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REBECCA WEST  
SACRED COWS

FAY WELDON

*A Hard Time  
To Be a Father*

A collection of short stories



Flamingo

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HOSPITAL

New Advances



Noisy into the Night



A Hard Time to be a Father

## New Advances

### *A Short Story in Fifty Words*

o post-feminism : retro-feminism; Nozella, Kath Kodston

'I don't want a fashion house, I want a baby,' moaned famous, beautiful, busy designer Annie, fifty-three.

'Too late now,' whimpered Belinda. 'You can't have your cake and eat it too.'

'Can so,' said Annie, and went to Rome where, thanks to advances in gynaecological technology, she had a baby.



## Noisy into the Night

More women seem to die than men, though of course that can only be illusion. We peg out in equal number. But when men do die, what an uproar! Women are dying all the time, clogging up the cancer wards, no one taking much notice, the family saying what a blessed relief it's finally over; a small private funeral, a rummage through the old hat box, a flick through the family photographs: 'Remember when! Remember when!' A trip to Oxfam with the better things, a quarrel over meagre possessions and past promises, a minor upsurge of sibling rivalry and everything's over; the corpse, the female corpse, has settled down into soil or drifted as ashes over the waters of some familiar river or in the park where she walked her little dog.

But the men don't lie down so quiet and silent, oh no! For them the heart ward and the hi-tech rescue, the drama of alarm bells, the shouts of resuscitation teams, obituaries; they died intestate like as not, unwilling to believe the world can go on without them. Rows of tearful women line up at the grave: ex-wives, mistresses. 'Who's she? Who's she?'

Don't think you count as the one and only wife, till you

see who turns up at the Crematorium, tearful over your old man.

Unusual to find a weeping cluster of ex-husbands, and ex-lovers at a female funeral – not unless you're Marilyn Monroe or Jackie Kennedy and the media requires it and has old pics it wants an opportunity to pull out. Female Monarchs make it to a State Funeral, of course; Queen Elizabeth, Queen Victoria; solemn music, specially composed, threnodies, goose-stepping by ranked males, guns pointed earthward, but it's scarcely personal. Woman as symbol of nation looks good on a coin; see it like that; see it as necessity – there hasn't been a decent male profile since Caesar. All men may be equal in death, but in this case man doesn't include women, and there's the truth of it.

'Nothing like the thought of your own funeral for reviving the feminist spirit,' observed Trixie. The old 'Not fair, not fair!' Did she argue too hard: should she make out a case for the opposite? Probably, but Trixie didn't want to; she hardly had the energy. She wouldn't even, at Imp's urgent request – 'Think about it, Trixie, think about it!' – consider the fact that women outlive men, notice the way men tend to die suddenly, stricken in the full flood of sex and anger; she just wouldn't see the unfairness in that. All Trixie could think about was the way women tended to die alone, yanked out of bedsitting rooms, thrown into hospitals, as she had been, 'defeated by surplus', as she told Imp.

'What do you mean, defeated by surplus?' asked Imp. Imp and Trixie had ended up in adjacent beds. They preferred

to call it by its proper name – Terminal Mixed. Whatever fault you could find with Imp and Trixie, and many did, they were seldom afraid. ‘Oh, she’s in Uppingham Mixed, I’m afraid,’ tactless girls at the Customer Information Desk would say to enquiring relatives. The ‘I’m afraid’ gave the game away, spoiling the myth. The game? That none of us die. The myth? That hospitals cure, don’t just add decency and non-disclosure to the end of our lives. All men die, as Trixie said, and women too, but you’d never know it, and this ward, like this life, is Terminal.

‘A surplus of undirected growth,’ said Trixie, ‘that’s all cancer is; an overflow of body energy, a surplus of cells made so dizzy over time they can no longer distinguish between good and bad, what’s appropriate and what isn’t, rendered punch drunk by the requirements of female life. Daughter, wife, mother: hear the death-words toll! No wonder so many women these days simply refuse to participate.’

‘Give your life for a family and that’s exactly what you do,’ said Trixie. ‘There’s no stopping the process once it’s underway, nor is there a reward for sacrifice. That’s it. The family woman fades away: there is nothing left to mourn, so well the family she created incorporates her. The better you do it, the less they notice your existence. Give a child what it wants and it’s gone for ever. Grudge it, and it’s yours for life. Herein lies the bitterness: that in the very invisibility the woman sets out to achieve, in the forswearing of her human rights, in the gritting of her teeth, the shovelling of the shit, lies the non-reverence that is her lot.’

\* \* \*

‘I can’t even remember my grandmother’s Christian name,’ complained Trixie. ‘And why not? Because in the end there was nothing left of her to remember. The family had gobbled it up.’

Trixie sat at the end of Imp’s bed, thereby settling the bedclothes too heavily on the electrodes attached to his ankles. If his ex-wife were not careful, Imp realised, the leads to the monitor would disconnect and its bleeper start pealing false alarms and nurses come running – if he was lucky. Imp remembered now why he had divorced Trixie: she had argued too much, been far too noisy; all over the place, like a heart faultily connected to its leads, messy, setting off too many alarms. He had fallen in love with Rosemary in simple self-defence.

Chance and adjacency by alphabet had brought Imp and Trixie, after many medical adventures, to lie side by side in Uppingham Mixed, Terminal. Trixie was post-operative after the removal of her womb, but there were secondaries everywhere; Imp was recovering from his second heart attack, waiting for a quadruple bypass. There wasn’t much hope for either of them.

‘Errata,’ said Trixie, condescendingly. ‘All women die and you’d never know it. All men die and you certainly do.’

Earlier, realising his first wife’s proximity, Imp had asked to be moved to another ward. He had explained the circumstances: stress was not good for him: his third wife, Isobel, would be visiting; so would his child by his second wife Rosemary – more dramas – it was an intolerable situation. He had done his best, if only for Isobel’s

sake, but when Authority had declared nothing could be done, he had accepted its verdict without argument. The fact was that Imp found himself oddly comforted by their side-by-sideness, in this their joint extremis. Imp-and-Trixie had always sounded right, had fitted, as if Trixie, for all her dreadfulness, her noisy feminism, had been the true and proper wife. Imp-and-Isobel, third time round, sounded fit for a dinner party; it betokened a calmness and a dull orthodoxy in bed, and would do; Imp-and-Rosemary had never worked. The strung-together words did not suit, had no staying power. Imp-and-Trixie sounded like a good dying partnership in a mixed ward. Not that gender, so important in life, weighed much with anyone in Uppingham. A withered breast exposed, or a shrunken penis suddenly visible – who cared any more? Yet, oddly, people did. Modesty, Imp decided, was inborn, or so habitual it might as well be inborn. Seeing is seizing, seeing is knowledge, knowledge is control: so cover up! The new world taught you some new things.

Imp and Trixie. Imperator and Imperatrix. Emperor and Empress. Master and Mistress. Father and Mother, in charge of all they surveyed, by virtue of the grace invested in them by God above. Paul and Helena Race. Helena's father the Rev. Gibbs, newly a widower, renamed them Imp and Trixie at their wedding, back in 1957, wishing on the couple the central role they did indeed come to hold in the lives of others. The mantle of the parents' household fell, and the names stuck, surviving Imps' free-loving Sixties, Trixie's feminist Seventies, till skinny-hipped Rosemary had come along and wooed and won Imp, and Trixie had gone into bitter and angry exile. But

Imp in his turn had been exiled by Rosemary, thrown out; thoroughly King Lear'd. The second wife took game, match and empire – that is to say the Rev. Gibbs' well-sited and by now valuable vicarage. That's when Imp had his first heart attack, in 1980, in the act of moving out what a Court referred to as his 'personal possessions', denied all pomp and circumstance by his Her Majesty's usurper. 'Trust you!' was all Rosemary said, calling an ambulance and going out to dine with her new lover.

'Serve you right,' said Trixie to Imp at the hospital then, charitably visiting her ex, 'for breeding a child by a woman other than me, then divorcing me and marrying her; what was she but a self-interested yuppie bitch who let the black spot get the better of my grandmother's climbing roses? I can never remember her name but at least I cherished her climbers. Of course Rosemary shafted you, as you shafted me. Biters get bitten.'

'Get out of here, you feminist bitch,' was Imp's response. One callousness deserves another: once they begin, how can you stop?

'No one asked you to visit. Your time is well and truly over.'

Then as now the monitor trace had bounced about all over the place, though not for any technological reason, not because leads were being mispositioned by Trixie's hollowed-out weight, but because in those days passions of hate and rage still had the power to overwhelm him, alter the patterns his heart made. Those were the days when Trixie was still powerful, still the Queen in Exile, robust and healthy enough. Took seven years for her to wear out her objections, to roam the edges of a different land. How she'd suffered in the meantime, she told

everyone; the proud bitch! Imp had seen to it that she suffered, Trixie claimed: none so finished or worthless in a man's eyes as a dismissed wife. Oh, the pain, the pain! Twenty-two years of royal marriage swept away by a greedy kitchenmaid, a brisk, skinny girl with a Filofax, long, shaved legs and a designer suede skirt pushed out of place by a pregnancy. An early scan showed the brat to be a boy, a prince. Twenty-two years of marriage to Imp and all Trixie had produced was a couple of girls, pretty enough but lacking the gravitas of the male. Or so Trixie would have it. While Imp claimed feminism was the mother's way of unconsciously diminishing her daughters: so emphasising their female disadvantage as to bring that disadvantage about.

'The nuclear family is hell,' Trixie's self-appointed advisors whispered in her ear. She could hardly tell, in retrospect, whether they'd been real or not, these advisors, vague; lumpy shapes looming through a fog full of disembodied voices. 'Let the house go: what do possessions matter? Walk away from the past; save yourself.' Sheer surplus of astonishment, Trixie sometimes thought, at discovering the world to be so dire a place, had triggered off the cancer that now pushed her innards this way and that. By the time she felt better about the world again, had put the marriage to Imp into the past, had actually stopped hovering and walked away, it was too late. No going back, once the processes of despair had gotten underway: the destruction of family.

'She moved out of her own free will,' Imp assured everyone who asked. 'She left me defenceless: walked out on me and the girls. Treason! What kind of wife

abandons her husband to the wiles of another woman?'

'The kind whose husband asks his pregnant mistress to tea and says why can't we three get along? He tried to move a concubine into my home,' said Trixie to everyone. 'I couldn't put up with that. There was too much loss of dignity involved. I would have lost my allies: even the girls would have gone over to the usurper. Better to save my face and lose my home.'

'Good God,' said Imp to Trixie back then in 1980, 'I am not Henry VIII, you are not Anne Boleyn: you are a contemporary feminist. You are giving me a pain. Do you want to kill me? Is that why you've come? Go back to your coven and your man-hating; leave me to suffer in peace.'

'You have a bad heart,' said Trixie, 'in every sense of the word. One heart attack foretells another. Excuse me while I go back to my coven and stick a few pins in a few more wax images.'

And Trixie left, furious, brushing past the nurse, who, as it happened, presently became Imp's next wife. Breast lightly touched breast. Trixie's leather jacket: Isobel's stiff white uniform. Such a sweet, caring girl, Isobel. Her heart bled for Imp: she took him into her own home when they unhooked him from life-support; she nursed him back to health, both emotional and financial. Imp had lost not just his kingdom and his fortune to Rosemary, but his clients too. Five full years before he was back on his feet.

'Do you hate me as I hate Rosemary?' Trixie received a letter, out of the blue, Imp to Imperatrix, five years on.



'I hope not,' Trixie wrote back with the one word: 'Yes'. One bad act deserves another.

But now once again Trixie sat on Imp's bed, and this time he did not drive her away. The heart monitor bleeped its warning as she wriggled – she could never sit still – and Imp groaned aloud in embarrassment, not pain. The nurse brought him paracetamol at once.

'Men get given painkillers more speedily than do women,' Trixie observed to her first and last husband. 'You just say that,' he complained. 'Where is your statistical evidence? You and your sample of one! Same old problem.'

'First and last! First and last!' Trixie had had liaisons with both men and women since she left Imp to become Empress in Exile, but would not, by remarrying, let him off the hook of his guilt. She'd roamed the boundaries of the kingdom, making Imp and Rosemary uneasy in their first, good days, attributing her presence in the locality to chance. Revenge? You must be joking! No, a talk at the local school on equal opportunities, a visit to an old friend's cat on its deathbed, a local wedding, a former neighbour's child's christening to attend. What could be more civilised? If Trixie's social activities had contributed to the Palace Coup, to Rosemary throwing Imp out, and his consequent Learing, why then Trixie announced herself glad. If they had led to the second major, massive heart attack which had left Imp feeble and finished in Uppingham Mixed without even the strength to move his leg out from under his first wife's haunch, so much the better.

'All your fault,' Imp murmured with some truth, swallowing his paracetamol, though in no observable pain. 'All your fault. Feminist bitch!'

Trixie failed in resolution, momentarily. She wept at her ex-husband, first and last, a little; she snivelled, for both of them.

'Try to be nice to me, just a little,' she implored, 'now we're both so near the end –'

'Damn queen! Intolerable! Speak for yourself!' but Imp's voice caught in his throat: he spluttered. He longed to be 'nice' to her, but was too much out of the habit.

When they both felt better, that is to say when the companionable habits of twenty-two shared and responsible years upon the throne had managed to cut in, like some sulky motor starting up, Imp repeated the observation that for Trixie to say 'All men died but you'd never know it, it so seldom seemed to happen, what an uproar when it did' was grossly unreasonable and unfair. He could not let the matter lie. Obviously women died as often as men, only later. Women, everyone knew, had the advantage of a couple more years of life expectancy, much good might it do them in their shrivelled-up state. They could hardly enjoy it.

Could not Trixie try to reform now if, as she claimed, her end was nigh; could she not see reason, exonerate men from at least this particular blame? He, Imp, was well aware that, Dworkin-like, Trixie saw all male sex as an attack. Was not this bad enough – and the very attitude that had driven him into Rosemary's arms in the first place – without Trixie now saying that all female deaths were men's fault?

\* \* \*

'Look around,' said Trixie, 'use your eyes. Twelve beds in Uppingham Mixed,' she told him, 'seven of them occupied with female cancer patients, sorry, "customers", one female terminal multiple sclerosis, only one male cancer, two male heart patients, and one bed screened, its occupant now thoroughly genderless inasmuch as it was dead and awaiting transport to the morgue' – there was a shortage of porters. 'You could tell this particular customer had been female,' Trixie told Imp, 'because of the absence of fuss at the end; just a little flurry the night before; a stifled sob from a family member, and this morning a scuffed, emptied woman's handbag in the bin in the sluice room, the leather denatured, as flat, throw-away, collapsed and pointless as a cat's body once the spirit has left it.'

'If that person had been male,' Trixie observed, 'no one would have whispered. The whole ward would have been woken, resuscitation equipment brought, priests and lawyers been called, alarm bells and beepers rung, and medical staff come running – with any luck. Women were encouraged just to slip away out of this life, annoying no one: men were meant to go noisily. As for cancer,' said Trixie, 'why, cancer, that disease of surplus run riot, was what a woman got when she tried to behave.'

Trixie offered Imp both diagnosis and cause, waving her skinny finger in this direction and that around the ward. 'Look there, look there!' She'd spoken to all of them, and these were her conclusions:

Sally Dixon, fifty-six, from throat cancer, from biting back

too many words, failing to make too many sharp ripostes, swallowing too many insults, from being too good. Her husband's fault, for being horrid to her.

Miriam Patch, twenty-three, from cancer of the breast run riot, from the death of love and a broken heart and being sad. Her lover's fault, for leaving her. ('Women have died and worms have eaten them, and the worm's name is love,' said Trixie.)

Marlene Briggs, sixty-two, from cancer of the liver, from boredom, too many regrets, too little stress, having played safe all her life. Her son's fault, for not having her to live with him.

Susan Serocynski, forty, from a malignant melanoma, from too much uprooting and being too sensitive to insult. Her father's fault, for emigrating, for bringing her young into a hostile, sneering land.

Mary Panikar, fifty-one, from cancer of the womb, undiagnosed too long, from childlessness, refusing a smear, believing she was exempted from her female fate. Her own fault, for being too proud: Trixie would acknowledge that. But the finger of blame might well point at the father, or an uncle, but Mary wasn't telling.

Teresa Gallichan, thirty-three, from too much trust in the medical profession, from shock, a fibroid misdiagnosed, an unnecessary hysterectomy. Her surgeon's fault, for taking away bits she wanted without asking.

'Don't go on,' said Imp. 'You're absurd. For every male

death you could equally blame a woman. Cancer of the prostate: cause, associating with frigid women. You should know all about that.'

'I was never frigid,' said Trixie. 'You were inept.' She would never, ever give up, thought Imp. Though even 'never' must have an end. How much did she weigh now? Eighty, ninety pounds? Still enough to discommode his leads by wriggling.

'Why do you waste your last breath in this way?' asked Imp sadly.

'Because you said your illness was my fault,' said Trixie. 'And I want to persuade you to take it back.'

'I take it back,' he said, adding cunningly, 'That is to say, I blame Rosemary for my condition more than I blame you. She was even worse than you.'

'Blame Isobel, too, then,' said Trixie, 'since nothing can be your fault. Isobel failed to save you. Not that I mind Isobel so much. There were only pieces to pick up by the time Rosemary had finished with you, nothing worth having. And now I suppose we're expected, all three wives, to line up at your funeral? Together in your death?'

'Of course,' said Imp blithely. 'In a row, throwing flowers. Isobel can have first go because she's current. You can have last because you were so long ago.'

'Oh thanks,' said Trixie. 'You always did know how to hurt. And if I die first? Will you come to my funeral?'

'How can I possibly?' asked Imp. 'All wired and tubed up as I am? I'm far too ill. It would kill me.'

'You wouldn't come anyway,' said Trixie. 'What, stand in a row with the other lovers? Men don't do that kind

of thing. Only the last man in there is required to attend a woman's funeral.'

'But women,' said Imp, 'were meant to act as if life were a game of tennis: go up to the net when it was over and shake hands.'

'But it's not a game, Imp,' said Trixie. 'It's real and it's a fight to the death. I'm not coming to your funeral, don't think I am.'

Having made her point, and because Isobel, red-eyed, face swollen with grief, was now coming down the ward in the company of Rosemary, who looked ruthless, beautiful and short-skirted as ever, Trixie quickly got off Imp's bed and back into her own. She turned her face to the wall and pretended not to be there, not to exist at all, as had always been Imp's ambition for her: and indeed her thinness suggested collusion on her part. Nor did Imp let on, as he received the concubines, that the Queen was present. Trixie took this as some kind of acknowledgement and felt, on the whole, comforted.

'Why did people call them Imp and Trixie,' asked Isobel of Rosemary at Imp's funeral, 'when their names were Paul and Helena?'

'No idea,' said Rosemary. 'There was so much falsehood and lying. All I know is that it was going to Trixie's funeral which killed Imp. First the heart attack, wholly because of her, then this perfectly pointless exertion. It wasn't as if he'd thought about Trixie for years, let alone seen her. Everyone warned him, including myself, but he insisted on going: sheer stubbornness. I blame Trixie for everything that went wrong.'

'Me too,' said Isobel, weeping into the grave, held up on

either side by the princesses, Imp and Trixie's daughters; nice girls, Cordelia and Stephanie, but they wouldn't inherit a thing.

## A Hard Time to be a Father

*→ draws on the young  
folk tradition  
but also ADD,  
role-playing, and this.*

Once upon a time, DEAR READER, but not so far away or long ago, practically round the corner, in fact, and *fin-de-millénaire*, a young man took his PAIN to a hospital, for the sake of his young wife DELIA. *↓ my mythical quest.*

See the HOSPITAL as a castle, see the CASTLE as a place which immures THE HEALER MAGICIAN; see it in the sense of FAIRY TALE or KAFKA, see it how you will. We are all within SPITTING DISTANCE of castles; spit away, if that's where your experience of institutions leads you, if it makes you feel better.

THE YOUNG MAN had been to art school and now worked as a store-window designer, where being HETEROSEXUAL he stuck out like a sore thumb, but never mind all that. He came to the castle by night: AFTER work but BEFORE the pubs close being the most propitious time to attend CASUALTY, or so Delia told him.

Delia knew better than he how the world worked, or seemed to.

CASUALTY was written in letters of fire which passed across a frosted green panel above the hospital doors,

and seemed to offer a welcome, albeit a dangerous one, for the dog CERBERUS roamed the castle gates keeping off all comers. Cerberus had THREE HEADS and all of them were ugly.

'You obviously can't park there, sir,' said the first head. It wore a collar, a tie and spectacles, waved human arms and used CONTEMPT as a weapon. 'These spaces are reserved for DOCTORS. You are attempting to commit an anti-social act. Kindly move on.'

'I'm so sorry,' said the YOUNG MAN, being apologetic by nature – and he drove on round the corner hoping for better LUCK.

'Don't even think of parking there,' said a SECOND HEAD, appearing out of nowhere. Its scalp was shaved, its tongue and lips were ringed: its mien was terrible. 'That's reserved for fucking ambulances. Are you blind?' 'It's true that pain does somewhat blur my vision,' the YOUNG MAN said with heavy irony, but only once the window was UP and his door lock was DOWN. He drove around another corner where amazingly he found an EMPTY SPACE. As he backed into it a THIRD HEAD came along, wearing a hat of the kind a Ruritanian general might wear, all heavy gold and red embroidery. 'Double lines, sir, you can't park there, on penalty of clamping.'

'Then where am I meant to park?' asked the young man.

'Nothing to do with me, sir. I just do my job.'

CERBERUS'S NECK is very long: HEADS spring up all over the place; latterly he has been cloned, they say. He is everywhere: the faces may waver and change, often taking female form, but rest assured he is the same beast. He

guards the gates of castles everywhere; even though the castles may be PHANTASMAGORIC, Cerberus is real enough. Only in parts of London can you cheat him; by parking with your back wheels in WESTMINSTER and your front wheels in CAMDEN; then confused, Cerberus sometimes finds it easier to leave you alone. But such spaces are in hot demand.

PAIN made the young man unusually brave. He just left the car where it was and walked away, the CREATURE FROM RURITANIA taking notes behind him.

Now the young man's name, dear reader, as it happens is CANDIDE, not because your writer is trying to make a point, but merely the better to report a story as told to her in real life by a young couple whose names were in fact Candide and Delia. Blame Candide's parents, not me, should blame be called for: let's get on, now that's out of the way.

The bullet-proof glass doors that admitted walk-ins to casualty were bolted shut against VIOLENT MARAUDERS. Two SECURITY GUARDS flanked the entrance. Candide was checked over visually for suitability for treatment out of PUBLIC FUNDS. The security guards took their TIME.

'Please! I need help,' mouthed our hero through the glass.

A nod from ONE to the OTHER: at least the person had the password right. Their eyes were grim and their mouths tight, but they let him through.

CANDIDE saw a SWEET-FACED GIRL behind a

counter marked *RECEPTION*; she wore a badge which named her as *MIRANDA - VOLUNTEER. FRIENDS OF MERCY*. In streaks of pinkish fire which travelled ceaselessly above her head, moved the slogan *PLEASE WAIT PATIENTLY. OTHERS MAY BE IN NEED OF MORE URGENT ATTENTION THAN YOU. THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING THE HOSPITAL OF MERCY*.

'What's your problem, sir?' *MIRANDA* enquired, kindly enough. She had some small training in dealing with difficult, even violent, patients. Hospital casualty these days is full of violent people, but no one knows why. 'Appendix, peritonitis, death, who's to say,' said *Candide*. 'I appreciate your sense of humour, sir,' said *MIRANDA*. 'Just wait on one of those chairs over there until a member of staff is free to attend to you. We are very busy today.'

*Candide* sat and clutched his *BELLY* until the pain eased. Fifty *GREEN PLASTIC CHAIRS* were ranged in five rows of ten. Forty were unoccupied, ten occupied. *Candide* spent his time counting them. Other *SUPPLICANTS* slept, breathing and snorting gently, *DINGY GARMENTS* trailing and rooting on the grey floor. From the far end of the great hall, by the coffee machine, came a burst of colour, chatter and laughter. *FOUR GIRLS OF EASY VIRTUE* - or so *Candide* supposed them to be, for their skirts were up to their crotches, their jewelled handbags swung low, their heels were high, and their faces heroin white - had worked out a way of extracting coffee from the machine without paying; one would thump, the other would kick; another try and

catch the coffee as it spurted. The *YOUNGEST GIRL*, who was about twelve, was smoking and not interested in coffee.

'No smoking over there,' cried *MIRANDA*. 'In the interests of public safety. Don't you understand this is a hospital?'

'Fuck off,' shrieked the *SMOKER*, in harsh though *Sloaney* tones, 'or I'll spit and spread Aids.'

*Candide* resolved to keep his distance, and even *Miranda* paid *THE BAD GIRLS* no more attention. It takes *GIRLS FROM ALL CLASSES*, dear reader, to keep the *SEX INDUSTRY* going; the trade is *BUYER DRIVEN*, and *VORACIOUS*.

Ten minutes passed: fifteen, twenty, sixty. There was coffee all over the floor.

A *RUGBY PLAYER* slept in the last chair of the first row. He seemed to have been there some time. A red and white striped scarf was wound round his head: his shirt was striped black and white, vertically. He murmured in his sleep: he drowsed. He wore muddy shorts striped horizontally in purple and yellow. His thighs were vast and muscle-knotted; his socks could barely stretch around his powerful calves. Beneath his right knee *Candide* now noticed a *SLIVER* of broken shin bone piercing the flesh. *Candide* peered and peered again. He could not be mistaken.

'Nurse, nurse,' called *Candide*, spying one who passed. She was a dark-eyed girl with the face of a *GRECIAN GODDESS*, calm and strong.

'Well? I'm busy. What?' asked *NURSE GALINA*, for so her badge named her.

counter marked *RECEPTION*; she wore a badge which named her as *MIRANDA – VOLUNTEER. FRIENDS OF MERCY*. In streaks of pinkish fire which travelled ceaselessly above her head, moved the slogan *PLEASE WAIT PATIENTLY. OTHERS MAY BE IN NEED OF MORE URGENT ATTENTION THAN YOU. THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING THE HOSPITAL OF MERCY*.

'What's your problem, sir?' *MIRANDA* enquired, kindly enough. She had some small training in dealing with difficult, even violent, patients. Hospital casualty these days is full of violent people, but no one knows why. 'Appendix, peritonitis, death, who's to say,' said *Candide*. 'I appreciate your sense of humour, sir,' said *MIRANDA*. 'Just wait on one of those chairs over there until a member of staff is free to attend to you. We are very busy today.'

*Candide* sat and clutched his *BELLY* until the pain eased. Fifty *GREEN PLASTIC CHAIRS* were ranged in five rows of ten. Forty were unoccupied, ten occupied. *Candide* spent his time counting them. Other *SUPPLICANTS* slept, breathing and snorting gently, *DINGY GARMENTS* trailing and rooting on the grey floor. From the far end of the great hall, by the coffee machine, came a burst of colour, chatter and laughter. *FOUR GIRLS OF EASY VIRTUE* – or so *Candide* supposed them to be, for their skirts were up to their crotches, their jewelled handbags swung low, their heels were high, and their faces heroin white – had worked out a way of extracting coffee from the machine without paying; one would thump, the other would kick; another try and

catch the coffee as it sputtered. The *YOUNGEST GIRL*, who was about twelve, was smoking and not interested in coffee.

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'That rugby player asleep over there -'

'Yeah, we get lots of rugby nuts on Sundays. They bring it on themselves, like smokers.'

'But his leg is broken. I can see a bone sticking out.'

'Bones often do that when they're broken,' said NURSE GALINA.

'Shouldn't he see a doctor?' asked Candide. His OWN PAIN had eased. In fact he was beginning to wonder if he needed to stay at all, and worrying about the fate of his car outside, left in the space reserved, he now remembered, for PATIENT PARTICIPATION OFFICER, GRADE ONE ONLY. He thought the traffic warden had probably been bluffing, but supposing the PPO was on night shift and turned up to claim his space?

'It's asleep,' said NURSE GALINA. 'A rugby player's like a baby: if it's asleep, don't wake it. It's just asking for trouble.'

'A BABY,' repeated Candide, and all but fainted. NURSE GALINA had to thrust his head between his knees till his head stopped swimming. Candide explained to her that this was part of his TROUBLE. His wife was pregnant. He suffered from recurring STOMACH PAINS which their friends assumed mimicked LABOUR PAINS and were SYMPATHETIC: well, he could IGNORE these; they were one thing: but the fact that whenever he heard the word 'BABY' he felt DIZZY and PASSED OUT was another. It had become something of a JOKE with his friends, but it was a serious matter. The word was used increasingly all around him; no one could avoid it, as his wife's labour became imminent; he needed to be in TIP-TOP FORM to help her when the time came. This was why he had come to casualty.

His OWN DOCTOR would not take his complaint seriously.

'But there's no one complaining of this kind of thing on my list,' said NURSE GALINA. 'Have you checked in?'

'I don't think so,' said Candide. 'I was told to sit down.' 'That new girl on the desk,' complained NURSE GALINA. 'She knows nothing about anything except sex. She's sleeping with the Senior Registrar, they say. You should have checked in with Triage Nurse ages ago. How can she call your name if you're not on her list, let alone pass it to me? Didn't you think about that?'

'I trusted the system,' he said. 'I assumed you knew your business. And who and what is Triage Nurse? I thought Triage was a system used to sort those lying on the battlefield at the end of the day. The dead who need to be buried; those who can be cured to fight again, and those who are better just left as they are.'

'My, how knowledgeable we are,' said Nurse Galina, but she said it kindly and explained that Triage Nurse divided patients into three CATEGORIES: those who were seriously ill and a DOCTOR needed to see QUITE SOON: those who were making a FUSS ABOUT NOTHING and would have to WAIT: and those who were only fit for PSYCHIATRIC anyway. At least that is what he thought she said.

'From the sound of it,' said NURSE GALINA, 'you're ripe for psychiatric.'

'I don't see why,' said Candide, 'Delia and I both look forward to the BIRTH. The pregnancy is PLANNED, we're both halfway up our CAREER LADDERS and on FLEXITIME and so forth; we're doing everything RIGHT, I can hardly be MAD. Whatever my problem



turns out to be I am sure it's PHYSIOLOGICAL in origin, or I wouldn't be here.'

'My, my, my,' said Nurse Galina, 'in denial, are we, and what big words we use!' – but she took him back to RECEPTION to register.

APPOINTMENTS NURSE was small, skinny and dark. Her name-badge read ISHTAR.PATEL. She asked Candide for his NAME, ADDRESS, AGE, RELIGION, PARTNER STATUS, SEXUAL ORIENTATION and how he had TRAVELLED TO THE HOSPITAL.

'I don't see how that latter is relevant,' said Candide.

'You are not expected to see anything' said ISHTAR.

'This information is needed for our statistics.'

'But I could be DYING,' said the YOUNG MAN. 'I might not have the time to help you with your statistics.'

'Perhaps English isn't your first language,' observed ISHTAR coolly. 'I may have to wait for our ETHNICITY expert to come back from lunch so she can help me fill in the form. She takes a long lunch.'

'I came by car,' said the YOUNG MAN, sighing, 'and parked it, for all that Cerberus snapped.'

'Definitely psychiatric,' murmured ISHTAR to GALINA, 'as are so many of these fair-haired square-jawed types; off to Triage with him!' And Candide was sent to sit in a different part of the great hall.

Here light was scarce, and the WRETCHED OF THE EARTH, who had somehow sidled around SECURITY and gained an entrance to the WARMTH and SHELTER of the Castle Mercy, huddled in some number in corners. They seemed to murmur and whisper in chorus. Candide

tried to make sense of the muted, drifting sound, and thought the words ran thus:

'We are the flotsam, the jetsam of this city,  
The drifters, the hopeless, the object of your pity.  
You need us to be sorry for;  
In triumph we sing our ditty.'

At least that's what Candide thought they murmured and whispered, but who was to say? The faint SMELL of anti-septic dulled his senses to more acrid human scents, and the low HUM of central heating, and the distant clank of trolleys, and CARING FEMALE VOICES, lulled him as he waited, and waited. Thus the castle works its enchantment. The stomach pains had abated. He drowsed. But the plight of the rugby player, whom he could see quite clearly from across the hall, now troubled him more than his own: he could not rest. A shaft of light glittered on the white sliver of projecting bone.

Nurse Galina passed by again. Once more Candide drew her attention to the rugby player. Apparently the man slept; but supposing he had lapsed into a COMA? Were they keeping an eye on him?

'Why do you care about that great ox?' asked Nurse Galina. 'More like an animal than a human being. He'll be seen in due course. We know well enough what we're doing. Those who inflict damage on themselves, smokers, over-eaters, drinkers, sportsmen, and so forth must take responsibility for their own actions: we've had a memo round. If a male giant throws himself into a scrum and invites a lot of other male to stamp on him, he needn't think he can coi

here and ask for special privileges from hard-working women.'

Her voice rose in pitch as she spoke. She let it be known she was at the end of her TETHER.

'Hasn't Triage Nurse even seen you yet?' she asked, as if Candide's negligence were responsible; and when Candide shook his head, she sighed heavily.

TRIAGE NURSE, who was little and fair and PRETTY, now emerged from her cubicle, calling for a BABY Longman. Nobody responded to her cry, not Longman mother, not Longman father, so she huffed and puffed her way back into her cubicle as if she were a DRAGON thwarted by the non-appearance of St George. Next time she came out she called for one CANDIDE NEWMAN. Yes indeed, dear reader, NEWMAN is in truth my hero's surname. I promise you I'm not doing it on purpose. His parents just liked the sound of it. Like Fifi or Peaches, or Pixie. Why not?

'Yes, this is me,' Candide replied, coming forward as quickly as he could, so as not to irritate Triage Nurse further. Progress was not as quick as he hoped; he was still recovering from the effect of a new barrage of the word BABY. He staggered and groped through DARKENING VISION.

'You took your time,' snapped Triage Nurse and sat him down facing her. She took Candide's temperature, his pulse, and MARVELLED at the lowness of his blood pressure before she let him describe his SYMPTOMS. He told her much what he had told Nurse Galina.

'Feeling faint when the word BABY is mentioned is not exactly an urgent matter,' she REPROACHED him.

'What do you think your local surgery is for? This is casualty department of a large inner-city hospital: we exist to deal with emergencies. And the most common cause of fleeting stomach pain is WIND.'

Candide found, as sound SWAM and SANG in them, that he had ears to hear her thoughts. Sometimes the UNSPOKEN words of others ring through another's head. It has happened once or twice to me, reader, and I HOPE it never happens to you, as it happened that night to Candide, as TIRED, EXHAUSTED, DEAFENED, and BLINDED by the problems of others as he was, he persisted in his attempts to breach the defences of the Castle.

'Good God, what a wimp, what a poor pathetic wimp,' Triage Nurse thought: and it became very clear to Candide that substantive thought must indeed be preceded by language. 'Pity his poor partner, who'll be left on her own in due course coping with the broken nights and the crashy nappies and the rashy crap. No. The crappy nappies and the nappy rash. Thank God my own baby doesn't have to put up with a father. No, it's the crechey child and the crappy care for my little girl, and trime pine for me when I get home from this the Castle Malaprop. In the meantime this wimp is wasting my time. There's nothing wrong with him; my BP machine's on the blink, that's all. No one can have blood pressure as low as that and stand up.'

'If, as you say, there is nothing wrong with me,' Candide began, but Triage Nurse stopped him short, very short. 'I must ask you to withdraw that allegation. Anything said to that effect might have legal consequences,' she SNAPPED, her pretty little mouth TIGHT and FIRM.

'I did not claim there was nothing wrong with you, I inferred it as a possibility.'

'There is definitely something wrong with that man over there,' said Candide, 'I don't care what you say. I can see a sliver of bone sticking out of his leg and that is that. He must be in agony.'

Triage Nurse seemed to SOFTEN.

'Try and realise that men of that kind don't feel PAIN like we do,' she replied. 'I suspect it's your blood pressure. It's so low you are suffering from optical illusions. I can see no BONE from here. It is true waiting times are a little longer than usual due to the recent DOWNSIZING of our medical team and the fact that our new computer has CRASHED again, but if there was a problem, we'd have seen to it. Let me tell you a JOKE to cheer you up. It comes from a book called MORE FROM RUGBY, which was on my father's shelves when I was a CHILD. My father was a keen rugby player: never at home when he was wanted. This is the joke. TWO MEN are sitting peacefully by the river fishing. They say nothing for the first two hours.

'Then the first angler says, "Weren't here YESTERDAY, then," and the other replies "No."

'"What stopped you?" PERSISTS the first angler.

'"Got MARRIED," says the other. There is a long, long silence. Bees BUZZ, stream RIPPLES, fishes DART. A beautiful day.

'"GOOD LOOKER, is she?" asks the first angler, puzzled.

'"Nope," says the other.

'"Got MONEY then, or what?"

'"Nope."

'"Is she SEXY, is that it?" demands the first.

'"You must be JOKING," says the second angler.

"Then why on earth?" asks the first angler.

"She got worms," says the other.'

Triage Nurse asked Candide if he thought the JOKE was FUNNY. Candide said if he had laughed it had been INADVERTENTLY. He assured her he himself was neither an angler nor a rugby player, had never seen the book in question, let alone read it. He was innocent. He was a new man like his name. Ha ha. The nearest he got to any kind of sport was that he and his wife Delia were in the habit of JOGGING round the PARK on a Sunday morning. But Triage Nurse wouldn't have it, she said she was talking GUILT BY ASSOCIATION. A man was a man for all that.

The CASTLE MALAPROP, the one that Triage Nurse inhabited in her head, is full of little DEMONS from the past: they scuttle out and nip the unwary on the ankles. Or nipple out and scut the anway on the UNCLES. Speech and thought disturbance occurs.

'All you men go about,' said Triage Nurse, or so he thought she said, 'with an albatross around your neck. "Instead of a cross, an albatross around my neck was hung." Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Aim of the Make-shift Rhymer. I go to compulsory dug awareness classes every Wednesday evening. My little girl has to go to greighbourns who make me eel the fobligation. Life is not easy for the working, unpartnered mother, no matter how noble the calling. Samuel Taylor Coleridge ook topium, you know, an early morph of forfine, a dopyy perivative. It shatters the brain. Whoever heard of anyone going round with an albatross around their neck, but there it is, pain as

a plikestaff on the page, certainly taken seriously by those who ought to know better. Awareness is half the hassle. Most preative creople are on drugs. Are you creative? I see that your occupation is written here as "designer". It sounds creative to me.'

'I assure you it isn't,' said Candide.

'My little girl's in cray dare,' said Triage Nurse. 'I don't get much sleep. Their remit is to stimulate her creativity, but when you see what preativity does to creople I wonder why they bother.

'Alone, alone, all all alone,  
Alone on a shiny sea!  
And never a soul took pity on  
My soul in agony.

'Was it slimy or shiny? I quite like the poem, for all it was dug cased.'

'Drug crazed?' he asked. 'Do you mean drug crazed?'

'Are you trying to tell me something here?' asked Triage Nurse. 'Research shows that people on drugs refer to them 27 per cent more frequently than those who are not. I should be careful if I were you. Well, I am glad we had our little chat. I did enjoy it. If you go and sit over there by the green swing doors, doctor will see you presently about the stomach pains. Afterwards I'd recommend you to go through to psychiatric, but doctor will decide.'

From his seat by the green swing doors, so near and yet so far from TREATMENT, Candide heard a chant SWELLING from some point near the coffee machine. It rose from the painted lips of the whores, who had SETTLED in to play cards.

'We are the whores, the bad girls of the city,  
And thank you very much, we do not need your pity.  
We save marriages by millions, and in triumph sing  
this ditty.'

And Candide, quite cheered up, was thinking, well, perhaps this world of ours isn't so bad a place to bring a child into when Triage Nurse came out again and called – 'Baby Longman, Baby Longman, come in Baby Longman' – and again Candide's head swam, his eyes misted and whether he SAW things that were not his to see, and HEARD things he should not hear, and everything was TRUE and REAL or NOT who was to say? – but there was a sense of movement everywhere and he SAW that the whores were now moving up and down the rows offering their services, falling into CHEERFUL conversation even when rejected. The ragged SHUFFLED along on their haunches, unseen by Reception, BEGGING and BLESSING even when refused aims.

This time it was his own dear wife who pressed his head between his knees as he swayed. She BURGEONED in PREGNANCY like a SMALL ship with a FULL sail: she had a sweet, anxious expression, a high complexion and nut BROWN hair so CURLY that all you could do was DUNK it under the tap to WASH it and then allow to DRY naturally.

'Poor thing, poor thing,' cried Delia. 'Haven't they even seen you yet? It's beyond belief!'

'I've been triaged,' said Candide. It was his instinct to make the best of things, if he could. He and Delia fought a battle, if that was not too strong a word for it, dear reader, between TRUST and MISTRUST. If he

children's 1st  
↳ optimistic outlook

4k.  
daughter of man.  
soothe her but no one  
will believe her  
prophecies.

was Pollyanna, she was Cassandra. Between them they managed very well. 'They can't think it's very serious,' he said, 'or they'd have seen me by now.'

'I don't think that's NECESSARILY the case,' said Delia. 'That rugby player over there actually has a bone sticking out of his leg. It's a DISGRACE!'

'Don't make a FUSS, Delia,' begged Candide. 'You will only make things WORSE.'

But Delia MARCHED over to Nurse Galina.

'I work in TV,' she said, (a lie) 'and unless SOMETHING IS DONE for the man with the broken leg I will BRING THE CAMERAS IN. I and my unborn child will be in a position to SUE THIS HOSPITAL for post traumatic stress disorder. Surely I have a RIGHT to come in here and not be TRAUMATISED by what I see?'

'We can't be pleasing everyone all the time or we'd never get through,' said Nurse Galina, but she HURRIED away, as if PERHAPS she meant to do something. Then she was lost in an ANGRY CROWD now clustering around Reception, prevented from getting even so far as Triage, inasmuch as the SOFTWARE relating to their means of transportation to the hospital had developed a VIRUS, or so Miranda claimed.

'The new computer's crashed,' explained Candide to Delia. The castle had worked its SPELL on him and he felt the need to DEFEND its ways. 'But when it's working it will CUT DOWN waiting times no end.'

'It's still too bad,' said Delia, rather FEEBLY. She was near the end of her TIME, and beginning to have stomach pains at REGULAR INTERVALS. Like so many of us, she could FIGHT for the rights of OTHERS, but did not like to draw attention to herself.

'It's NOT as if I were an URGENT case,' he said. 'You're the one who needs the care.'

'Me? I'm as strong as a horse,' protested Delia.

At which point Triage Nurse came out calling, 'Mr Holifog, Mr Holifog! Anyone here by the name of Holifog?'

'Bet that's the rugby player,' said Delia, and went up to the BULKY, RECUMBENT, much MULTI-STRIPED vaguely human shape and SHOOK him vigorously.

'Nurse did say not to wake him!' said Candide, tentatively, but Delia took no notice, and SHOOK on. Another half inch of BONE slipped through the hairy skin below the knee so she stopped, aghast. Candide did not say 'I TOLD YOU SO' - it was not in his nature - and besides, he had become conscious of the thoughts DRIFTING through the rugby player's HEAD.

'Don't wake me, Mummy, because I'm in heaven! Run for it! Run for the touchdown! Oh the grass is so slippery, oh the green wet shine of it, the slippage: the silage: the sweat, the ache in the calf, the knotting of muscle, the thwack and collision of flesh. Oh, the earth-shaking joy of it. Sling 'em off, fling 'em off, into the scrum and here's mud in your eye! Wash my clothes, mother, wash them real good' - and so on, and on, ponderous as a rhinoceros, and then suddenly Triage Nurse was calling, 'Mr Huggifuss, Mr Huggifuss, anyone there called Mr Huggifuss?' at which the rugby player STIRRED and said, 'Name's Oliphant. Hugo, Oliphant, actually -'

- and Triage Nurse said, 'No one here of the name Huggifuss. I told you he was a WASTE of time, HYPOCHONDRIACS all these sportsmen. If they knew what women had to put up with during LABOUR, they wouldn't have the NERVE to complain -'

– and Hugo Oliphant called ALOUD for his father, ‘Daddy, Daddy, watch me, one day you’ll be proud of me –’

– and such a CHURNING of the poor and disaffected rose around Candide’s feet, their hands outstretched for alms, that he SHUDDERED but DELIA said, ‘Give them what you can, my dear, who knows when a beggar is a prince in disguise!’ so he did.

– and Delia persuaded Hugo Oliphant to whisper his TELEPHONE NUMBER in her ear, and then rang his MOTHER collect. Mothers can often NEGOTIATE the CASTLE when passers-by cannot. Whole FORTRESSES will FALL when motherlove is on the WARPATH.

Now outside one of Cerberus’s heads was barking loudly at an intruder: a guard dog of a different tune, a PISSER and a RUNNER: vast and clanking, the TOW-AWAY TRUCK.

‘You can’t park there!’ cried the HEAD, ‘Hey you!’  
‘I park where I fucking well please,’ said the other DOG.  
‘That’s our ambulance ZONE,’ snarled the HEAD.

‘Don’t swear at us,’ yapped the NEW DOG, and at the very notion of US split in two; into driver and mate.  
‘They PARK, we CLAMP, we LIFT, we take our time, but when we’ve taken it we MOVE, right, Fred?’ said DOG.

‘Right,’ said Fred, ‘let’s do the world a FUCKING favour’ – by this time Candide and Delia’s Fiat Uno was swinging in the air – ‘and drop this pile of CRAP. Look at the rust on that UNDERBELLY!’

– But at that moment an AMBULANCE screeched up, backed up and parked ARSE to REAR of the tow-away truck –

– and a tripartite ROW ensued, between ambulance DRIVER and the TWO forms of dog. The ambulance was bringing in a HEART attack victim – a middle-aged man – and had fetched him all the way in, siren SCREAMING, red lights IGNORING, but now declined to fetch him out until the tow-truck MOVED –

Let’s leave them there, dear reader, you know how it goes, so what else is new, and return to the castle anterooms where Candide and Delia hold hands and wait.

‘I’m afraid our car’s been towed, darling,’ said Delia, ‘I looked out the window just now and saw it swinging in the air. Perhaps you didn’t leave her in quite the most sensible place’ – and before he could say ‘PLEASE DON’T MAKE A FUSS, DARLING’ she was out of casualty and into the ambulance bay GESTICULATING, and within minutes was sitting back next to him, the LITTLE CAR had been LOWERED, the clamps REMOVED, the tow-away vehicle GONE and the heart attack VICTIM was being STRETCHERED into the castle.

‘But what did you say, darling?’ Candide MARVELLED and Delia just said, ‘I told them I’d have my BABY then and there: that always works,’ and CANDIDE did his best not to faint right away; he was utterly exhausted. During the minutes of Delia’s absence he had been KIDNAP-PED, ASSAULTED, RESCUED, and RETURNED to his chair. He was OK, just about, but had few psychic or physical RESOURCES left.

This is what happened.

\* \* \*

Two soft-voiced, mousey-haired, maternal COSMIC HEALERS had set about him, and DRAGGED him into a linen cupboard. Their names were Donna and Jan. Donna had been a TEACHER and Jan a NURSE in what they saw as a previous life, but now, if you asked them, they'd say their original bodies were inhabited by walk-ins from the Dog Star Sirius. It was their mission to heal the sick by ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE and they hung around the castle, posing as patients or friends of patients, chasing the UNWARY, anointing them with UNGUENTS, passing CRYSTALS over the CHAKRAS – the points of energy – of the FEEBLE and ANXIOUS, the better to restore them to HEALTH. They fell upon Candide for no better reason than that he was NEAREST to the linen cupboard and ALONE. The ENCHANTRESS Donna simply crept up behind him and removed the chair from beneath him: her PARAMOUR Jan dragged him off, her strong hands under his shocked armpits.

'Quickly, Jan love, quickly, before he struggles! Juniper oil beneath his nose. And patchouli too!' The door slammed. He was alone with them, and where was Delia?

Strong odours assailed his nostrils: his head SWUM. He felt his garments removed as he lay upon the FLOOR. A cold, sharp surface scratched gently across his chest and other MORE INTIMATE parts.

'Don't be afraid. Relax. Thank God we got to you in time, before the doctors and nurses, the MESSENGERS OF DARKNESS, invaded the HOLINESS of your body with their needles and POISONS. Do you feel your strength reviving? We have you framed by four crystals, which TRANSFORM and TRANSMUTE all negative

energies. How tense you are; MY HANDS can feel how tense you are –'

The long soft hair of Donna the ENCHANTRESS brushed his body as she WORKED upon him.

'Don't, don't,' he CRIED. 'I am a married man –'

'Rose quartz upon the heart,' cried Jan, not to be UNDONE. 'To promote LOVE and EXCITEMENT at the deepest levels; an emerald here at the base of the SACRAL CHAKRA to refine the SEXUAL energies –'

'This is beyond BELIEF,' Candide cried.

'See,' murmured Donna, 'as your MEMBER rises it creates that perfect form which lies at the root of the UNIVERSE – every cell in your body is diffused with a red light: your whole auric field is SCARLET, the petals of a flower UNFOLDING –'

Mercifully the Guardian of the Green Swing Doors happened to be passing, and was alerted by the SCENT of patchouli, which as every ex or indeed current hippie can tell you, gets everywhere. He was male and powerful and hauled the two women off Candide's dazed but EVER-LIVELY MEMBER, crying –

'Not you two witches again! Is nowhere safe?' and the women SCUTTLED SHRIEKING, WITHERING UP, becoming LITTLE and OLD and CARAPACED, like black beetles making for safe CRACKS and CRANNIES between the skirting and the floor: while the Male Nurse, for it was he, SCRUNCHEd and STAMPED them beneath his feet: CRACKY on the outside, SOFT in the inside.

'There's always more roaches where they came from,' Male Nurse lamented. 'A regular plague of them!' And Male Nurse helped Candide back into his CLOTHES,

keeping his HANDS more or less to himself, and Candide felt quite AT HOME and as if it was all FAMILIAR: it was like being back at work again.

Reader, you must understand that if you were in a position to click your mouse in every uppercase word in this text, whole worlds of fictional delight would allegedly open up to you (and I bet you EVER-LIVELY MEMBER would, if a count were made, get the most clicks of all, or possibly INTIMATE PARTS). But, think of it, you could have a novel based on the doings of the enchantresses' goings-on – if that is what they were, and not just mere projections of Candide's Id – and their connection with the Ultra Natural Healing Front, and the Alternative Medicinities: or a GAY novel based on POWERFUL MALES, or you could call up on your screen a textbook on SACRED CHAKRAS OF THE HEART – or a combination of all three; really there is no end to the permutations. As with evolution itself, fiction ever seeks to diversify, and with the invention of CD Roms and multiple choice novels now has the opportunity. All it lacks is willing reader-clickers: it is, it turns out, rather in the nature of reader-clickers to prefer non-fiction to fiction, with the possible exception of sci-fi, always the FAVOURITE of the NERDS. Are you not reading this fairy-tale, God help you, upon the page, not on your screens? So words in UPPERCASE can merely indicate your author's pattern of interest, and thus, perhaps, enrich the tale. Even as you take issue with authorial decision, you will, by the very act of indignant opposition, find yourself PARTICIPATING. This has been the object of the exercise. Reading, of course, is almost as complex a matter as writing; all CUSTOM and PRACTICE and RESONANCE within

the individual's head. But from now on your author will desist from the PRACTICE OF UPPER-CASING. Feel free to place such emphasis as best suits your mind-set: for vigour I recommend the verbs, for diversion, adjectives. Be sparing with adverbs.

But let us return to a shocked and exhausted Candide, recovering as best he could, and sitting once again where he was safest, next to his animated, belly-flaunting wife Delia, flushed from her triumph over split and snarling tow-away dog.

Between the rows of chairs now approached none other than Mrs Oliphant, Hugo's mother: her bosom proud as Delia's belly, swathed in the green peacock plumes of a traditional Liberty's fabric, her face as noble, as pained and strong as that of a prize-winning cart-horse.

'What does he ever want to play soccer for anyway?' she asked the assembled halt and sick. 'You have these babies, you devote your life to them; you take them to the doctor at the first sign of a cough; to the clinic for an X-ray every time they fall on their heads; you squeeze them whole oranges and sieve the juice for pips in case one lodges in the appendix; you clear out their toy-boxes; try not to tread on their lego; you walk them to the school they hate; you save them from strangers; you look out for signs of drug abuse; you get them to twenty-one without a police-record, and what do they do? They self-destruct. They break their teeth in the swimming pool after years of orthodontics, rip their cartilages on the playing field, break every bone in their body and expect mummy to come along and pick up the pieces. Well I will, but he'll



get no sympathy from me. Such a hypochondriac,' she said, her strong voice faltering as she spied her slumped son. 'I expect he's making a fuss about nothing. I had to get my sister-in-law to wait in for the delivery man. A new washing machine. It was pay for a new tub or replace the whole machine; they get worn out, don't they, going all the time. All that mud: it gets into the works. A mother's love is a terrible burden -'

She took one look at her son's leg and yelped. She spied a wheelchair. Fetched it, and with Delia's help, heaved her massive son into it, and started running with it towards the green glass doors, all but slipping on a watery surface as she went.

'Oh my God,' cried Delia to her husband, 'my waters have broken! I am going into labour.'

It is sometimes easier to do for others what it seems all but impossible to do for the self. Candide was finally galvanised into action. He too seized a wheelchair, shoved his wife into it, and fell in behind Mrs Oliphant in their mutual race to the inner sanctum, where healing occurred or was alleged to occur. Here surely would be people trained to hazard a guess as to why a man fainted, or had pains in his belly, who could click a bone or two under anaesthetic, or help nature expel a baby from the womb.

Triage Nurse did her best to bar their way: her arms seemed to stretch a hundred miles in every direction. Her white sleeves reached only to her elbows; she wore shorts in the manner of nurses in the summer, and sandals without socks; acres of firm, healthy flesh rippled and dissolved before them: the king's sorcerers were up to their tricks again.

\* \* \*

'You haven't been called, you haven't been called!' The voice of Triage Nurse echoed round the vast chamber: it was the Day of Judgement and see, the dead were forbidden to arise. A murmur of anger rose from the patients on the chairs, and the cluster round reception, and the dim dispossessed in the corner, and the four whores rose up magnificent in all their blonde glory, tarty satin and silver chains - and as Mrs Oliphant broke the glass door with her elbow, put her hand in to loose the catch from the other side, and sailed through in blue peacock feathers, followed by Candide pushing the already groaning Delia, so did all the others; a stream of the dead on their way to paradise -

- Triage Nurse stood aside, she was obliged to; she sank to her true size again: much and permanently diminished, she spoke.

- 'I give up this job,' said Triage Nurse. 'Anyone wants it, they can have it. I'm going back to my little girl, who is the only one who has ever truly appreciated me.'

- and she walked right out of the castle, and everyone agreed it was a better place for her going, while appreciating that she was sorely tried and did a good job to the best of her ability.

- 'A baby!' cried Candide, 'my wife's having a baby,' and his head felt clear and his voice was strong, and the dreaded word no longer afflicted him.

Doctors appeared, and nurses too and on the other side of the green swing doors it was indeed like heaven: no wonder it was so difficult to get into, as many said then to each other. Angels of Mercy whisked Hugo Oliphant off to the operating theatre - and you will be glad to know

he was back on the playing fields within two months and his mother's washing-machine was delivered, plumbed in and up and running by the time she got home from the hospital. Oh, what a day of Miracles! – Nurses ran to take Delia to the delivery room: it was going to be what they called a lightning birth.

– Male Nurse sidelined Candide, and stood him under a shower to remove the last traces of patchouli, for the health and safety of the coming baby, he said, and admired his body and was content with that.

– and by the time Candide came out of the shower the baby was born, perfect, healthy and cheerful, washed and wrapped, and frankly Candide was much relieved by the pattern events had taken and Delia didn't seem to mind too much. Some men are just plain happier for not being there at the birth.

– the man who thought he had a heart attack turned out to be having indigestion pains, and was sent home.

– waiting staff cut away the callouses of the homeless, listened to their sad stories, gave them free cups of tea and put them on yet more waiting lists.

– the four whores found willing punters in a quartet of visiting Japanese politicians, here to investigate the workings of a national health service, and all in all it was the happiest fairy tale ending anyone could imagine.

– and the little Uno started first go when Candide started back for home – he'd collect Delia and the baby the next day – and Cerberus didn't even growl.

Cerberus is always happy to see people going, it's when they approach he gets so restless and multi-headed.