good as dead." He surmised, but sloth revolted more than the pain.

On some evenings, he wondered who this other 'mister' Jerome really was, but these investigations were soon blocked by a voice that told him that he should stop such idle reflection and concentrate on the job in hand, that being revenge.

How unsettling it must be to discover that you are paying for a life that you did not know you had lived? What was the point of Jerome's suffering if he could not associate with what he was beforehand? Even if he could remember, what were the traits that made him the monster of his dreams? Initially, his lack of memory seemed to be a distinct disadvantage to his understanding of his situation. But with time, it became clear that it was this slow revelation of a previous life that made his life so difficult. The island was not some cruel joke that the Grand Poobah had dreamt up for his own amusement and neither was it a good old-fashioned hell. The island was Jerome's own creation; the question was why?

"You are all yet you are nothing." Often echoed through him mind.

And that was true. The island did not exist without Jerome and Jerome did not exist without the island.

Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald had always wanted to be king of an island; it fitted in with his dictatorial view of the world. Jerome, on the other hand, was a blank slate who could develop in a different way, rejecting conquest and consumption and accepting the peace that

lay within him. Inside both men were the same beasts, an original equilibrium of goodness and hate, but Jerome was still a child, discovering his past and interpreting it in a new way , reconciling past and present. Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald had never wanted to confront his hate; he found it to be an indispensable ally in the realisation of his dream. But he also knew that it was his weakness, as he was its servant. Forcing his egocentric ideal of a greater purpose upon all the weakness that surrounded him, he legitimated the terrible roars of the beast that lay caged inside him.

-----"

Jerome set himself a strict timetable for each day. Breakfast at sunrise, pain until midday, lunch, then more pain until sunset. Every fourth day, seaweed would appear on the shore and with it, he would clean the cave. He neither had to wash nor defecate; all he had to do was face the beach. With time, he saw his realm expanded from a few thin sheaves of shale into sandy beach. His skinny legs grew into oversized engines to drive him across the perils of his past. During his moments of rest, he would look out across the sea to the island and dream, the hunger for escape so strong that he often rushed into the ocean.

-----"

He awoke one morning to find himself trussed up in a restraining harness, a leather gag strapped across his mouth. He was set on a leash that was held by the ever debonair Cat. "Good morning Jerome. I'm terribly sorry for this precaution but I'm afraid that you may make things worse for yourself during your summons before the Grand Poobah."

Jerome shouted through the gag.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that. Oh yes. Hasn't time just flown by?" Jerome muffled yells were incomprehensible. "I've been damn busy you know."

"Oh Jerome, calm yourself, please! It won't do you any good to get all upset like this," purred the Cat.

The Cat's pocket vibrated, as it pulled out a gold watch, it put in a monocle and exclaimed "Oh dear, late again."

With a ferocious jerk on the chain, Jerome was dragged out of the cave.

"Golly gosh! You have been busy." exclaimed the Cat as Jerome scrambled to his feet. "I've seen better men than you crack long before this. Nasty business: you know, cracking."

As they marched down the beach, Jerome trailing behind, the Cat talked lightly of one thing and the next.

"Many people have got it all wrong about good and evil, you know." (How it got to this topic I cannot tell you.) "They think that hell is somewhere where you go for eternal of damnation.

For that matter, they think that heaven is where you go for eternal praising. Personally, I couldn't think of anything worse than sitting about for an eternity singing praises. You see, it's all about equilibrium, everything falling back into its original place precisely as when it left."

The Cat looked at the gagged Jerome and winked.

"Don't forget Jerome, it's all about equilibrium, fitting all the bits back in the box. It's just that simple. Just like a Jack-in-the-box. That's it; you are a Jack-in-the-box. That's damn good I'd say. What do you think Jerome?"

Jerome had long stopped listening.

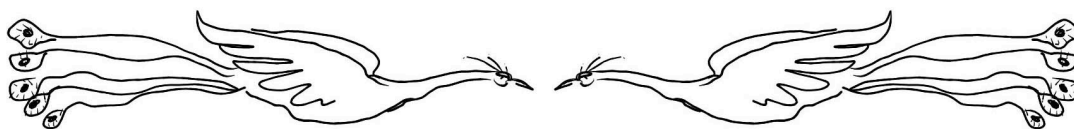
After an hour of walking in what seemed to be a circle they arrived at the given moment. The wind picked up and the sky went dark as the Cat kicked Jerome to his knees.

"Don't forget Jerome, you are everything and nothing all at once. Be happy in that."

The Cat disappeared in the whirlwind of dust as Jerome tucked his head tight up against his knees.

Suddenly the wind stopped, Jerome feeling the cold shadow of the Grand Poobah on his back. There was a short incomprehensible exchange and a moment later the meeting was over.

This was the first of many such summonses.



## CHAPTER 17

One morning, an interminably long time later, Jerome awoke in a particularly foul mood. As during the previous night he had been kept awake by a terrible storm. As he sat at his eating stone waiting for breakfast, he looked out to sea and dreamt of the paradise on the horizon. He had had the time to build a complete fantasy around the furtive memories he had of the island. The green, the white sand, the voice that soothed him. His dream was unclear but the feeling was; it was paradise;

"Help me!" came a little voice out of the quiet. Jerome took no notice, thinking it was just another devil come to spoil his day. "Help me." it repeated insistently. He grunted like a savage throwing a stone into the sea. With the passing time Jerome had become a virtual savage, the little hair he had, had grown to his shoulders and his skin was now leathery from the sun. The solitude had wasted his mind, which suited him as it dulled the daily pain of his visions. He was now not much more than a strong pair of legs that crushed the nightmares of his past in silence.

"Help me!" The charming female voice cried.

"I don't bloody believe it. It better not be that Cat!"

He looked around him trying to work out where the voice had come from but saw nothing resembled a large black lump of cat.

"Help me!" This time the voice was closer.

There, just in front of him, lay a brightly coloured cockatoo floundering in the wake, its wings splayed and its feathers filthy.

"Jerome, help me!" The voice was now close, its velvet timbre seducing Jerome's coarse ears.

A shiver went down his spine as his addled memory jumped into action.

"I can't help you stupid bird! You should have stayed over there, on your island. There is nothing for you here."

"I came to tell you that there is a way out and you all you have to do is look for it."

Proclaimed the bird, spluttering in the water.

"Where is it? Where?!" Jerome jumped into the wake and grabbed the bird, shaking it.

"Only you know the answer to that."

"That's not much of an answer." He flung the bird back in the water.

"Oh my sweet Jerome, I know that you are innocent." Reassured the voice.

"But you are useless to me here." grumbled the savage Jerome.

"If you let me rest a little, I will fly back to the island and send you drift wood to build a boat."

"How am I going to build a boat?"

"Crush the bones of the fish to powder and mix it with your saliva to make a glue. You have time to build the rest."

The voice of the half-dead bird so enchanted Jerome that it began to frustrate him.

"Take me in your arms and wash me. Be tender with me as I am poor and fragile." Jerome cried as he waded into the water that he disliked so much. He gently took the rotten smelling bird in his hands and clasped it to his chest.

"How tender you are Jerome." Whispered the voice, as he waded back to shore. "Soon I will be strong enough to fly home."

"I have no time for weakness, you know." he proclaimed childishly as he delicately poured water over the moulted feathers.

"And you have no weakness?" questioned the voice.

"How dare you! Look at my weakness." He showed the bird all the shale that lay to the horizon. "That is not the work of a weak man."

"No Jerome." Replied the voice. "So if there is so much weakness everywhere, why leave your kingdom?"

"So there is weakness on the other island?" Jerome questioned arrogantly.

"Oh, I'm sure there is."

"Then if it is the place for me."

The bird at that moment shuddered into life, spreading its wings slowly.

"Take me to the shore so that I can dry in the sun."

The cockatoo hopped onto his shoulder as he walked over to his dining rock.

"How far is it to the other island?"

"For you, very far."

"Why?"

"Because you don't know the way."

"Send me the wood and I will manage the rest."

"I hope for your sake." The cockatoo spread its wings out and fluttered in to the air. "You have not got as long as you think."

"I have an eternity."

"That is for the Grand Poobah to decide... my love."

"Hurry to the island, I will be waiting for you."

With that the bird flew out to sea.

As the bird had promised, each morning a piece of driftwood washed up on the shore.

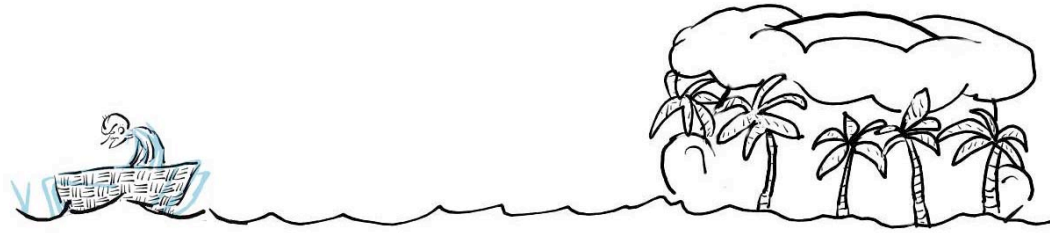
Jerome stacked the wood outside the cave mouth next to a smaller pile of fish bones. As the years went by the piles slowly grew, as did Jerome's dreams. He had plenty of time to work on the design of the craft. He worked on glue consistency and wood protection, building

models in all sizes only to watch them sink in the wash. Eventually he found a combination of glue and strands of his long hair that held the craft together so he started to build the first version. He graded the wood by size and shape but he found it impossible to find two bits of wood that matched. So he abandoned his construction and let the single pile grow into two and then three as did the dried bones were not far behind. It could be said that these were good times for Jerome. There was hope and that made the pain of the beach bearable. After what may have been a decade, which may seem like a long time to you dear reader, but is nothing to the 'Jerome, king of eternity' for no reason, the driftwood stopped. Jerome therefore deduced that it was time to start building his wicker vessel. He spread all the pieces (the piles had turned into a dozen mountains of wood) across the shale and sorted them by size and shape. It took him three years to try every combination and eventually the vessel began to fall into place. He set out the hull in sections across the beach, then using his boots, he crushed the bones to dust. He plucked a long hair from his baldhead, spat on it before rolling in the dust. At the end of each day, he dreamt only of the moment when he would land on the other island and be united with his love.

Jerome spent more and more time on the boat and less on the beach. He was afraid that the Cat would appear at a crucial moment, as he had a habit of doing, and ruin his plans. As quickly as his hair grew he would pluck it, and glue it in place. The day came for her maiden voyage. Jerome checked her a last time before dragging her into the water. Barely had she been put to sea than she sank. He waited for the tide to turn, filled the cracks with glue and within a month she was ready. On the second voyage he tentatively paddled far from the beach but was still dissatisfied. He filled the last of the cracks and on his third attempt he felt ready to confront the open sea. That night, he could not sleep for excitement, checking and double-checking the boat. At first light, Jerome was ready.

"I here by name you... Jerome one."

He was long gone before breakfast.



## CHAPTER 18

Jerome paddled as hard as he could, not daring to look back, gliding across the calm sea as if it were being drawn to the island. Yet as hard as he paddled, he did not seem to be getting any closer to it. Too tired to paddle any longer, he plucked up the courage to look back. First furtively, he glanced over his shoulder and saw his kingdom was little more than a dot on the horizon. Howling until his voice went hoarse, Jerome was free to start again.

In the mid morning sun, Jerome lay his paddle delicately on the floor of the boat and took a well-earned rest. He was just making himself comfortable in the gently rocking boat when he heard a desperate gurgle coming from the sea.

"Hey Jerome. No breakfast then!" gurgled a cod, trying to keep its gills in the water

"No!"

"Pardon?"

"Go away!"

"Hang on mister Jerome..."

"What did you call me?" Jerome demanded.

"Mister Jerome! You bloated, autocratic, fascist oppressor."

"I would watch your language if I were you." Jerome threatened as he popped his head over board.

"Don't you get all repressive-like with me. I am district delegate for the Revolutionary Cod League, an anarcho-nihilist alliance of freedom fighters who battle daily to set free the average working cod from the oppression that shackles, I demand an apology!"

"Oh shut up!!"

"We will fight from the flattest plains to the deepest crevices, the didactic oppressors of the cod. Long live the cod. Long live the cod." It burbled, a fin cocked up in salute.

Jerome slumped back into the boat. After a long silence.

"Why did you call me mister Jerome?" Demanded the old man.

"It's what's written on my report sheet."

"Well go back and tell whoever wrote it that they have got it wrong. My name is simply Jerome."

"If you say so... Jerome."



"And if you do run into this 'mister' Jerome, tell him I'm looking for him."

"Very well." Replied the cod.

"Thank you. Now please would you go away." He sighed as the midday sun beat down on him.

"Surely you must be hungry, it's nearly lunchtime?"

"No, mister cod, no!"

"That's comrade to you."

The cod turned its ugly face away from the boat and made to disappear into the depths.

"Incidentally, where are yer going then?"

"Nowhere!"

"Just a little jolly then is it?"

"That's right. Just a little jolly."

"Have you got a pass for this jolly of yours?"

"Mind your own business."

"I am obliged to insist, you see, being I'm district security officer of the R.C.L.. Long live the cod." it cried.

Jerome sighed.

"Anything that happens on this sea is my business. So I can assume that you have not got permission from our esteemed leader, the Great Lobster?"

Jerome leant as far as he could over the edge boat, his eyes beaming with menace.

"Come closer and I'll tell you what I'm really doing." He whispered, his first finger beckoning him.

The cod apprehensively swam a little closer.

"No; closer. I don't want the Great Lobster to hear."

It swam up to the side of the boat.

"Now listen to me." Jerome whispered.

"I can't hear a word yer saying. My ears are full of water yer know."

"Come closer then. Closer still!... I'm going to..."

With a dash of his hand he grabbed the fish clean out of the water and bit its head off.

"That'll teach you to be nosy, boring, communist cod!" He then ate the rest of the fish; bones and all.

After his refreshingly hearty lunch he picked up the paddle and got back to work. Head down, arms pulling, he paddled as hard as he could, but for all his efforts he still seemed to be getting no closer to the island. The sun was well past her zenith when thunderous clouds appeared on the horizon. Redoubling his efforts, he paddled as hard as he could, not even looking up to see where he was going, but it was becoming hopeless as he fought the swell of an approaching storm. With the blustering wind came the waves, at first choppy but

growing as the clouds scraped across the sea, the distant curtain of rain falling into an angry sea. As Jerome paddled towards its heart, the storm enveloped his paradise behind its ominous veil. But he was not going to be reposted from success by a storm. He had faced much worse; he had faced the Cat.

"There is only the storm between me and paradise. It is all or nothing!" He snarled gleefully as the rain spat at him so hard that he was hardly able to see.

'Conquer Jerome conquer. Soon we will be united in your success.' Urged his dark heart. It was not long before a howling gale was upon him, walls of water crashed into his wicker boat. He was the possessed captain of a Moby Dick of his own making, determined to succeed even if it ultimately meant his defeat. But the fight did not last long; his arms exhausted by the raging sea. Sucked into the heart of the storm, he struggled to keep hold of his paddle, but soon enough it was torn from his grasp. He slumped back shivering, unable to catch his breath. Through the turmoil he heard his mother calling him, her distant voice glowing in his cold heart. He begged for her to save him as he drifted over the mountainous waves, weeping, repenting and promising that he would try harder next time. But still he felt an urgent need to survive, to prove himself to her, recognising the value of every moment of his existence.

"Mother, please don't leave me!" he exclaimed but it was the storm that replied, blowing even harder.

He stood up and faced the enemy, knowing that that it was not death that awaited him but the slow pain of the beach.

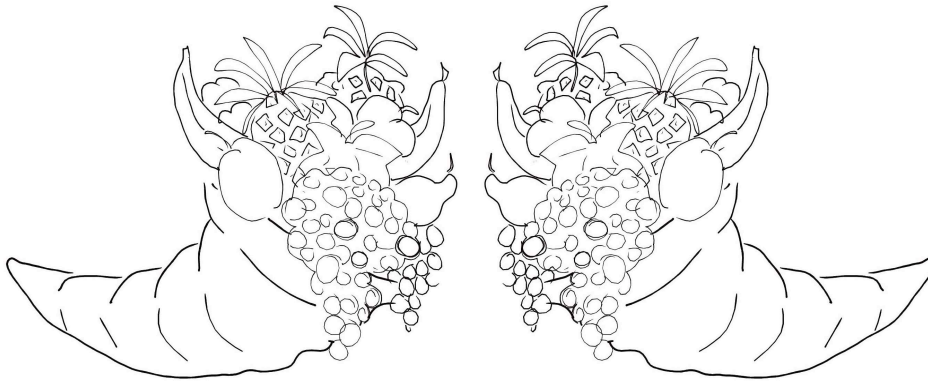
"Come out wherever you are and face me like a man!" he shouted at the dark clouds. The waves replied rocking the boat violently, nearly throwing him into the sea.

As he fell back, he saw a wall of water that touched the sky, rolling inevitably towards his stern. The boat swept up its sheer face, dragged vertically by a colossal tsunami rising towards the clouds. Passed the clouds, the storm disappeared below him as he was enveloped in a mist before it dispersed and he bathed in the hot sun. Surfing on a thin crest of wave, only the deepest blue sky lay above him.

'Set me free my son and you will find the answer.' Whispered his mother voice in the perfect silence of that idyllic moment. But the voice was lost to the familiar laugh of his friend, his dark heart.

'Set me free,' It sniggered. 'And I will introduce you to mister Jerome.'

"Mother!!!" he cried as the boat lurched forward as it fell over the crest, catapulting Jerome hard against the bow. He looked straight at the sun for the last time, as he felt boat disappear from beneath his feet.



## CHAPTER 19

In a state of inert perfection, Jerome listened to the still, as brightly coloured fish swam lazily in a turquoise sea that lapped slowly on a fine white beach. As he dozed, he remembered the echoing voice of his mother.

'Set me free my son and you will find the answer.' It came to him in distant waves from a distant place.

'It shall be as it was before.' He replied, warm inside.

'After all she did to you! You're a fool my brother, a fool.' Roared the darkness.

'You're no brother of mine.'

'No.' it giggled. 'I'm even closer than that!'

For the first time, Jerome closed the door on the darkness that drove him, not wanting it to spoil the peace.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello, Jerome." A voice purred, its silky timbre caressing his tired body. "I am so happy to see you."

Jerome started, glancing either side of him.

Through the palms appeared a nubile beauty beyond compare, her soft olive skin enveloped the most perfect form, her long black hair stroking the curve of her perfectly formed hips and her pert breasts beaming her unashamed nakedness. She strode a perfect gait of confidence, her hips rolling slowly and her head held high. She was a Venus to Jerome's tired eyes.

Lying back, her silhouette appeared against the midday sun above, her perfect form clearly defined to him.

"Every minute since we parted has been a weight on my heart." She said as she sat down, taking his head in her hands. "Every night, I have dreamt that I would find you in my arms. And now; that is all forgotten. You are here."

"Who are you?" Jerome whispered, mesmerised by the vision before him.

She placed his hand on her soft breast and smiled.

"What does it matter Jerome. I am part of you now."

Jerome felt her pass through his hand and imbue him with goodness: there were no more questions to be asked.

Hand in hand, she led him back up the beach and into the palm grove. The path was littered with flowers, their scent as sweet as honey, the enchanted Jerome following her, waiting only for her next smile. In the creek of a crystal clear waterfall, he heard the giggles of young girls hiding behind the rocks of a shimmering emerald pool.

"Come, I will wash you now." Said the goddess as she invited him into the water.

Three young girls appeared beside her, each as beautiful as the next.

"How long will this take?"

"Relax my love. You have nothing to fear."

Jerome fell back, his head resting in his companion's lap, shading his face from the sun with a palm leaf as the others undressed him, delicately rubbing sweet oils over his scarred body.

"Now it is time for you bath." Said the goddess.

With a nymph in either hand, he slid into the warm water and was taken to a submerged rock in the centre of the pool, where they scrubbed his old body with papyrus and bark before caressing him with their nakedness.

"What is your name?" Jerome whispered to his Goddess.

"Love."

"Where do you come from?"

"I have been here from the beginning."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I love you."

"Only me?"

"Yes," she purred, "only you."

"And the others?"

"We are only here for you."

"So you are my queen?" Remarked Jerome, a smile beaming across his face.

"If you wish, my love."

"And I am your king."

"Yes."

"Where is my kingdom?"

"This is your island."

"And who are my subjects?"

"We are all your most faithful subjects."

"What will my subjects do for me?"

"They will love you."

"And what shall I do in return?"

"You shall love them."

"I think I can love you."

He caressed their bodies, intrigued by their form.

"I have never touched a thing so soft."

"We have softer qualities still than our skin. But we are delicate flowers, my lord, which wither away if you do not give us love."

When they had finished, they swam back to the edge of the pool where Jerome's dirty boiler suit lay.

"I will not be needing that any longer." He remarked.

"No, let us hope not." She purred as she threw in to the middle of the creek.

He watched it slowly sink out of sight.

Making their way back through the jungle, they came to a clearing of five grass huts set close together, a large red snapper roasting on a spit in the centre.

"You must be hungry, my Lord."

"Very."

"Sit and I will bring you your food."

The women disappeared into one of the huts as Jerome sat down on a short stool in front of a makeshift table. He watched as one girl sliced the fish into large strips whilst the others prepared a plate of fruit and vegetables on a palm leaf plate. Jerome ate all that was placed before him in silence, savouring the succulent fish, the crisp vegetables and the sweetest fruit.

When he had eaten his fill, she led him in silence to her tent. In the middle of the simple room stood a wooden bed covered with red petals and a wicker bedside table on which stood an oil burner. Hand in hand, Jerome sheepishly followed Love, quite unable to fathom what was happening, but his rabid darkness was pounding on the door of his heart, insisting on being let out.

"Lie down and I will watch over you." she said as she sat him down.

She caressed his forehead as he relaxed on the soft bed but however hard he tried, Jerome found increasingly difficult to ignore the darkness.

'Let me out Jerome.' It taunted from behind the door. 'And I'll show you what to do with Love.' Jerome shivered.

"I am cold. Come and lie next to me."

Her soft skin caressed his flaccid stomach, her breasts pressed against his sagging chest as he passed his hands through her long hair. Her touch sent an all-consuming heat through him, so tender and so perfect, but at that moment the door to his heart burst open and with flowed a terrible lust.

"I need you now!" he whispered.

"Learn to love; overcome your desire."

"But I am the king."

"Yes. King of the island, not king of Love."

Jerome tightened his grip as he tried to cast his desires from his mind.

"But you are driving me mad!"

"Love me Jerome and you will conquer the darkness."

He searched for all the love he could find but he was blocked by the darkness.

'You will not conquer a grain of this island if you listen to her.' Jerome knew this voice well. It was the guilty one.

"What do you mean by love?" Jerome asked innocently.

"Give and receive. Take nothing." she replied.

He clasped her tight in his arms, caressing her back with as much tenderness as he could manage. But all he felt was lust, his arm drifting uncontrollably downwards.

"Love me, love me!" he cried.

In a flash of a dream, he saw a middle aged woman smiling at him, her blouse open revealing a pair of pert nipples on an ample breast. In a blink, he felt her soft breast against his cheek as he suckled her.

'Mother.'

Her soft hand caressed his head as she pressed him close to her for what seemed an eternity.

"Is this your love?" purred the goddess in his ear.

Startled, he opened his eyes to see that he was suckling the goddess.

"What is this?" he cried, examining his spittle.

"It is lust, my love."

"Lust." He grumbled.

"Rest now." She whispered. "You have so much to think on."

-----

The following day, Jerome was proclaimed king of the idyllic island by his court of four beautiful nubile and from there, life fell into a near perfect routine, each day passing, much the same as the next. He would wake to see the goddess by his side; have a breakfast of

fruit, bathe in the pool, take long walks through the forest accompanied by his giggling entourage before lunch and spend his afternoons fishing on the beach. In the evenings, there was always a large dinner of the catch of the day followed by dancing. By day, he resisted eyeing his entourage lustfully but by night he dreamt of defiling them. In the morning, the goddess always reminded him that there would be nothing without first embracing his pure love.

"Reach out Jerome and touch me with your heart."

He close his eyes tight and stretch out his arm, forcing all the love he could find out to his finger tips, but he only burnt her with his touch.

Yet for all these simple pleasures and crucial conflicts, Jerome was never truly happy, as the unfinished business of the Cat haunted him. During his daily promenades, he began to dream up endless tortures, each more horrid than the last. He would lose himself in these moments of intense dreaming, but when he returned, he found his queen scowling at him. This did not dissuade him as he had begun to feel contempt for her. He got used to her chaste beauty, finding it dull, so concentrated on his far more interesting plan of revenge. Since his arrival on the island he had grown in confidence, which translated itself as spitefulness towards Love. But he had to be careful with her as she had a pure power that neutralised his dark heart, often making him feel impotent to his natural desires. The more he developed his plan, the more he realised that she was an essential to its success. He was sure that the cat would crumble under the purity of her power and as she had sworn to protect her king, she was obliged to follow him in his enterprise.

His plan was very simple. He would send a message by the fish to invite the cat for dinner. Love would inform the cat that he was very ill and that he was in great need of help. When the cat was by his bedside, he would use Love as a shield to stab the cat in the heart with a sharp stick that he had been honing during his daily fishing trips.

When all was ready, he inquired if his queen knew the Black Cat.

"I have heard of him."

"What have you heard?"

"He is the Grand Poobah's personal secretary. He is said to be just and fair, as well as being handsome and charming."

"Fair!" scoffed Jerome. "He is no more that a rotten scoundrel."

"I do not know my Lord. I only tell you what I hear."

"I wish to make amends for the past. Will you invite him for dinner?"

"Please don't do it." She sobbed as he edged towards her.

"Do what?"

"You will only hurt yourself."

"How can I hurt myself when I have you?"

His nubile court burst into tears.

"Stop your blubbering you pathetic women! Tell the Cat that I am waiting for him. Tell him I wish to reconcile our differences."

"I cannot my king."

"I command you."

"Give him your love and you will be invincible." She implored. "Your salvation lies in love."

"My salvation lies in making amends with that Cat and I will not rest until it is done."

"What has made you change so?" she implored.

"You! Your love is nothing but sugar coated pain filled with compromise and sloth. I will take the path of change and it starts with revenge." Jerome pronounced.

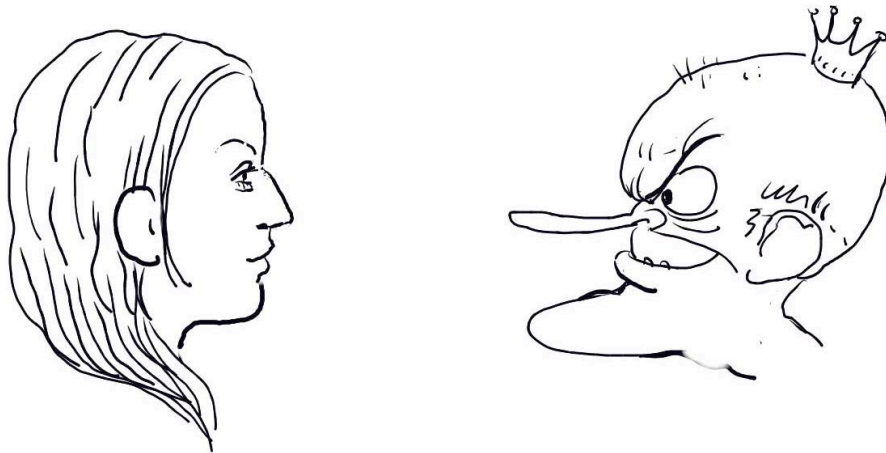
"Love is the hardest path."

"Only in suffering do you find true love." He hissed, crushing her in his arms.

"You are no longer my goddess but my prey." He whispered in her ear. "You will learn to love me for what I really am, a man."

She pushed him away, fleeing into the forest.





## CHAPTER 20

That evening, dinner was not the gay event that it had been before. Jerome sat bolt up right on his stool, privately revelling in the power that he had assumed.

"Love, you will not forget to call the Cat tomorrow?" Jerome goaded as he finished his orange slices. Her eyes welled up as she nodded quickly, looking away from him. He took her bloated face in his hand and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"There's no need to be like that. It's not the end of the world. Just the beginning of a new one."

She nodded.

"Now don't forget. When he arrives, the girls are to bring him to me. Do I make myself clear?!"

Love slowly stepped away, trying to hide her distress.

"Please Jerome, put your hate away before it is too late."

"Too late?"

"Before there is no more goodness left in your heart."

"This is no time for goodness."

"Love the Cat and he will be your servant. If not, you will forever be doomed as the king of the sand."

"How do you know that I was the king of the sand?"

She stuttered for a moment. "The cockatoo told me."

His angry stare pierced her red eyes, waiting for her to look away and admit that she was lying but she held his gaze defiantly.

"Tomorrow, you call that Cat!"

The women cleared up the meal in the last of the light and disappeared to their huts. Soon all was quiet. Jerome looked up at the stars gleaming through a dark sky and felt complete. He was empowered, motivated and ready to fight. Standing up from his little throne, he

composed himself and walked over to her hut. In the regal bed lay Love, crunched up in a ball motionless. Jerome sat by her admiring her body as a thief admires a sculpture.

"Don't be frightened my queen." He whispered in her ear as his hand made its way down her body. She did not flinch, her back turned to him.

"Jerome, I beg of you not to do this. Without love your escape will be for nothing."

"On the contrary, my escape is about to justify itself. All you have to do is relax. I will do the rest."

His withered fingers caressed her breasts as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Come my love, why are you crying?" Jerome whispered.

"I am crying for you, Jerome."

This so infuriated Jerome, that he grabbed her wrists.

She struggled but in the end it was hopeless.

"Please don't do it!" She implored as she tried to wriggle free.

Pinned down on the bed, she begged him with every muscle she had, but Jerome only observed this futile struggle. He felt only contempt for her. With a slap of his hand, he beat the love off her face

"Your chastity maybe your strength, but I want you to show me your love!" he roared.

Her eyes glazed over and her body relaxed, a piece of meat, ready for him.

"There my queen, I never asked for your pity."

He eased himself in, relishing every moment of perfect satisfaction as he was consumed by an uncontrollable urge to let himself go. The pleasure was intense; it was his finest moment; his conquest of Love's false promises. This was pleasure, the love he had craved since the beginning, but in this all-consuming moment that was so complete, he heard the muffled screams from the bottom of his heart, begging him to stop. The further he went, the louder they were until they broke his concentration. Propped up by his arms, he arched back and let out the most terrible cry.

"Mother!"

With that, he fell back, empty.

---

"Jerome." a voice purred mockingly. "Jerome. What did you mean by mother? I hope you didn't think... Oh you rascal."

Dazed with fatigue, Jerome slowly looked up to see the muzzle of the Cat but an inch before him.

"Who's been a silly boy then."

With a yell, Jerome jumped off the bed and into the darkest corner of the hut.

"I hope you were wearing protection." The Cat sniggered as it did up its trousers and put its jacket back on. "You never know what you can get from a CAT!!"

It strode slowly towards Jerome, tutting as it went.

"Please don't hurt me!" Jerome whimpered, cowering in the shadow of the beast.

"Oh but Jerome, I'm not here to hurt you. You seem quite capable of doing that all by yourself."

"Where is Love?" he choked.

"Love had to disappear. She didn't feel she was ready for that kind of relationship."

"But I love her."

"Sadly for you, it just wasn't enough. I have to confess that I was hoping that your séjour here might have done the trick but I was evidently mistaken."

"I won't go back, you hear me, never!!" Jerome exclaimed.

He lunged at the Cat but in mid flight, it caught him by the nostrils and lifted him up high into the air.

Bringing Jerome close to its mouth,

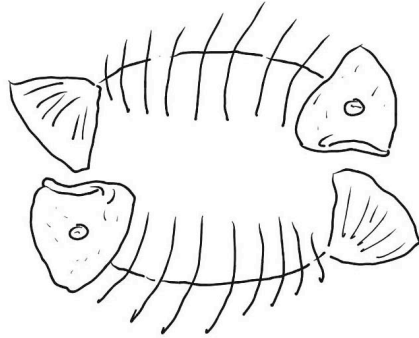
"Now it's time to pay." whispered the Cat jovially. "And to think you nearly made it. So close Jerome, yet so far."

He pulled out a pair of gleaming tailors scissors and presented them to the asphyxiating Jerome.

"I don't think you'll be needing this any more."

With a snip, off came his shrivelled man hood, it falling on the dusty floor.

"Now, back to the island for you."



## CHAPTER 21

'Damn, damn, damn...!' Jerome repeated furiously.

His cave was empty, his beach was nothing but pebbles and the sun was camped behind a cold, grey sky. The only proof he had that it had ever been his kingdom was his old lead boots. Refusing to eat or drink, he lay day and night on his stone bed, feeling nothing for the outside world and the outside world felt nothing for him.

One morning many months later, in the haze of his perpetual inertness, he heard a seagull calling. Too weak to walk, he crawled to the entrance of the cave, hoping that it might be his beloved cockatoo, but whatever it was, it had disappeared. Surveying the grey beach, he noticed a dead fish rolling in the wash. The fish stank, its puffed up body falling apart in his hands but however repellent he found it, his hunger overcame his reservations. Afterwards, he was terribly sick, vomiting not only his guts but his very soul, purging himself of the past, restarting afresh. The terrible burdens of his failure disappeared and for the first time since his return, he felt his heart floating on a wave of peace. It was certainly the moment to go and confront his dark heart but he did not dare, unsure of what he would do when he got there.

All the same, he felt like a new man taking his first steps towards his release. He dedicated himself to a harsh routine; breakfast of dead fish followed by vomiting, rock crushing, followed by visions and pain; lunch, if he could face it and then more pain until night fall. Every few days, unable to face anymore of his gruelling regime, he would lie on the stony floor of his cave and try to sleep, but his mind was tormented by dreams of revenge and conquest always ending in failure. With each square metre he reconquered, it only made him realise just how far there was to go and worse still.

"I am in my own hell." He often surmised. "I should have stayed on paradise. Dammit!" He searched the horizon for the island but it had disappeared.

Bitterness and regret soon strangled the flower of hope that he had found on his return from paradise, which led him back to resentment. He began to rant and rave at the cloudy night sky, justifying himself furiously, explaining that it was circumstance that had made him the way he was. These bitter nights became bitter days, which in turn grew into bitter years.

There was not a precise moment when Jerome stepped from delusions and into madness; it just went that way. His ranting dragged him further and further away from reality, to a point where not even the pebbles could touch him anymore. Each morning, he automatically put his boots on having quite forgotten why, and strode across his sandy domain, mumbling and spluttering like a badly tuned car. There was little sense in what he said, often repeating a sentence until all the words had fallen out of order. With the jumble of words, he would sing it repeatedly until he stumbled across a tune that he liked, but he could never remember how it went when he stopped. This only made him rant even more, continuing the cycle. Yet for all his madness, he made good headway on the beach and was a quarter of the way round the island when the Cat paid a visit. As usual, the Cat appeared from behind expecting Jerome to jump with surprise as he had always done but instead Jerome ignored it, walking away singing at the top of his voice. The Cat thought it best to leave this mad man alone, as there was obviously nothing to be done for him. Eventually when Jerome was summoned before the Grand Poobah, he seemed sweetly oblivious to the proceedings. His head bowed, handing the pebbles and sand to the Cat for examination whilst mumbling a love song to his long lost queen. The Cat and the Grand Poobah would have laughed if the scene were not so pathetic.

But this is not the end of the story of the great Jerome and his past. As with all great heroes, good or bad, they have a habit of bouncing back. For Jerome, it came in the shape of a cod. One grey morning, like all the other grey mornings, as he waited for his breakfast to appear, a cod flipped out of the wash and onto his finely crushed grey sand.

"What are doing here? You're meant to be dead!" exclaimed the mad old man.

"Waiting for you." Retorted the cod with a delicate Scottish accent.

"Do you know I am in love with Love?" Jerome declared, turning to walk away.

"That's very nice for you."

There was a moment of silence, as Jerome stopped walking and took a large step backwards.

"So what are you doing here?" he scalded at the fish.

"Being your breakfast."

"Are you a spying on me?"

"What for?"

"Because I am the King of the Sand."

"Nearly King of the Sand."

"And when I am King of the Sand, I'll just sing all day long."

"How long have you been here?" asked the cod.

"I can't remember."

"And how long do you plan to stay?"

"I am the king of the sand you know." Jerome repeated manically.

"You've told me already."

"You don't by any chance know of way out of here?" he whispered, looking around him furtively.

"No."

"It's just that if you do, I'm very interested."

"And even if I did, which I don't, what would you do for me?"

"I could swop you maybe... this pebble... no this one. Look how beautiful she is. Look at her shape; she is the shape of... Love."

Jerome took a deep breath and began to sing of the beauties of the pebble.

"Oh, I get it. You're the mad one, aren't you?" Exclaimed the fish. "I've heard about you."

"What have you heard? What?" Jerome cried dropping the stone.

"Nothing much. Just that you escaped to the other island and that you've since gone crazy!"

"It's all lies, lies and more lies. I am not mad, I am a changed man." Declared Jerome, thrusting a finger into the air. "But my case is hopeless."

"Oh no it's not! You can get a reprieve."

"How?" Jerome grabbed the cod by its tail. "Tell me quick or I'll kill you!"

"You'll kill me anyway."

"Don't push your luck!"

"I can't tell you exactly but I've seen others do it. I've even heard of people who've committed suicide."

"Suicide? How?"

"All I know is that if you want to die, you have to tear yourself apart, limb by limb." Whispered the cod.

"More lies. Now I know you are a spy."

"For whom?"

"For the Cat, of course."

"The Cat doesn't need me to spy for him."

"Lies and more lies!"

"Think what you like, but I'm telling you that if you tear yourself apart, your worries are over."

"Do you know who you are talking to? I have fallen from the top of the cliff, sunk to the bottom of the sea and have even had my bits cut off." Jerome parted his legs but the fish looked away. "And I'm not even remotely dead."

"I tell you what, I'll see what I can find out. In the mean time, would you get on with the meal as I'm on a very tight schedule." The fish wriggled impatiently.

"What schedule?"

"I can't say."

"I won't eat you until you tell me."

"Fine."

A hostile silence reigned for a couple of minutes.

"Alright, but swear that what I tell you will never repeat." The cod cried angrily.

"Very well."

"I am nothing and you are all."

"What?!?"

"I am nothing and **you** are all." The cod repeated.

"That's no answer!"

"Eat me and I promise to tell you more."

"How can I trust you?"

"What have you got to lose?"

Jerome picked the cod up by its tail, nodded at it in agreement and smashed it down on a pebble.

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Jerome never forgot the smug ugliness on the face of that particular cod, so when it reappeared one lunchtime many years later, he recognised it instantly.

"I'm sorry I took so long but it wasn't easy." the cod gurgled, out of breath.

"Not good enough." Jerome mumbled flatly.

"Well, it's very simple. All you have to do is tear your heart out with a knife."

"What knife?"

"A knife!"

"But I don't have a knife."

"I tried to find you one in the stores but fish don't have much need for them so I brought you this instead." With a flip of his tail, a stick fell in front of him.

"But it's blunt!" exclaimed Jerome.

"It's the only thing I could find." The cod exclaimed angrily. "Anyway, I'm not even meant to talk to you."

"Who said so?"

"The Great Lobster."

"Oh." Jerome retorted, examining the stick. "Just cut my heart out." He mumbled to himself, examining the stick thoroughly.

"Apparently so. No heart, no person."

"Just here." He said drawing a circle over his left breast.

"Well if that's where your heart is then... yup... that's it!"

Jerome prodded the stick on his breast inquisitively.

"It's going to be a messy business. No way of getting anything sharper?"

"No!"

Jerome started back up the beach to his dining stone.

"Where are you going?" shouted the cod.

"To cut my heart out, of course."

"What about me?"

"What about you?"

"Aren't you going to eat me?"

"Why would I want to do that for?"

"Because that's part of the deal."

"Tough!"

Jerome decided it was best to leave his suicide until he had thought it through properly. During the following days, his sanity returned, as did all the nightmares and pain that accompanied it. He soon resented his stupidity at not having committed the act earlier, when his madness had dulled the reality of the situation. There was also the fact that he was already half way round the beach and it would not take so much more effort to finish. But as the sand got finer so the pain got worse, the visions mixing up into a syrup of suffering, a suffering that he would have to endure without reprieve. Toying with the rough implement of his destruction, he saw only hope in it, a hope that he no longer had in the beach. Sitting on the sand, he clasped the stick in both hands and brought it up before him, its blunt point focused on his chest. He felt empty, the voices having been silenced by the finality of the moment, as if he was about to perform an amazing stunt to an amazed crowd.

"It can't be anymore painful than what I have had to endure so far." He whispered.

Plunging the stick hard against his chest, it did little more than graze the skin. Jerome examined his wound in disbelief. Again, he brought the stick down, harder this time, digging it through the muscle and twisting until he had made a hole big enough to slide a finger in. Rummaging around, he levered away a rib, tearing a gash across his chest. Blood began to pour from the gaping wound as he slid the stick downward, trying to break the ribs that protected his heart. Even though it was a terribly bloody operation, he felt quite detached from it, neither feeling pain nor disgust as he tore himself apart.

It took a lot of poking and prodding, which he found quite tiring, to open a hole big enough to get most of his hand in. Grabbing on the bottom tip of the slippery organ, he slowly tried to pull it through the small gap, using the stick to lever a hole wide enough for it to pass. But it was no easy business as he kept losing his grip, his heart slipping back into his chest. He rummaged with the stick to make a bigger hole, grabbed his heart and with a concerted tug, dragged half of it into the open. Taking a short rest, he played with the piece of meat that protruded from his chest, flicking the end to see if it was still pumping, but it was not. Naturally, he should have been dead long ago, but then this was not natural and Jerome did not find it strange.



The operation had lost its initial intention to him as he childishly played with his innards, quite fascinated by it. But he was still resolute in his purpose and so cupping his hand, he forced it into the hole, and with a concerted pull, tore the muscle clean out into the open.

There in his hand lay his heart, a grey bloody inanimate mess. Jerome gawped at it as if it were a holy relic, in awe of what he had managed to do. But his flaccid toy had meant more than just his endeavour, he quite literally had his life in his hands. Lying back, he held his heart above, the vessels stretched to breaking point, blood dripping onto his chest.

"I'm sorry, mother." He whispered but there came no reply.

Yanking the heart as hard as he could, the vessels tore apart and he yelled with all he had left. It was his moment of truth as he stared at the silhouette of his arm out stretched, presenting his own heart to the sky.

In a moment,

In an eternity,

The darkness enveloped him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh how sweet." Echoed a sarcastic purr through Jerome's deathly torpor. "Dear fellow, Look at what I found washed up on the beach."

He slowly opened his eyes to see the ever-debonair black Cat standing above him, holding a shrivelled piece of flesh in its paw.

"Looking at the state of you, I'd say that this must be yours." The Cat bent down to inspect the festering hole that was Jerome's chest.

"My god, very impressive. But then, Jerome, I would expect nothing less of you." the Cat concurred as it toyed with bits of rib.

"Go away. I'm dead." Jerome flicked the Cat's paw from his chest.

"Sadly not, old boy. You really didn't think I would let you off with this cutting your heart out malarkey?"

Jerome lay silent, willing the dream to leave him.

"That's just too easy!" the Cat exclaimed as it took off its velvet jacket and rolled up its sleeves. "Hmmm, I suppose I'll just pack this all back in."

After trying to work out which vessels were attached to which hole, the Cat abandoned the idea of a reconnection and just bundled the heart and vessels back through the hole.

"I don't really know why I'm bothering to do this as you don't need it anyway. But, it does look better than that rather unsightly hole."

"Damn you!!" was all that Jerome could muster, as he lay incapacitated on the bloodied sand.

The Cat flipped Jerome's sagging flesh over the hole and stitched it back up with a long thread of its own black fur.

"There. Right as rain, old man." It exclaimed proudly, admiring the cross-stitch.

"What happens when I finish the beach?"

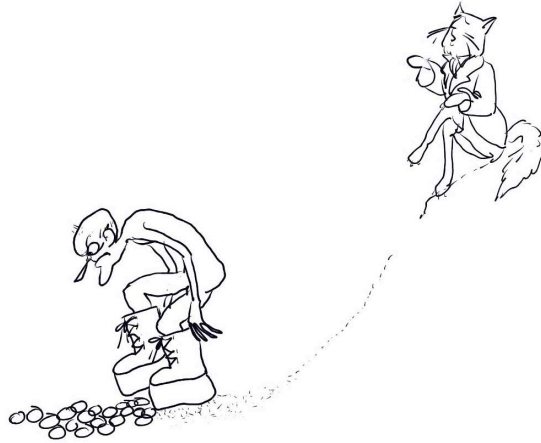
"That depends on you. Now be a good fellow and stop all this denial business, it's getting you nowhere."

The Cat wiped its bloody paws clean with its handkerchief before putting its jacket back on.

"Don't forget that your summons before the Grand Poobah is soon enough. It really wouldn't do for him to see you in such a state." The Cat patted Jerome on the cheek and turned away

"This time I want to speak to him myself." Jerome shouted.

"We shall see about that." The Cat replied as it melted into the horizon.



## CHAPTER 22

Jerome worked quickly, systematically criss-crossing the beach, accepting the pain without recourse. When the Cat appeared, it was always impressed by Jerome's progress and with good reason, as Jerome was making fine progress. Life got easier, the weather got better, the fish became more abundant and objects began regularly to appear. Lastly, Jerome's hatred for the Cat also waned. He began to look forward to the Cat's passing and so the Cat passed more often. They would talk over a wide range of subjects, each as inconsequential as the next.

"Through industry, there is hope." Jerome often declared, as they strolled down the beach.

"And what kind of industry gives you hope?"

"Clearing up the beach of course."

"Your industriousness is only a means, my friend."

One day, just like any other, as Jerome was being 'industrious', the Cat appeared behind him.

"Do you have to do that?" Jerome implored, finding this habit extremely disconcerting.

"I find a good surprise so much more... dramatic." Said the Cat.

"Dramatic?" Jerome mumbled unimpressed as he continued to crush rocks, wincing with every step.

"How are you getting on then?"

"Oh very good."

"Anything in particular you would like to discuss?"

"Why?"

"It helps to talk."

Jerome felt contempt for the seeming triteness of the comment as he continued to wince his way do the beach.

"The reason for my visit may sound strange but all the same, I feel that it is time to was done."

Jerome stopped and looked at the Cat.

"There's no reason to worry. It's just that we've never been formally introduced." The Cat thrust out its paw. "My name is Felix. You may use it freely except when in front of the Grand Poobah." Felix then bowed.

"Felix?"

"I know it's a little corny now but it was terribly fashionable when I was born."

"And when was that?"

"It seems an awfully long time ago. Anyway, I don't have a great deal of need for the time, rather more a need for the time-less."

Felix mused on this point for a moment.

"You do have a way of talking an awful lot of errr... rubbish on occasion."

"Rubbish. Can't a cat muse on its very existence? I may not have been the brightest beast on the boat but at least I have the ability to think. The Great Lobster for instance, lovely fellow that he is sadly incapable of any reflection. I mean, how can you..."

Jerome was no longer listening. He had long felt that philosophy was a pastime reserved for the idle and therefore was counter-industrious.

"... So Jerome, if you don't think about time, what do you think about?"

"What! Me! Oh nothing. Nothing at all."

"Oh rubbish. I know that you have spent an awful long time dreaming up tortures for me."

"But that was a long time ago, Felix."

"There you go using that word again."

"Which word?"

"Time!"

"So what other word can I use?"

Felix put its paw to its chin pensively. "Ah yes. I see your point. I suppose there is always a past. Ah but no! The past exists only in your own linear perception of time because it defines a temporal direction."

"So?"

"But real time is actually circular, so therefore you always end up where you started, which means the past and the future are effectively pointless."

"And who says it's a circle, because it doesn't seem like it to me!"

"The Great All of course."

"Sorry!"

"The Great All."

"And who is this Great All?" Jerome asked.

"That is a difficult question. The Great All is the eternal circle that pulses the rhythms of change, having neither past nor future "

"You mean God."

"Not exactly. The Great All is a perfectly balanced entity that is both good and evil or as we say hear, positive and negative."

"Do you think you could introduce me to him?"

"Oh no." it laughed. "No one can see him because everything is part of him."

"It does not interest me if I'm part of him or not. Can he help me or not?"

"I suppose he could, in a manner of speaking." Mused the Cat.

"So when can I meet him?"

"Before you get all excited, I should first explain how he is."

"Is it going to take long?"

"On no."

"Good."

Jerome sat down crossed-legged on the pebbles as the sky went dark, filling with stars.

"Can I start?"

Jerome nodded. The Cat spread its arms as wide as it could, as if it was trying to embrace the sky.

"Imagine that the universe's expansion and subsequent implosion is but the single beat of a heart." The Cat pumped its arms to a slow rhythm, repeating. "Explosion, implosion, explosion, implosion... So you see that in the first half of the beat, the heart expands, in the second half, it contracts." Felix looked down at Jerome, who smiled. "Good. Now imagine this man is in his own universe, wistfully unaware that his heart is another universe. Your universe was in his heart and it beat sixty times a minute, which means that 60 universes lived and died. So, with the death of one universe, in a momentary contraction, bang, it starts all over again, a new expanding universe. Here you have a rhythm, not based on time because time is just a reflection of where you are, but more based on an equilibrium: the rhythm of all and nothing."

"So you're telling me that I live in the heart of someone else."

"No, no, no. You lived in a fraction of a heartbeat of some else. As did a billion universes live in you. Fascinating eh?"

Jerome looked on dumbfounded, unable to comprehend the enormity of the proposition.

"So where am I now then?"

"That is not important right now."

"It's important to me!"

"It's another discussion." Retorted Felix firmly.

"Ok. It's all very interesting but what has that got to do with time?"

"Everything. For you, the universe expands and contracts over billions of years, therefore defining a beginning and an end. But to the Great All it is just a heartbeat and as the Great All is eternal and everything is part of the Great All, time becomes redundant. Globally, there is all and there is nothing, the rest is just perception."

Felix was very proud with his erudite explanation of the very nature of 'all'. Jerome, on the other hand, had never heard so much rubbish.

"Frankly, I don't believe a word of it."

"Believe what you wish. It's part of the process."

"The process!" Jerome sniggered.

Felix looked at his watch and exclaimed. "Damn it! I'm late again."

"What do you care?"

"Very good Jerome, very good. I am not governed by time, but by coinciding events." The Cat retorted.

"Oh."

Felix then swivelled on his paws and made to march off.

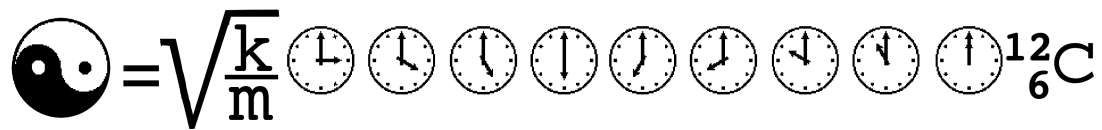
"Wait a minute Felix. Tell me when can I apply for a remission?"

"Remission, you say." Felix chortled. "There's no remission my friend."

"Then let me speak with the Grand Poobah?" Jerome pleaded.

Felix took a large stride towards the horizon.

"We must continue our conversation soon." Shouted the tall, shimmering figure and with that, it vanished.



## CHAPTER 23

Jerome was not in the habit of taking much notice of Felix's musings but he found its explanation of the Great All deceptively engaging. During his abundantly painful hours on the beach, he tried to picture exactly what Great All could look like but as with all metaphysical reflection, it became a little dull. So he investigated other ways of imagining an 'All', using words, numbers, signs anything that came to mind, but as hard as he tried, none of them seemed to reduce the 'All' to a tangible size. Eventually, so muddled by his thoughts, he somehow stumbled on upon a formula that he felt to corresponded to the idea he had had at the beginning.

What this formula actually meant has confounded the greatest mathematicians but for Jerome it surmised his theory. It seemed to propose that the Great All was an infinitely divisible metronome of perpetual change that kept a perfect equilibrium of the sum of its parts.

"I am all and I am nothing. I am the cycle and the cycle is me." He had made a huge step forward into a dimension of his situation that he had not understood until that point.

"Therefore, if all change is eventually cyclic, then I may as well do nothing as anything I do will also always end up being nothing." He felt very uncomfortable with this nihilism, finding that it went completely against his basic need to be 'industrious'. By the time he had finished his tour of the island, he felt even more apprehensive about finishing than about starting again.

When this fateful day did eventually arrive, he had left himself a ceremonially small strip of pebbles with which to confront what he was sure would be his last day. At dawn, after putting on his tattered boots, he marched proudly out on to the beach. Taking a deep breath, he surveyed his kingdom, so very impressed at his industriousness.

"I... I... I..." he stuttered, unable to find any appropriate words.

As if an Acapulco cliff diver before a terrifyingly high plunge, he walked to where the strip began in reverential silence. The longer he waited, the harder it was for Jerome to pluck up the courage to take the first step. After procrastinating for sometime, his body jerked and he took the first step of his last day. His boot thundered down, his hugely strong thighs straining but instead of crushing the larger than normal rock that lay before him, his leg was stopped in its tracks and he toppled over, a shudder numbing his body. Recomposing himself, he stepped back, lifted his right knee high over this persistent patch and brought it down as hard

as he could. At the moment of impact, a pain, as powerful as death itself, rushed through him, he screaming as only as children do.

After the initial shock, he saw himself as a young boy, wrapped in a warm coat, wearing shorts, long woollen socks, a thick scarf and a hat that covered his ears. He was standing on a frozen lake, on a clear winter's day. Next to him stood an older boy, similarly dressed, preoccupied with his jacket buttons. In the distance he could hear a woman's voice shouting, "Be careful now boys. The ice is very dangerous." The boys did not react. "Jerome, did you hear me?"

"Yes mother." he replied politely.

"Jerome, I can't do this button up!" sobbed the other boy.

"Why do I have to spend my life helping you, Alfred? You're my older brother." insisted the young Jerome.

Alfred continued to blub childishly as he finished doing the coat up.

"I can't help it, Jerome."

"You can't help a lot of things!"

"I'll tell mother." Alfred snivelled as he burst into tears.

"Go on. She only listens to you because you're a spastic. I heard mother say that the quicker she got rid of you, the better!"

With that, Jerome turned and marched towards the centre of the lake.

"Wait for me."

"Go away spacko!!!" he retorted.

"It's dangerous out there." Alfred wined as he ran after Jerome.

"That's why we're here, stupid." Shouted Jerome, not letting up the pace

"Why do you call me stupid all the time?"

"Because you are stupid. You can't do anything for yourself and you even wee in yours pants."

"I can't help it."

"If you can't help it then you should never have been born."

His brother's sobs turned to tears as he continued to run after Jerome.

"Oh Jerome, stop it. Tell me you don't mean it."

Jerome began to run over the ice, leaving his awkward brother to his tears. He just wanted to run, run away as far as possible from his 'stupid' brother. He hated him. He hated his stupidity, his frailty, his weakness, but most of all he hated the fact that he had a retarded brother.

Often Jerome dreamt of killing his brother but he had never felt the need to commit a murderous act as strongly as he did that day. Where his hate came from I cannot tell you, but it was profoundly important to him that it would have to express itself once and for all. He felt a twinge of apprehension at the thought of his beloved mother's tears.



'But instead I will liberate her from the curse of Alfred and we will be free.'

Jerome no longer felt remorse. He saw his brother as an ineffective pest and it revolted him to nausea. As Alfred got closer, his voice of reason faded away, drowned by the nausea.

"Jerome come back here!" echoed from the shoreline.

"Hurry up Alfred. You can run faster than that." Jerome shouted. "It's here that the adventure starts."

He turned and ran until he felt the ice crack beneath his feet. It was now or never. Looking behind, he saw his brother lumbering some twenty metres away.

He tapped the ice lightly, searching for the weakest patch, edging his foot back until a crack told him that the trap was set.

"You never thought I could do it?" Alfred panted, as he ran the last few yards. Jerome felt his brother's hot breath on his neck and it made him feel sick.

"Now what, Jerome?"

"Alfred, we're going on a running adventure."

"Where?"

"Over there." Jerome pointed into the centre of the lake.

"But we aren't allowed out there." exclaimed Alfred.

"How can it be an adventure if we are allowed out there, stupid?"

"I don't want to play."

"Alfred, I'll never play with you ever again if don't play this game."

"Mummy said we shouldn't go so far."

"I told you never to call her that. She is my mother. You know you were just an accident."

"She says she's my mummy." Mumbled Alfred.

"Well she's lying!"

"Why are you so nasty to me?" sobbed Alfred as Jerome took him in his arms.

"Oh Alfred, I'm not nasty, but you know how much I like things to be right." Alfred nodded, wiping the tears from his eyes. "So are we going on this adventure or not?"

Alfred nodded.

"And to show how nice I am, I'm going to give you a head start."

"But it's not allowed." Mumbled Alfred.

"You've been further out on the lake than this."

Nodding, Alfred looked at his brother.

"So what are you scared of? Nothing."

Alfred shook his head, grasping his brother tight in his arms

"Now stop snivelling and get on with it." Jerome reassured, unclasping his brother. "Ready.

One, two, three, GO!!"

Alfred ran off towards the centre of the lake, his heavy gait crunching on the ice. Thud, thud, thud, thud. Jerome listened attentively counting every step, waiting for the crack that would

finally liberate him of his burden. Behind him, his mother shouted for Alfred to stop, but Jerome was deaf to everything but the crack.

THUD, THUD, THUD, THUD, CRACK.

Falling like a soldier, his arms flaying, Jerome watched as he brother stop in his tracks and disappeared into the water. He savoured the moment of silence before looking back to see his mother running towards him. He then looked in front and saw a screaming figure, bobbing on the surface some twenty yards off.

"Damn it!" He started to run towards his drowning sibling. As he ran, he felt his purpose weaken, remorse clouding it, but this was short lived, the darkness twisting the situation, telling him that he could be a hero if he saved Alfred. But as Jerome closed in on his floundering brother, the voice died away behind a curtain of nausea. Alfred, his face a tinge of blue, was hyperventilating; his teeth chattering so much that he could barely speak.

"Help me Jerome." he implored. "Please help me."

Jerome bent down as Alfred grabbed his lapel only to force him away from the edge.

"Jerome. Help me! Please, I'm sinking! It's too cold!"

"Mother, help me. I can't hold on any more!" Jerome shouted as he pretended to pull him out. In a matter of seconds, Alfred was floundering, the cold had exhausted him, his clothes weighing heavy on his back. The terrible screams had subsided, as he put all his efforts into keeping afloat. Jerome now watched his brother with a scientific distance as he kept him from grabbing the side. He was deaf to the shouts and removed from his pain. All he saw was his older brother, floundering unheroically. Alfred's desperate attempts to escape did not last long and soon he stopped moving as Jerome's frozen fingers let go. The current dragged Alfred under the ice, his bluish face, gasping; spitting. Jerome watched his brother disappear into the freezing abyss, motionless. He felt only an anxiety that his brother would not disappear completely before his mother arrived.

'Alfred the kitten.' He repeated to himself as he watched him pass away. Jerome followed the corpse as the current dragged it towards the sea, unperturbed by the knocking of the corpse against the ice, each dull thud sounding Jerome's victory. The cries of his mother broke the moment, Jerome realising she was close.

"Help mother. Help. He is gone. I couldn't help him."

He jumped up and followed the body, half-heartedly kicking the ice, pointing and shouting as he followed his brother's corpse. Yet in a matter of metres, the corpse stopped moving and there it came to rest, its eyes flat; its mouth wide open. He never felt an ounce of remorse for the murder of his brother. He only regretted that it had had to happen in the first place.

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The vision flashed. His mother stood before him, dressed in black. From behind her veil he heard,  
'Even Cain can feel pity.' She then disappeared.

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Jerome gasped, lying doubled on his side.  
"It had to be done, dammit." He cried. "I did it for mother."  
'Look deeper before it is too late.' Echoed his mother's voice.  
He opened his eyes and took a few deep breaths.  
"I had to do it. He wasn't right."  
The old man jumped up defiantly and after composing himself, took his next step. As the boot crushed the pebbles, another electrifying shock blinded him with a vision of his mother screaming in horror. Again, he fell to the ground, unconscious.  
With each step he took, the pain and visions became progressively more horrific, but through all this Jerome insisted on finishing.  
As the sun set on a calm sea, stared apprehensively at the last small cluster of rocks. It was as if he was staring at a bomb, wondering which wire to cut, unable to make a decision. After some procrastinating, he closed his eyes and let himself go. The boot came thundering down and pulverised the last pebbles to shale.  
Felix, who had as usual appeared from behind, began to clap and cheer.  
"Hoorah, Jerome. Congratulations! Well done. And in record time! I can't tell you how proud I am of you. I even won a handsome bet, you know."  
Jerome fell back into the shingle, tears of relief rolled down his face.  
"It's over." he whispered to himself. He kicked off what was left of his lead boots and yelled for joy. But his joy was short lived.  
"Jerome! To honour this moment, I have created a song and dance. It is called Jerome, King of the Sand."  
Felix started a jig.  
"Not now." He grumbled.  
"It is the moment! It is very much the moment." bellowed the Cat angrily.  
Jerome sat up astonished, its tone bringing back unpleasant memories.

"Good. So I will begin." Felix took off his burgundy velour jacket, revealing a bright yellow tweed waistcoat.

"Lahhh." it hummed, its paw to its ear. With a swirl of its arms and a hop forward, Felix burst into song.

*There was once an old man called Jerome,  
Who lived on an island of stone,  
He at first fought with such ardour,  
Coz he thought he was harder,  
Than the stone that he had made, all by his own.*

*Oh Jerome, Jerome, King of the island made of stone.  
He was never one to moan,  
Oh Jerome, Jerome.*

*After many attempts to escape,  
Jerome put on his boots and made haste,  
He crushed all beach,  
With his own two feet,  
And the Cat won a bet on his pace.*

*Oh Jerome, Jerome, King of the island made of stone.  
It was now his home  
Oh Jerome, Jerome.*

*Soon that the pebbles had been crushed to sand,  
And he was proclaimed King of this new land,  
He was taken to his final trial,  
But was convicted of denial,  
And now all we see is his hand.*

*Oh Jerome, Jerome, King of the sand.  
An innocent man who was damned.  
Oh Jerome, Jerome.*

Felix jiggled and twirled like a Morris dancer, singing with the verve of a provincial operetta star. When he had finished, he bowed low, waiting for a rapturous applause that did not come. Unperturbed, he looked up at Jerome, his face beaming.

"Well, what do you think?" He said gleefully, " Just brilliant eh."

"It's not a song, is it. It's a limerick and not a very good one at that." Jerome grabbed this opportune moment, knowing full well that it would vex the Cat.

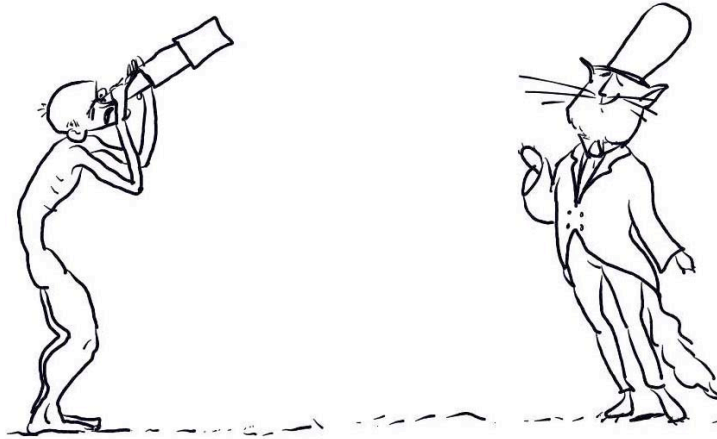
"Frankly, that is very unfair." Felix retorted. "If I wasn't in such a good mood I would have taken it as an insult." Jerome grinned, pleased at the result. "But on this special occasion I will over look the insensitive critique and nothing more will be said of it."

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings. It was just what I honestly felt." Replied Jerome as politely as his sarcastic mouth would let him.

"Well, I also came to remind you that you have your meeting with the Grand Poobah tomorrow."

"Good."

"Then until tomorrow!" Felix scowled as it disappeared in it usual fashion.



## CHAPTER 24

It was the longest night of Jerome's life, his dark heart in all out mutiny, terrorising him with the most unsavoury thoughts. His mother often came to him, screaming but he was unable to understand what she said, interspersed with glimpses of him kissing his mother tenderly then of her kissing the Cat. When he awoke, he felt so battered by the dreams that he could barely remember where he was.

"Time to get up, old man." The Cat stood above him, dressed in full mourning suit with top hat.

Jerome only sighed heavily, thinking it was part of the nightmare.

Felix grabbed him by the nostrils and jerked him out of bed. "Feeling better." It exclaimed sarcastically as Jerome struggled to unhook himself. "Frankly, I don't really care for your attitude, but I would prefer that you were at least civil."

"Yes. You are right. No need to fight. None!" Jerome snorted, his nose about to tear off.

Felix let Jerome fall to the floor. "So, we can continue our discussion on the concepts of time and space, if that doesn't bother you."

"No problem at all." muttered Jerome, wiping his hand across his bloodied face.

Felix twisted on his hind paws and started for the doorway.

"Are you coming?" The Cat asked politely

The pair had been walking in silence for sometime, Jerome kept his head bowed, preoccupied with the image of his mother kissing the Cat unable to understand where such an unholy idea could have come from. Occasionally, he looked up at his partner and wondered if there was anything in it but the very thought disgusted him too much.

"Jerome. I have refined my theory of the nature of time, you know." It declared with great enthusiasm.

"Oh really."

"Yes. I have defined a new theory on the matter which I have called the 'Felix's Theory of Eternal Time'."

"Sounds so promising." Muttered Jerome.

"Good, I will first set out my à prioris before attacking the guts of my theory."

"Excellent."

"My first à prioris is that time is a measure of change, agreed?"

"Yes."

"Good, therefore I propose that time can be defined as," Here, Felix exchanged his soft purr for a forthright tone of a professor addressing an Oxford seminar. "incremental rhythm added to perpetual change equals time." Felix looked round at Jerome for a response, but there was none. "Now, there are three sub parts to time; time past, time present and time future. As eternal time is not concerned with either time past or time present, as they have 'change' attached to them, I assume that only future time is of importance. Agreed?"

Jerome was staring at the Cat wondering how his mother could have ever entertained kissing such an ugly beast.

"I know that is very complex Jerome, but at least make a little effort."

Jerome nodded.

"Therefore, my first proposition is that eternal time can only be defined by zero."

"Zero is nothing."

"No, zero is all and nothing. It is the only complete entity there is. You can start at zero and end at zero. It is a whole, a perfect circle."

"So the 'Felix's Theory of eternal time' measures... nothing."

"No no no." exclaimed the Cat. "Felix's Theory of eternal time deduces that as it is complete, there is nothing to measure. Even so, there is a graduated scale of measurement to eternal time."

The Cat pulled out a large rubber band from his waist -coat pocket.

"Don't you ever get hot in all those clothes?"

"I don't sweat, thank you."

The Cat stretched the elastic band revealing a line of numbers marked at regular intervals.

"Watch how the numbers part as I stretch the band. This proves that time is elastic."

"No. It only proves that the band is elastic."

"If you're going to be like that, I'll just have to go back to the old way."

His paws shot towards Jerome's nose, the sharp nails glinting in the sunlight.

"I'm sorry, please go on." Whimpered Jerome.

"Now, where was I? Ah yes, the elastic time band. As you can see, the closer one gets to infinity, more time it takes to reach it."

Felix thrust the elastic band before the old man, who examined the line of numbers.

$$\infty=0$$

"Zero." repeated the bemused old man. "Yes, it seems on your machine that the numbers do bunch up close to zero."

"Yes zero. So the equation is:  $\sum$ ternal Time = Zero minus change divided by rhythm."

"I could not have put it better myself. Well done. Excellent."

"And I have even got a scale for measurement of my theory." Felix exclaimed, encouraged by Jerome's response.

Out of another jacket pocket, the Cat pulled out a camera with an enormous lens. On the lens, large numbers were scrawled incrementally, in a descending scale with a large zero at the far end.

"This is my eterniscope. It is an apparatus for proving 'Felix's Theory of eternal time'." Felix handed him contraption. "You look through the eyepiece and focus the viewer on the horizon."

Jerome placed the eterniscope to his eye and focused it out to sea.

"You will notice that everything that is set to zero or eternity is still and clear."

Indeed, Jerome did observe this fact. Admittedly he could only see the sky but all the same, the sky was still.

"If you look at the scale on my eterniscope, you will see that it indicates how much time is needed for you to get to eternity, based on the Felix law of elastic time."

"And what is that!?"

"Time is what you make of it!"

"Time is what you make of it?" Jerome repeated before jumping up exuberantly. "Eureka. You've cracked it!"

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes of course I do. I think it is even worth me telling the Grand Poobah that we have a genius in our midst."

"Would you?"

"But of course. That is if you will let me speak to him." Jerome said with the utmost sincerity.

"Normally it is against procedure but in this case I can ask."

"Excellent."

"You must remember though not to look or say anything until I tell you."

"Absolutely." Jerome confirmed.

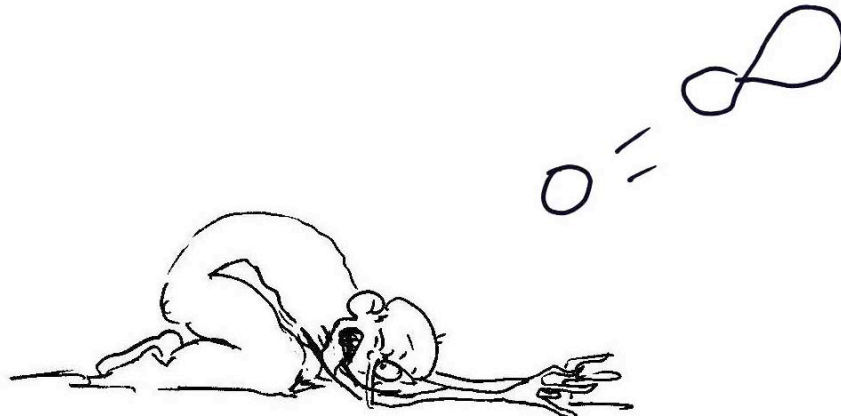
Felix put the eterniscope back into his pocket as his whiskers jolted upwards.

"It is time."

As usual, Jerome fell into a ball on his knees.

'I'm not doing this again.' He thought to himself. 'It's just too humiliating!'





## CHAPTER 25

The Grand Poobah appeared, heralded by a hurricane, yet this time, it was made all the worse by the fine sand being blown high above the prostate Jerome.

"Don't forget me!" Jerome shouted as his mouth filled with dust.

The wind stopped as suddenly as it had started.

"Oh, your highness. Welcome."

"ᠠᠨᠠᠨᠠᠨ ᠠᠨᠠᠨ ᠠᠨᠠᠨ ᠠᠨᠠᠨ. \*ᠠᠨ ᠠᠨᠠᠨ ᠠᠨ ᠠᠨ ᠠᠨᠠᠨ." boomed the Grand Poobah in that ancient language that Jerome did not understand.

"Thank you, my Lord." Replied the Cat who was bent in two.

"Tell me before we start, is he reconciled yet?"

"Not quite but I'd say he's very close."

"So he has calmed down then."

"Absolutely. A little cherub I'd say."

"Oh no, not a cherub." boomed the Grand Poobah anxiously. "My nephew is at cherub school at the moment and he's far from good."

The Cat hissed politely, whilst the Grand Poobah boomed a heavy laugh.

"But seriously, in between these greedy, ambitious cases and the stultifying dullness of the do gooders, I'm not just sure what is right anymore."

"It is so terribly confusing." agreed the Cat.

"Look how long it took to reconcile Francis of Assisi. I mean, he was so imbued of his fervour that he tried to evangelise the other islands. It was awful. He just would not stop."

"He even tried to convert me." exclaimed the Cat with a laugh.

"I ask you, how can a man spend so much time chanting and torturing himself in the name of goodness. It was infernal. Eventually I had to dress myself up as God himself and tell him to stop. It was the only way."

"So he has he evened out. That's the most important thing."

"Exactly. But so often in those obsessive cases it ends in failure. I tell you, I've had three today alone."

"I am sorry to hear that. Well, I hope that Jerome here won't be a disappointment. He has worked awfully hard and in turn has made astonishing progress."

"Oh I am pleased."

"So am I. That is why I would like to propose that, if it is possible, we break protocol. Jerome has three things he would like to tell your omnipotence."

"How exciting. I promise I won't try and guess." whispered the Grand Poobah.

"That is kind of you."

The Cat bowed, always smiling and turned to Jerome.

"Now, Jerome. The Grand Poobah has given you permission to explain today's revelation."

"Can I look up now?"

"I am really not sure that it possible." explained the embarrassed Cat.

"Let him stand." boomed the Grand Poobah.

"If you make a fool of me old man, you can be sure that I will personally redefine your concept of misery." Whispered Felix in Jerome's ear.

Jerome was not looking for trouble but his dark heart was. It still kept crying for revenge even at this late point and he found it hard to fend off its attacks.

"The Grand Poobah, in his infinite goodness has given you permission to stand."

pronounced the cat. In the dark shadow of the Grand Poobah Jerome scrambled to his feet and slowly lifted his head. As his eyes rose he saw undoubtedly the most remarkable sight he had ever seen. There, set in the hood of a small black habit, which sat behind an oversized lectern, was a huge vortex that sucked all of the light about it into a small hole. Its hands were blurred spheres and his cloak also had a soft aura about it. On the lectern stood a large sand timer that perpetually poured. In the blur of the vortex, the Grand Poobah had no definable features, yet Jerome instinctively recognised himself, as if the swirling mass was a mirror.

"You may ask him the three questions." Felix whispered.

"It's probably best if you ask the difficult one first." insisted the Cat.

"Where am I?" shouted the old man, believing that the Grand Poobah was some way off.

"You don't need to shout, you know. He's not deaf." Muttered the Cat.

"Oh." replied Jerome.

There was a long pause.

"You at the edge of eternity."

The fuzzy black mass pulled back the hood of his habit, revealing what could be best described as the heart of a swirling vortex of darkness, light pouring into it like water down the plughole.

"I am the end and everything must pass through me."

He then put his hood back on.

Jerome looked astonished at Felix, who was smiling smugly.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Have you never seen the end of eternity before?"

Grand Poobah burst into a roar of laughter.

"The end. Very good." Jerome replied bemused, trying to recover the situation.

"My second question. Why am I here?"

"Because everything must pass through me." retorted the Grand Poobah sternly, his laughter having stopped as fast as it had started.

"That's not what I meant." complained Jerome.

"But that is what you asked. Last question!"

The Cat stared at him with its beady eyes and Jerome knew why. He had the choice of either the theory of elastic time or to demand a remission.

"Have you heard of the theory of... I demand a remission?" Jerome blurted.

The Grand Poobah burst into an even louder laugh.

"You want to know about remission."

The Cat took a step closer to Jerome, its eyes as black as opal and long claws fully extended.

"Oh. This is not an issue of remission. It is an issue of submission."

"But I am innocent!"

"It doesn't seem as if our friend is quite ready." Boomed the Grand Poobah.

"Maybe some more intensive treatment is needed." Growled the Cat, Jerome cowering at the ferocity of its voice.

"Step forward and present your sample." Boomed the Grand Poobah.

"I couldn't help myself." Jerome whispered.

"I'm sure you couldn't." retorted the Cat.

Jerome gathered a handful of sand and walked apprehensively towards the towering desk.

Yet the closer he got to the desk, the further away the Grand Poobah seemed to slip.

Reaching up as high as he could, he poured the sand into the empty timer and watched the first few granules fall effortlessly through the restriction, his heart leaping as the basin quickly filled.

'Go on my little ones, make me proud.' He whispered, barely able to contain his excitement.

With each grain that fell, he took one step closer to freedom, one step closer to revenge,

Unable to control his happiness, Jerome kept glancing round at the Cat, but it was obviously unimpressed, only grinning politely. As the last of the fine sand fell through, they left behind only the larger granules, which Jerome counted attentively, his stomach so tight that it was about to snap.

"Four three, two, one... one.... one!" he cried as the last grain bounced down the restriction only to lodge itself in the middle. Furious, Jerome grabbed the timer but it disappeared in his hands.

"It's not fair. For pete's sake tell him it's not fair." Cried Jerome turning to the Cat.

The Cat sniggered, watching the outburst with restrained satisfaction.

"The court is adjourned." Boomed the Grand Poobah.

Instantly, the wind blew up and swirling the sand high into the sky.

"Wait. At least give me a new pair of boots." shouted Jerome into the sand storm as he fell to his knees, covering his face.

Soon enough, the silence returned and Jerome looked out from under his arm to see the Cat before him beaming an evil grin.

"Oh, I am so sorry that you missed out this time. Another ten thousand years before he comes round again. That will give us plenty of time to put things right." Declared the Cat as it admired the shrivelled ball flesh with enormous thighs. After a long silence, the Cat turned its back on Jerome, saying,

"Just as I thought. There's nothing but fear in you. Nothing at all!"

As the Cat walked away, Jerome jumped up, grabbed it by the neck, squeezing it as hard as he could, every muscle in his body willing the Cat dead. Felix just kept on walking, whistling nonchalantly, oblivious to Jerome who hung off the cat as if a mink shawl. As hard as Jerome squeezed, his gums tight shut, he could not even make the cat cough. With a jerk of the cat's shoulder, he fell to the ground.

"Do you feel better?" asked the Cat.

"No!"

"Good."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Oh I don't know yet, but then I am not in a terrible rush. Anyway, it was all really rather funny."

"Please don't hurt me." Jerome whimpered.

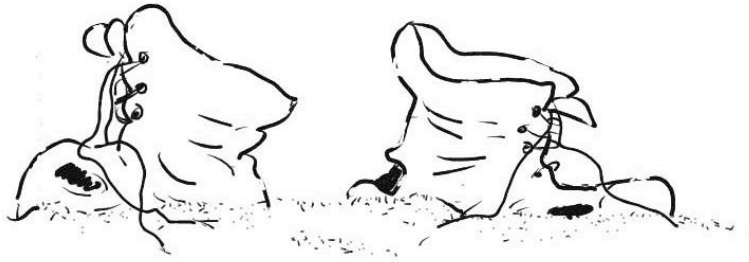
"And why would I want to do that?" growled the Cat as it kicked Jerome in the stomach.

"It will not happen again." Jerome groaned as he received a kick to the head.

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The cold bite of the evening wind woke Jerome. Clutching a handful of shale in one hand, he muttered repeatedly,

"That ... Cat... broke my noise." He wiped the dried blood of his face, examined and fell unconscious for a second time.



## CHAPTER 26

The full moon was high in the sky when the old man re-emerged. In the crisp night air he shivered uncontrollably as he gathered himself together for the long walk home. His head low and his feet dragging, he saw only sand, but for Jerome these were no longer grains of freedom, but grains of pain. Grinding the shale to dust was to be far more painful than crushing the pebbles to sand, the dreams blending together into a cocktail of horrors. The beach and his dark heart each imposed its will, leaving him tired and worst of all, impotent to either. As he wandered aimlessly across the beach, he tried to find a way out of with this compressed frustration, but he was locked in between the two complimentary forces. This perpetual struggle evolved year by year, a wilderness of tired pain.

This confusion would have continued until his next summons, had it not been for a little detail that was to change the course of his future. It came in the form of a simple revelation one morning as Jerome was putting on his boots. It had been so many years since he had questioned this ritual that he did it, quite literally, with his eyes closed.

As he placed his right foot in the boot, the leather lace broke in his hands but he was half way through the process of tying the bow when he realised. On opening his eyes, he discovered that firstly, the lace was broke, but on closer inspection, he discovered that the sole of his shoe had worn right through. He picked up the other boot to discover that they were both equally useless.

"Oh damn!" was all he could to utter as he cast the remnants of his once fine lead boots aside. From now on he embarked each day of grinding in his bare feet. With time, his daily routine had an unforeseen physical effect on him. First, his feet grew flat like elephant feet, before splaying into the shape of little pancake. In fact, they became so flat that eventually, he could no longer walk without tripping over them. By the end of his first tour of the island, his calluses had gown so thick that he could no longer arch his feet, which in turn had evolved into flippers. On his second tour of the island, his flippers became so thin that his toes of his feet to eroded away. After his toes, ever so slowly, the rest of his feet followed. He did not realise the full extent of his loss until he stumbled upon what was left of his lead boots whilst cleaning his cave after a sandstorm.

"Hmmm. Very odd. I seem to have lost my feet." He reflected nonchalantly, wobbling on the ends of his stumpy legs.

After many more years, Jerome began his third tour of his kingdom, only stopping to wonder when the Cat would appear. As he walked across the sands on his stilt legs he had only thoughts of revenge. As he roamed his sandy kingdom, his stumpy legs being slowly ground into needle sharp points. The sharper they became, the harder Jerome found it to walk. And the more frustrating the endeavour was. With every step he took, he sank deeper and deeper into the dust until he was literally swimming in it.

Eventually, he could take no more. He was bored of the repeated memories, bored of the same old questions, bored of being caked in dust and very bored of the beach.

"I'm not doing anymore!"

With that, he lay on his bed and waited.



## CHAPTER 27

Time stopped for Jerome as days melted into years, Jerome lying as good as dead to the world. The wind filled the cave mouth with sand, turning it into mausoleum, he dreaming only of sand in its totality and in every single grain. He dreamt of swimming on it, flying over it, but most commonly drowning in it. He would see himself sinking up to his neck, shouting, desperately.

"Help me Felix. Anyone help me!"

But no one came and to his rescue.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jerome! Jerome! Jerome!! Good God, look at you!"

Felix picked up the skin and bones, which had once been Jerome, with nothing but a single nail of its paw and dangled him like a marionette.

*"I've got no strings*

*To hold me down*

*To make me fret, or make me frown*

*I had strings*

*But now I'm free*

*There are no strings on me"*

"Wake up Jerome. It's Felix." The cat as it brushed the carcass down as if it were an expensive suit. "You really haven't been looking after yourself have you... Oh my god!! Where have your feet gone?"

Jerome just hung there, unable to muster the energy to reply.

"I must confess that in all my years I have never seen this before." Felix said as he prodded the points at the end of his legs as if scientific specimens. "I'm just not sure of what to make of this." it mumbled to itself before shouting in Jerome's ear. "You haven't forgotten that you are summoned today."

Jerome grunted deliriously.

"You'll have to wake up old man."

Jerome grunted a second time.

Frustrated by Jerome's lack of response, Felix drew him close to its mouth, its whiskers tickling the leathery face.

"This will only hurt a little." The Cat reassured as it opened Jerome's mouth. With each breath, the Cat quite literally inflated the old man back to his normal size.

"Let go of me!" Jerome cried between each breath, his broken nose pressed hard against the Cat's wet snout. When the Cat had finished, it retracted its claws and Jerome fell into a heap on the ground.

"I save the situation and all you can do is shout like a spoilt prince?"

"I didn't ask you to save me!" he retorted as he wiped bile from his mouth.

Felix chose to ignore this unpleasant outburst.

"I'd say you have a very good chance of getting out this time. I mean, there is so much sand now that even I had problems finding you."

Jerome grumbled as he tottered on his needle sharp legs.

"Well, we had best be off then." said the Cat jovially, as it kicked the sand from the cave mouth.

It was beautiful day outside, the sea was calm, the sky was blue and a cool breeze lightened the burden of the sun.

"Oi. You can't do that! I'm for pin legs over there." Cried a cod that was marooned on the shoreline.

"Oh stop it!" growled the Cat as it sliced the fish into fine strips before stuffing them into Jerome's parched mouth.

"I like to call this the Lazarus experience, you know."

"Lucky Lazarus." Jerome quipped as the Cat forced another strip into his mouth.

Before them lay the finest white sand dunes you have ever seen, rippling all the way to the horizon.

"And when Alexander saw the breadth of his domain; he wept for there were no more worlds to conquer." Jerome declared with great pride.



"It was never meant to be a war Jerome." Felix purred.

"This was not war, it was a conquest and it is now mine."

"But it was always yours. Only you could have created such a place."

"You're right. This is my place. This is me!"

The pair started out across the dunes to meet the Grand Poobah. They said little as Jerome struggled to climb up the sandy faces, his pin legs sinking up to his knees each step. Felix soon lost his patience at the lack of progress that they were making but it never said a word as it watched the old man struggle through his final hours.

At midday, Felix decided it was best to rest.

"When was the last time I saw you?" asked the Cat.

"I can't remember."

"Oh yes. I was developing my theory of eternal time. Actually, I forgot to apologise to you. Your foolishness before the Grand Poobah saved me an even greater embarrassment."

"How could that be?"

"Well, I reviewed my theory and found that it was floored."

"Really!?"

"Oh yes. The eterniscope was not properly incremented because eventually one arrives at zero." The Cat pulled out the old elastic band. "You see here, the numbers are very close together but even if you stretch it out you always end up arriving at zero."

Jerome nodded vacantly, having totally forgotten the first theory.

"So," continued the Cat. "I modified the theory and the design." Felix pulled out a second larger elastic band. "And here is the eterniscope mark II. You will notice that the band is circular."

"Yes."

"With zeros marked incrementally around its edge."

"Yes." Jerome repeated, already exacerbated.

"So, from which ever point I start on the band, it will always be at zero and I will always end at zero, even if I stretch the elastic band."

"Yes."

"Well this is proof that eternal time is perpetual in form, elastic by nature and that it always starts and ends with nothing. It is all and it is nothing. Hoorah!!"

The Cat jumped up, elated at his erudite explanation.

"But Felix, if all starts with nothing and ends with nothing, then the cycle is not complete."

"Of course it is. All is nothing and nothing is all. The Great All said so."

"Maybe you should call him the Great Nothing!" Jerome retorted.

"Shhht. He gets very upset if you call him that."

"But its true."

"Yes, but he likes to keep things positive. So, what do think of the theory then?"

"Frankly, I think it is a load of old cod's whallop!"

"Oh." Felix retorted. "You are obviously too stupid to grasp the finer points of this revolutionary theory so we shall leave it at that."

There was a long silence, the Cat terribly vexed by Jerome's reply.

"Felix, is it really the end?" Muttered Jerome.

"Only you know the answer to that."

"But I don't."

"That's very promising." Felix replied earnestly.

Jerome lunged at the Cat, grabbing it by the arm.

"You don't understand? You never understand. Look at all this pain I have had to endure.

Yes, it's all mine but I have no regrets. I did what I had to do and I will do it again if need be."

"Jerome, calm down!" it growled persuasively, pushing him away.

"I've had enough of all your gibberish. I demand a straight answer for once. Will I ever get out of here?"

"Are you reconciled, Jerome, reconciled within yourself?"

"Yes!" replied Jerome quietly, determination beaming from his eyes.

"So you have nothing to fear then. But, if you are lying to yourself, things will get definitely worse."

Jerome slumped back in the sand and closed his eyes. He sank as a stone into the cold abyss of his heart, trying to find a way in but he found nothing but a brooding darkness.

-----

Their shadows had grown long in the sand, when the Cat's whiskers stood up on end. Before Felix could say a word, Jerome was already rolled up in a ball.

"Now remember, do not move until I tell you to."

The Cat covered its snout with its paw and doubled himself in a low bow. The sand instantly swirled up into a tornado, the wind howling around them and then, as quickly as it rose, the wind died away.

"Oh your eminence, the Grand Poobah. It is such an honour to see you."

"Felix, how long has it been?" boomed the Grand Poobah from under his the hooded vortex.

"Too long." replied the Cat ingratiatingly.

"Ah yes. Now I must hurry this session along a little as I have to finish early today. It's my nephews investiture this evening."

"Oh. I am sure he will make the most wonderful cherub."

"Well, lets hope so. His schooling has cost me a small fortune." It quipped. "So how has he been getting on? I read in my notes that he was close. Let's hope we can see him through eh."

"Oh I think so. He seems very confident. Aren't you Jerome." the Cat asked with all the sincerity of a Jewish mother.

Jerome nodded, wondering when this game would finish.

"Mind you Felix, he's not in very good shape." Commented the Grand Poobah.

"I am so sorry your eminence, but the catering department has been on strike." The Cat replied, as it looked out to sea.

"The Great Lobster with his petty socialism can be such a bore."

"Get on with it." grunted Jerome from inside his ball.

Felix looked down at Jerome, mortified, ready to kick him.

"He's absolutely right. I mustn't forget my nephew."

"Oh but of course." The Cat replied bowing.

"Let the accused step forward with the sample."

Jerome took a handful of the finest dust before struggling to get himself upright. Tottering in the fine dust, he wobbled so terribly that he fell over. On a second attempt he had found his balance, he looked up at the blurred, cloaked mass before him. It sat at some distance from him behind the schoolmaster's desk with the empty sand timer glinting in the last of the sun. Focusing on his final objective, as an athlete focuses on a world record, Jerome took his second step, only to see his legs sink even deeper into the sand. After digging himself out, he brushed himself down and took his third step, sinking just that little bit deeper.

"I can assure your eminence that I have seen the error of my ways and that now I am a reformed man." Jerome reassured the onlookers as he struggled to free his legs that were sucked into the sand. "I realise that I may have done terrible things but that is now all the past."

The Cat said nothing, watching stony faced as Jerome clambered onto his stilt legs, only to sink once more. The closer he got to the timer, the finer the sand became and so the deeper he sank.

"Excuse me, but it seems that there is a problem here." Jerome looked about him only to confront the stony faces of a silent audience. "What's happening to me? I am an innocent man. Help me!"

He was now not more than an arms length away from the desk when he became utterly stuck. He had sunk up to his stomach in the swirling sand and he did not have the strength to drag himself out.

"Felix! I'm stuck!"

"I'm sorry old man but the rules are the rules." the Cat replied flatly.

"But it is only a couple of inches more."

"There is nothing I can do for you my friend."

Jerome turned to the Grand Poobah, who sat high above him, behind the desk.

"Please help me. I'll do anything you ask."

But the blurred apparition remained silent, sucking the light about it.

"Felix, help me. Help me!"

"Looks like you're on a sticky wicket there, Felix." observed the Grand Poobah lightly.

Jerome shovelled the sand as quickly as he could but it was to no avail as the terrible weight in his heart was pulling him down. He redoubled his efforts; each handful heaped high, but as he threw it aside more sand slid into its place. Desperate, Jerome shovelled for his life, but as hard as he tried, he only sank that bit deeper.

Jerome slumped forward and cried "Mother!" but there was only silence. He had never felt as alone as he felt at that moment. Even his mother had forsaken him.

"As no sample has been submitted, the court is adjourned for one week." Pronounced the Grand Poobah, as Jerome lay still, heaving with despair.

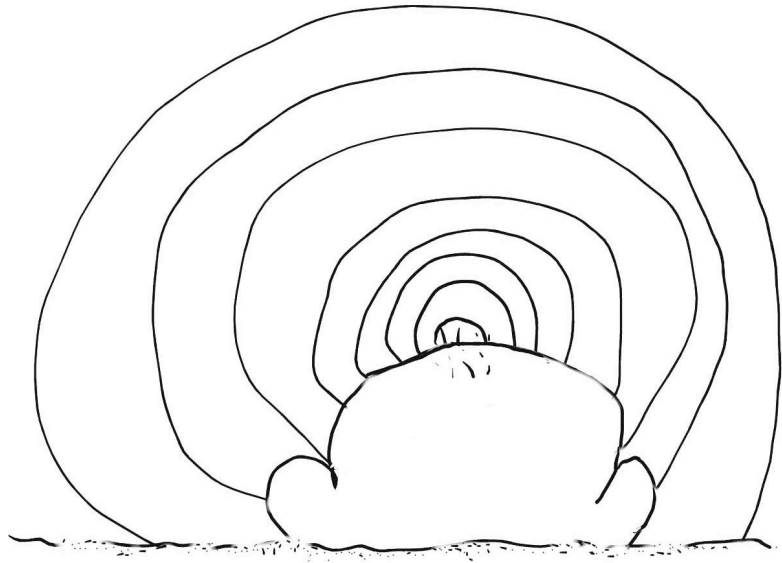
"As your honour wishes." Felix replied quietly.

"No! You can't do this to me. I am Jerome Spencer-McDonald. I am an innocent man!!!" But his shouts were lost in the storm of the Grand Poobah's departure.

"Good bye Jerome. Better luck next week." The Cat said coldly as it twisted on its paws and made for the horizon.

"Come back here, you, you cat!!!" Jerome balled, twisting round in his sandy hole.

"Save your energy my friend, you will need it." With that the Cat dissolved into the horizon, leaving Jerome poking out of the sand.



## CHAPTER 28

Jerome had the most terrible itch across the back of his pointed legs as the sand slowly dribbled passed them. Alone on the first evening, Jerome struggled and swore, dug and wriggled, tugged and shouted, but the more he fought, the heavier he felt and the deeper he sank. By the time the full moon had reached its zenith, the crests of the dunes glistening in the clear night he looked up at the sky full of the brightest stars and was hypnotised into a deep sleep. The moment he closed his eyes, he saw the Cat standing before him in the shadow of the Grand Poobah, its paws crossed with the solemnity of an Indian chief.

"I'm sorry old man but the rules are the rules." Echoed its pur.

Jerome looked round to the Grand Poobah, its soft glow so inviting and cried. "Help me, help me!" but there was no answer. He stretched out his hand, grabbing at the timer but however hard he tried, he felt himself sinking ever deeper into the sand. Then the dream twisted.

Jerome was now master. The Cat was stuck in the sand whilst the Grand Poobah, stripped naked, watched on in silence. Jerome circled them, his razor sharp teeth gleaming, his fists clenched. In an instant, he was beating them both as hard as he could before throwing them into the sea. They both disintegrated in a puff of smoke, only to reappear. Round and round the dream went, Jerome begging then beating only to see them reappear.

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The following day, he continued to dig himself out but by sunset, he had sunk to his stomach.

"I order you to get out, what ever you are that weighs me down." Jerome bellowed.

Lying back, he pondered his desperately immortal situation but found no consolation. But for all its hopelessness, he was unconcerned as he was convinced that the Cat would eventually come to his rescue.

'All I have to do is insult him and he will pull me out of the hole and beat me about.' He concluded happily as he relaxed back and closed his eyes.

This uncertain logic seemed good enough to a man who had spent most of the last millennium walking up and down a beach in the blistering sun.

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He woke up on the morning of the third day to find the sand up to his chest.

"Well, just in case the plan doesn't work I should dig anyway."

By sun down, he had excavated a huge hole, but he was finding it difficult to pull his pointed legs free.

"Ha. You thought you had me." He cried at the setting sun. "Not me, not Jerome."

That night, the sky was black as coal. In the darkness, he was scared that in digging blindly he would only make things worse, so he closed his eyes and dreamt of the glory the following day.

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On the morning of the fourth day, he awoke to find the sun already high in the sky. He also discovered that his previous days work had vanished, the edges of his pit had fallen back, leaving the sand high on his chest. Worse still, his left arm was now trapped. Jerome struggled most of the morning to free it but without success. For the rest of that day, Jerome raged. In between the possessed cries, he heard the voice of Love on the wind, first gently and then louder.

"Jerome, don't be a fool. Reconcile your heart before it is too late."

"Love. Love! Forgive me. Help me!" he cried with all the sincerity of a condemned man but the voice disappeared. "You cruel bitch! How can you call yourself Love when you are only temptation."

The Cat's laugh echoed ominously over the dunes.

"So this amuses you, does it? What kind of a friend are you, Felix the cat?"

But the laughter only got louder.

"I will have my revenge, mark my words." Jerome sulked. "I've got an eternity."

"It is too late for revenge now. Save yourself Jerome. Go to the place where your fear lies." the voice boomed.

It was on the fourth night that Jerome begged for forgiveness from those he had wronged but by daybreak he was not even a fifth of the way through those that he could remember.

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On the morning of the fifth day, the sand having risen up to his breast, he slept. He found begging even more tiring than digging.

But that afternoon, he became perturbed that the sand had risen perilously close to his face, his slightest breeze filling the air with mouthfuls of dust.

"Jerome," he declared. "It is time to face himself." His conclusion was far from convincing, as he had no idea how to do such a thing. Questioning oneself is always difficult to start but it is particularly difficult when one is under pressure. He tried to collect himself in his head, as a writer collects a character, but Jerome had a very severe writer's block.

"Where do I start? At the beginning?" he persisted but it was a void thought, a collection of faded memories that seemed to be related by a collection of coincidences. It was an unfathomable tangle, the centre impenetrable. Precious hours disappeared as he picked at the tangle, like a seamstress trying to unpick the weave of a palace carpet.

"It is hopeless. I am finished!" he shouted out at the long shadows that now covered his kingdom.

Love stood before him, as beautiful as the day he first set eyes on her, her pert silhouette perfectly cut before a setting sun.

"Hello Jerome." She whispered.

Jerome turned away.

"Please don't be like that."

"Leave me alone. This is not a place for you" He mumbled.

"Come Jerome, you know me better than to judge you. I have come to help you."

"What for?" he replied continuing to avoid her.

"Because I love you."

"How can you love me after what I did?"

"Because you needed me Jerome."

Jerome twisted back, first his body then his face, his eyes squinting in the bright sun light.

There was a moment of tension through all his body as he remembered the paradise and its three sisters.

"Don't be ashamed Jerome," she purred as she stepped out of the backlight and her face came into view. "I know that you fought as hard as you could."

"Against who?"

"Your monster."

"Never trust the Cat." He blurted.

"Denial does not become you."

"Denial is not what has me trapped in this hole. It's that Cat and the moment I get my hands on him..."

"Jerome, look at yourself!" she retorted sternly. "You have no more time to waste on petty squabbles. You must confront the monster inside you and appease it. If you fail, you are doomed!"

"I have done all that they asked. Their only concern is to bring misery upon me."

"Remember Jerome you are all and yet you are nothing."

"I am neither. I am stuck in a hole that I can't dig myself out of and your doing nothing to help me!" he shouted.

"You have always held the key to your salvation and now is your last chance to use it. You must reconcile your dark heart before it is too late."

"Reconcile. That is all I can ever remember doing. I reconciled the beach; the sea; the boat. How do you expect me to reconcile anymore!"

"You are all. Go to it and do not return until you are at peace!"

With that, the sun disappeared below the horizon, wiping her away like chalk on a black board.

'Damn hallucinations! How can I possibly get out if I'm always having these damn hallucinations?' He muttered in his tired mind.

"Do not forget that you are all and nothing." Whispered the breeze.

"I am Jerome, do you hear me, Jerome and I will conquer." He proclaimed trying to pull his left arm free but it was no use. In the brisk darkness Jerome searched the night sky for salvation but there was nothing but the empty wilderness of eternity stretched before him. He lay back and closed his on the fifth day.

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Out of the darkness raced a tunnel of brightly lit windows, charging towards Jerome as floated into the inky abyss. Through each window, Jerome glimpsed from another world, the world of his dreams, each acted out as if scenes from a macabre peep show. In a flash, he saw the 'average' couple in their 'average' front room being torn apart by the shark-man, the bloody scene held in silence.

With a stroboscopic flash, Jerome fell through all the memories of a life that he had suffered, each impression lasting an eternity and lasting an instant, yet with a mechanical jerk he abruptly stopped. Above him he saw the bright windows flickering like distant televisions set in a converging tube, below him was an abyss. After waiting absolutely still for a minute, he



reached over to what he perceived to be the sides of the tunnel, but as hard as he stretched he never touched the tunnel's matte black wall.

Jerome waited as patiently as he could for something to happen but that did not last long.

"I haven't got anytime to waste with your stupid games." He shouted. "You are nothing but a coward!"

From out of the darkness, a door cracked open, bleeding with light. In its mouth stood a silhouetted figure, erect in posture, puffing on a cigar.

"Jerome, I've waited a long time for this moment." It said. "Please come in."

Jerome walked towards the door, the light blinding him, but as he passed the threshold, it disappeared revealing a bright winter's day over an empty frozen lake surrounded by a leafless wood that stretched far into the distance. Under foot, he felt the crunch of fresh snow; above he heard the distant call of a lone crow.

"Welcome my friend, welcome. I can't tell how happy I am to see you."

Jerome turned briskly round.

"Let me introduce myself. I'm mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald."

Before him stood himself; yet younger, dressed in a fine suit, cut to measure. He puffed on a large cigar then beaming a Cheshire grin at the old man. Jerome stood there in his leathery nakedness, his blood shot eyes scouring every aspect of this cloned apparition that stood at a safe distance before him.

"Where am I?"

"Home."

Jerome quickly looked about him.

"Love! Felix! Get me out of here!!!"

"Oh don't be like that Jerome. This is your home." mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald reassured with a large sweep of his arm, "this is where we both began."

"You might be me, but I am not you."

"I am you because you created me. And further more I have served you well."

"Served me well."

"Not at all. I am but the motor that brought you out of the wilderness of your weakness. I am you at your strongest; at your most pure, I am your destiny as you saw it." Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald purred as he stepped forward to embrace Jerome.

"I have no destiny!" Jerome scolded stopping his clone in its tracks. "I am here to find that mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald, for whom I have suffered. If it is you who is the culprit then assume the consequences."

"I am you, Jerome. I am your creation."

"Well, then it is simple, I want you to stop whatever you do and disappear." Jerome demanded rather naively.

"Do you think that is for the best?"

"Yes."

"So they broke you, you mediocre, little old man."

"They did nothing of the sort."

"You would not be here if you had listened to me from the start."

"Listen, I refuse to continue to suffer for the things that were beyond my control."

"You could have stopped me at any point. But no, you had a taste for it, a real talent. You called me your friend and let me share your intimacy, all so that we would glory in your success, your victory over all that was weak and mediocre. But now, you forget and think you can throw me away like last years shoes. I am you, I am your conscience and your pride and I am all that makes you."

Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald took an angry puff on his large cigar.

"So you are my hate?" asked Jerome, taking a step forward to examine this phenomenon.

"Hate. I have no time to hate. I am your efficiency refined, a natural born killer designed to destroy all the weakness that confronts me." he lunged at the old man, his body clouding the sky. "Without me, you are nothing!"

Jerome's body buckled as he felt the darkness so deep inside him tear his innards apart.

"Now do you know me?" cackled his clone as he stood above him.

Jerome nodded.

"Come my friend. Do not lose faith now, our greatest test still lies before us." Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald took the old man in his arms. "We will be purer than before, in the glory of your dream."

Jerome's stomach warmed and he felt stronger than he had ever felt before.

"You are right."

"Return to your kingdom and be strong. Do not buckle to the deceits of Love. She will give you nothing but mediocrity." he turned and showed the Jerome the magical door by which he had entered. "Do not forget old man, that you are all and they are nothing."

Jerome lifted his head up high and began tottering on his pointed legs to the door. He felt imbued with the power of success.

"Alfred!" echoed through the trees by the side of the frozen lake. "Alfred, come back here please."

Jerome looked round to see a lone figure running across the ice towards the centre of the lake, a black dress flowing in the crisp stillness.

"Mother!!" Jerome cried instantly. His stomach heaved with nausea, but his legs twisted away from the door as he began to run as fast as his tired body could carry him.

"Mother! Stop!" But the figure continued to run, deaf to his calls.

The thick snow led to the dull ice, stick and mud trapped in a seasonal prison. The first few steps on the ice were excruciating but Jerome took on notice of his grazed points as he kept his gaze fixed on the distant figure far off.

"Do not follow her. She will lead you away from the glory that is yours." Rumbled the voice of the clone as his stomach churned. But Jerome was overcome by a primordial need to catch the figure whose voice he knew instinctively. Step by step, slipping on the points, he slowly gained on the figure. He never questioned why he was running or if it was not another cruel hallucination. All he knew was that it was imperative that he catch it up. But as hard as he wanted to run, his legs soon waned, his body heaved with every breath of the crisp air and his pointed stumps bled. Tired, he lost his balance and fell on his knees.

"Mother, don't leave now!" he pleaded. "STOP, I beg of you!"

The figure stopped for an instant and looked about itself then continued to run, shouting,

"Alfred, please stop, Alfred!"

"Mother!" Jerome cried.

The old man picked himself up and started to run, harder than before, sliding across the ice. Harder and harder he ran, his body finding the energy of a child as he gained on her, shouting for her to stop. The figure slid; falling heavily but quickly she picked herself up again and ran on, never slowing her pace. Jerome had gained on her enough to see her black, flowing dress clearly, the silk gleaming in the strong sun, her dark hair flowing wildly, but he could not see. As the centre of the lake approached, the ice became thin, the abyss below revealing her murky flatness. Jerome slowed as his pointed stumps started to crack the ice. But when he saw that he was losing ground so he doubled his efforts in a desperate sprint, determined that he would stop the figure.

"Faster man, faster." He urged, thrusting, stretching out his hand as if he was trying to jump onto a departing train. With a jump, his hand snapped at the figure but it missed and Jerome fell hard onto the thin ice, cracks shooting off to the horizon.

"Stop!!" he bellowed as he looked up to see the figure running on possessed. "Stop!" he repeated as the figure stumbled over its dress and crashed through the ice.

"No!!" Jerome jumped up and sprinted the last few metres to the hole. Thrusting his arms into the icy water, he fished desperately for the figure, shouting, begging for it to return. But soon enough the cold bit hard and he pulled away, bawling; heaving each breath as tears rolled down his face.

"I did it all for you! Everything!"

Through the sobs, Jerome felt a dull knocking under him. Startled, he propped himself up like a shivering mouse, searching the lake, expecting his clone to appear, but he was alone. A second, heavier thud vibrated through his pointed legs. Looking down he saw through the ice the frozen face of his mother, bobbing in the light currents. Falling to his knees, his long nails tore into the ice, scratching the surface as the corpse drifted away from him.

"Come back. I promise I won't do it again. On my life I promise." He blubbered, scrabbling, but his fingers bled and he was left to wait for her forgiveness.

Jerome struggled to keep up with the corpse as it picked up momentum, drifting towards the centre of the lake. And as it slid under the ice, it sank out of sight.

"Damn you Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald. Damn you!" he cried to the blue sky.

As he dropped his shivering head and exhausted he saw that the corpse had returned but it was no longer his mother, but his brother as when he had last seen him, his screwed up face crippled and vacant, his mouth wide open. Jerome stopped, shocked at what lay before him, but the shock soon dissipated leaving the overpowering taste of hate in his mouth.

"Damn you Alfred. This is all your fault!"

But no sooner had the corpse appeared as it fell away and the corpse of the husband and then his wife appeared, each corpse more mutilated than the first. The cycle continued as Jerome watched all the corpses of his previous life morph into each other, each real to him as the day he had last seen them. With each corpse that appeared, he hated himself a little more. But for all the twinges of remorse, they were burnt away by his contempt for his brother.

"None of this would have happened if it hadn't have been for you!" he barked

"You should have listened, Jerome. You are only making things worse for yourself."

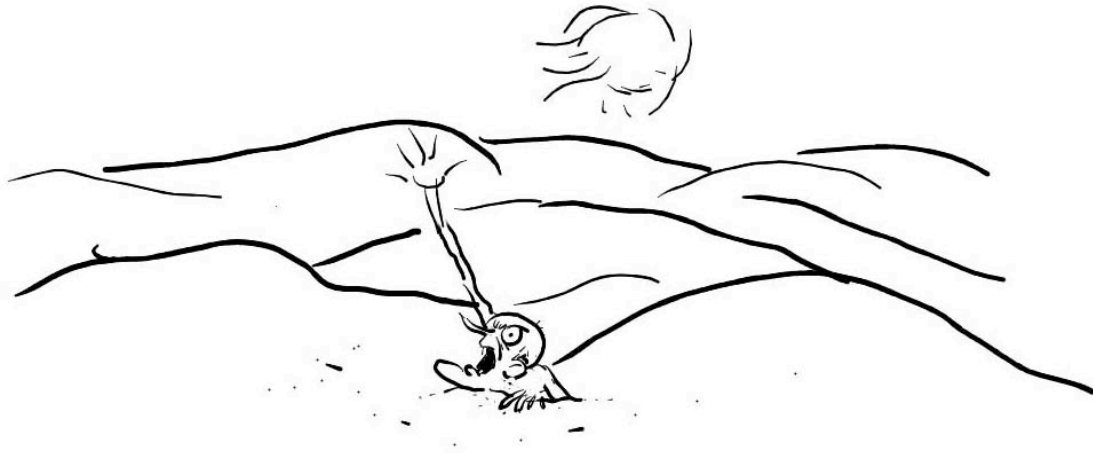
Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald stood before him, his fat cigar smouldering in his claw like fingers.

"Worse. How could they be worse?"

"Jerome, remorse is not what I would expect of you!" declared his clone, a smirk pulling his lips into a light smile.

"Don't you ever laugh at me!" Jerome growled with all the hate he could muster. "I am your master and you will pay for this insolence." Jerome lunged at the Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald, his frozen hands locking tight about its neck.

"I am Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald and let you not forget." Declared Jerome.



## CHAPTER 29

When Jerome awoke, it was well past midday. The sand had risen to his collarbone, leaving his free arm baking in the blistering sun. The pressure of the sand on his body now made it difficult for him to breath. But these were minor concerns considering that Jerome could now smell the baking sand. The slightest breeze caked his nose and eyes in dust.

'How could I have let myself go like that? How could I? He knew I would do it. He knew!' repeated the frustrated old man as he wriggled in his hole, trying to make himself comfortable. 'But of course he knew, He knows everything.' There was a moment of deep realisation and it made him feel very uncomfortable. 'But I hate Alfred. I can't do it. I can't.' Disgust welled up inside him as if he were a child being force fed cabbage and broccoli.

"Jerome, you must silence your hate." whispered Love, who had appeared out of the sun, her perfect forms enveloped in iridescence. "You must make peace within. Only you can conquer it."

"I can't make peace with him. That's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible. Just think of all you will gain."

"Such as?"

"All your fears, all your anger, all your love and happiness will melt into a singular point of well being." Declared Love with a consummate passion, her naturalness overflowing with every jest.

"Oh shut up with your earth mother rubbish. This is a war against an enemy that is untouchable and I am still not even sure why I'm fighting it."

"I know it is difficult for you but you must be strong, even if all your instincts tell you otherwise."

"And if I falter?"

"You must not. Find the your balance before accepting peace. Do not be afraid, you will succeed in taming the monster." She whispered as she kissed his dusty forehead.

"Remember Jerome, there is the fear of nothing, the joy of nothing but ultimately the conquest of nothing is peace." With that she melted away in the setting sun. Jerome did not have to wait long for the sun to set on his magic kingdom leaving him alone in the pitch darkness of his solitude. In what seemed like hours, but was probably only minutes, he began to feel anxious. The darkness in his stomach grumbled nervously as Jerome tried to fathom the black soup that had descended upon him. "Love." He called tentatively. "I don't want this nothing." The moments that followed only enraged his dark heart, the solitude unbearable. Jerome tried to quell the violence that was welling up inside him. "Love. Get me out of here." He repeated as he started to dig frantically, the emptiness driving him into a panic. The more he panicked, the more the darkness roared; the more he trembled. "LOVE!" he cried. "Catch me!"



Out of the oppressive emptiness above him hurtled the tunnel of lights as the night before. Sucked into its vortex, Jerome fell free as he caught glimpses from each window that he passed. At the end of the vortex, he stopped as he had done before, suspended in the darkness and waiting for the door to open. 'The conquest of nothing is peace.' Rumbled like an imminent storm through him. 'You must silence your hate.' Jerome was tired of the torture and the pain 'Peace, after all, was not a bad thing. At least I'll be left alone.' He reflected as he dangled in the tunnel of his past. Without a warning, the door sprang open and the bright light sucked the old man towards it. In a flash, Jerome found himself crashing head first into deep snow, gasping as the cold numbed him. "Look how your friends treat you, Jerome. Leaving us alone like that with nothing to do." Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald stood before him, puffing on his fat cigar, the last of his hair neatly parted to the side; his pin stripe suit cutting a perfect silhouette on his thin frame. "You tire me terribly. You know that don't you?" Jerome muttered as he picked his leathery nakedness out of the snow and saw that he was back on the edge of the frozen lake. "So you think it's easy for me, trying to keep you from yourself? It's not me that suffers from lapses of weakness and let me tell you my friend, I'd be quite happy to." "I'm tired of all this."

"Why stop? We've nearly won."

"Won what exactly? A pit of sand? A monster that won't leave me alone? You tell me what?"

"Peace."

"There is no peace when you're around."

"Oh come Jerome. I offer you the power to conquer the island and you fall for some love and peace nihilism routine from a skimpy beach bird. It's not my fault if you can't control your libido."

"I made you and I will destroy."

"And what will you get in return? An eternity of homogenised emptiness. Oh I can't wait!"

"It sounds good to me."

"Do you think that Love will be there when you crack? You'll be just another statistic for her."

"I want it to end now."

"Fine. I'll leave but we'll see how you fair on your own."

"Good riddance Hate."

"You think I am your hate, but I am not. I am your dream, Jerome."

"We shall see!"

Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald turned towards the woods.

"And how I tried to save you from your weakness." Mumbled Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald as disappeared behind the trees.

"I've done it. I'm free." Jerome shouted at the top of his voice. But his euphoria did not last long. He looked about him for the magic door to take him home but I was nowhere to be seen. "I hope this is one of his jokes!"

He scampered towards the trees, following the footsteps of his clone.

"Alfred, please come back, please!" Jerome knew the voice instantly. Twisting round he saw two figures running after each other across the ice, the closer in its long black dress, the other hobbling desperately towards the centre. Jerome began to run after the black dress. His thighs thrust him forward but his bleeding points often slipping on the frozen lake. He fell hard many times but he was undeterred as he scrambled to close the gap before it was too late. As he neared to the centre of the lake, he stretched his arm and tried to reach his goal that was now running but a few feet before him. With all the effort that was left in his body, he sprinted the last few paces but slipped. As he fell, his outstretched arm touched the dress.

"Wait for me!" he cried with the last of his breath as he lay on the ice. "MOTHER!!!"

The figure stopped and looked round, her silhouette cutting clean against the winter cloud.

"Jerome?" She rushed back to him, taking him in his arms. "Oh my sweet Jerome." She sobbed as he pressed him against her breast just as she had done so long ago. Jerome felt the warmth of her body envelope him and he wept the tears that he had held inside him all his life. Jerome could not remember ever having felt such tenderness, not even in the arms of Love. He grasped her ever harder, locking his arms as tight as he could.

"I won't leave you again. I promise." He mumbled as she caressed his face with her soft fingers.

"No Jerome. Never again." tucking his head under her chin.

"You promise?"

"When all is done, there will be peace. But first you must stop your brother. He is sure to hurt himself if you do not stop him."

Jerome looked up to see the hobbling figure continuing towards the lake and his stomach raged with nausea.

"I can't run anymore."

"You must stop him. He is your brother."

Again Jerome looked up the figure and this time he was invigorated with hate.

"I won't leave you again, Mother. Never again." He pulled her closer and closed his eyes.

"Jerome, it is not over yet. You must reconcile with him, if not all is lost. Go fetch him back and we shall never be parted."

"But you always loved him more."

"That is not true. His weakness meant that he had greater needs but I loved you just as much. I am only sorry that I did not show it to you more often." She wiped a sparkling tear from her eye.

"Are you proud of me?"

"Of course. You are my son and I love you."

Jerome stared into her perfectly compassionate eyes, her beautifully fine face beaming.

"Fetch your brother back before it is too late. I will wait for you here."

She got to her feet as he struggled to find his balance.

'Who is the cripple now? What do you want to save him for? He'll only get in the way. Do him a favour and put him out of his misery.' Growled the monster in his heart.

"Wait Alfred, wait and all will be put right." Jerome shouted half-heartedly as he stumbled on his bleeding points. But the figure continued to hobble, his left side jerking heavily.

Jerome quickly gained on his brother and soon he could see him clearly. The more he saw, the worse his nausea became.

"You are the fool who is about to lose all you have fought for. It is the chance to have her love all for your self. Take it and let the rest be damned."

"And what will you do?"

"Keep her!"

Jerome stopped. "The rest will be history." The clone added.

Jerome looked back at her as she waved at him desperately. In the distance, he could hear her urging him on, begging not to stop.

"You're a liar." he declared and the clone disappeared.



Jerome doubled his pace and soon saw the cripple loom large before him, his winter coat and scarf covering him up to his ears.

"Alfred, stop and come home!" Jerome implored

By now, the monster in his heart had burst its cage and rampaged through his body, its nauseous trail crippling his energy.

"Alfred, stop! I beg of you!" he cried as he fell to the crisp ice. "Damn him! "

Jerome picked himself up and continued, his points pounding on the ice, cracks beginning to, the murky darkness seeping through.

"Alfred, the ice is too thin here. If you continue, we will both drown."

A moment later, his left leg pierced the ice and he fell chest first on to the ice.

The figure stopped in its tracks and looked round over its shoulder. Jerome saw his face well enough and he knew it was his brother. As he looked upon the face that he had not seen in as long as anyone could remember, the monster disappeared.

For the first time, Jerome was no longer tormented.

"Come with me and all will be as it was." He cried, too tired to even lift his head.

"Do you promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die." Jerome mumbled.

"What?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die!" he repeated angrily.

"Ok. I'll come home then."

Jerome lifted himself onto his points as he watched the over grown child walk towards him.

As his face came into view, he was surprised at how deformed his brother was, how his hair was lank and glasses heavy on his nose.

"I hope you're not angry with me."

"Of course not!" he reassured as his cumbersome sibling came to a halt before him.

"I didn't want to cause you any trouble."

"You didn't."

"You promise you won't shout at me."

"I promise. Come on, Mother is waiting for us."

Alfred held out his hand and smiled, his eyes lighting up with the greatest happiness.

"So we'll be friends forever."

"Yes, I suppose we will."

Alfred took a step forward, both his arms out stretched, ready to hug his brother, when he stumbled and the ice splintered. In an instant, he grabbed Jerome's arm, pulling him to the ground. As Alfred fell through the ice, he gasped, the ice water punching the breath out of him, his mouth filling with water.

"Help me Jerome. Help me." he cried as he spat and panted, floundering in the weight of his coat.

Jerome tried to fight it forcing his hands to grip the coat tighter, but something stronger blocked him. As if in slow motion, Jerome watched all that he hated the most, panicking before him and he felt paralysed to his very soul.

'Pitiful message of nature wasted! You stole what was rightfully mine and I will not let you do it again'

His hand let go and he pulled his arm away, turning to look back.

"Help me!" Jerome bellowed as he watched Alfred sink away like a stone, his arms stiff as iron. As the last of the bubbles dotted the surface, Jerome was stunned. The quiet of the moment crushed him into the terrible realisation.

"Oh what have I done?" he cried as he jumped onto points and ran back to towards the distant figure of his mother. As a child who knows that he has done a terrible thing, Jerome wanted refuge from it all. He felt remorse and anger at his failure, but he was sure that she would understand.

'I tried to save him, but I couldn't hang on. He was too heavy for me. It wasn't my fault he fell away. I didn't even touch him. I swear it. I just could not hold on to him. It's not my fault.' He repeated with every step.

As he got closer, he saw her beautiful dress red with tears and his resolve strengthened.

"It wasn't my fault. It wasn't my fault." He yelled, tears running down his face.

She looked at him, her eyes turned cold and her face sallow.

"I swear it wasn't my fault."

Standing so perfectly statuesque against a dull grey sky, he ran straight into her open arms and thrust his head against her chest. "Mother! Don't leave me now."

But he was no longer her warmth as before. Looking up he saw her open her mouth wide and her jaw dislocate, chiselled sharp teeth gleaming, set in a tiara of red flesh. Jerome did not have the time to open his mouth before the monster plunged its stinking gullet over his head and tore the old man in two.

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Jerome woke up shivering.



## CHAPTER 30

On the morning of the seventh day, he awoke to find that the sand was up to his chin. From the moment he opened his eyes, he was in a panic, cocking his head back to open his mouth, pins and needles tingling through his up-stretched right arm that was now locked into the sand, buckled skyward.

What shall I do?! What can I say? They have known everything all along.' He exclaimed, his heart pounding.

Then all was quiet as he heard the shuffle of sand behind him.

"Oh dear, oh dear. What are you doing down there Jerome." Exclaimed the Cat as it stood behind him.

Jerome darted round, searching for his saviour.

"Felix. I'm a changed man. I've seen the light, I swear."

"Thank goodness for that! I had hoped to have had this wrapped up last week." The Cat exclaimed as he walked slowly round the incarcerated old man.

"No one wants this to end more swiftly than myself." Jerome quipped.

"So tell me old man. How have you changed then?"

"I am reconciled." He spat, the sand now up to his lips.

"Oh marvellous. And how do you feel?"

"Much, much better. I really wished I'd done it earlier. Honestly."

"And you're not telling lies now are you?"

"Oh no. Not me! Anyway, what's the point in telling lies now?" Jerome laughed tightly.

"You're a desperate man Jerome. Desperate men usually tell lies."

"But I swear I'm not. I found my heart and we're all friends again."

"That's very good."

"So how am I going to present the sample if I'm stuck in this hole?"

"I don't know."

"Can't you do something?"

"You know it's against the rules."

"It's in your interest to help me." Exclaimed Jerome.

"That is true." Mused the Cat, walking in circles, as Jerome held out his right hand.

"I'm sure the Grand Poobah will understand. Anyway, you can do it for old times sakes."

Jerome implored.

The Cat turned in circles pensively for sometime, its tail swirling out of its mourning suit, as Jerome waited. With a whip of its tail and a tut of its tongue, Felix declared,

"Jerome. I am terribly sorry but I just can't break the rules. They are there for a reason and that is that!"

"I have done my time Felix. It is only fair that now I should be released."

"But it was never a sentence Jerome. It is not an issue of time. It is an issue of your readiness and that is for the Grand Poobah to decide."

"Take my hand. I beg of you." Jerome spluttered as sand poured into his mouth.

"I cannot."

"Felix, I'm sinking." The Cat turned its back, as Jerome's hand grabbed at thin air.

"Please don't make it worse." It muttered

At that moment the Cats whiskers stood up on end.

"It's time."

"Help me, please. Help me. I'll do anything you want but don't leave me here. Felix, have a heart!!!"

Out of the stillness, the storm descended, the wind howling, sand whirling in a vortex of dust. Jerome continued to shout as he gagged on mouthfuls of dust; panicking, coughing, suffocating; every muscle in his feeble body struggling to keep the dust from blocking his nose. Heaving desperately to pull himself free, he saw the Cat twisting his whiskers and in the blink of an eye, Jerome saw the Cat transform, into his brother Alfred. He was now a mature man, but all the same, Jerome knew it to be his murdered brother that stood before him twisting his moustache. A tear rolled down Alfred's face he disappeared in the storm. A final gust covered his eyes before a swirl covered what was left of his head. Jerome tried to scream but he could not, he tried to move but he could not.

There, he was to remain, buried in his own weakness.

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All that remained of the once great mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald was his right fore arm pointing skyward. When the sand had settled, Felix and the Grand Poobah stood in silence as if pall bearers at a paupers funeral.

"It is so sad to see someone go that way, particularly after all the effort you made. It must be terrible for you." The Grand Poobah commented.

Felix nodded, a tear rolling down the black fur of his snout

"He was my brother all the same." Snivelled Felix.

"I am so sorry."

They both stood before Jerome's grave, his arm pointing straight up to the sky marking the spot, his petrified right hand open, grains of hand still dribbling from it.

"The case of Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald is closed." The Grand Poobah pronounced.

"Goodbye Felix. Better luck next time. "

As quickly as the hurricane had come and it was gone. Felix looked about him and then bent down close to the arm.

"I hope you can hear this, my foolish brother. I did all I could!!"

The Cat stood up, cast a handful of dust over the grave and then unbuttoned its mourning jacket.

"I say, it seems I have a day off after all." It sighed as it pumped out its chest.

The Cat delved deep into a pocket and pulled out a stripy yellow and exploding red deck chair, followed by a matching beach umbrella. Setting them close to the protruding arm, Felix pulled out with one paw a glass with ice and olives in and with the other a bottle of extra dry vermouth. The cat poured the glass and placed the bottle back in his top pocket and sat down in the shade of the umbrella.

"Here's to denial... and my poor brother, the great Mister Jerome Spencer-McDonald."

Taking a delicate sip, the Cat relished the dry mix of herbs and lying back in the chair, placed the glass in Jerome's hand.

" Welcome to hell old man!"

The End