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**Recycling science fiction: using natural time travel in the near future
to re-engage the past in a novel titled 'In Tempo'**

Leonora Rustamova

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of MA by Research.**

University of Huddersfield

March 2016

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IN TEMPO

1

The Way Back

The people smell of sleep or of things that wash it off. They drag and wrestle masses of luggage down the aisle. The train is getting ready to leave Moscow-Smolenskaya station. Everyone is talking except the girl sitting by the window and the man sitting across from her. He regards her with great interest. She holds a journal in her lap, bursting with loose pages. She wants to keep moving, but she won't get far running away from anything sitting there. It is a beautiful Autumn morning, two days and a whole generation ago. The girl's name is Dasha and the train is the wrong train.

There's not much time for the ticket collector to wake Dasha to her mistake, rush her out of the carriage, and point her across acres of teeming platform towards the Brussels Express. She has little to carry as she negotiates the void between the steps and the concrete. The strange man keeps his eyes front, waiting for her to appear beyond the window, then he spots a page from the journal, leaf-autumnised on the floor. He slides it out, pauses for a deep breath and then a furtive look, just to see the writing. There is a faded quotation in an ornate hand. He folds it, pushing the words inside. It is not at all faded to him. His fingers keep the page held with their tips as if the paint is still wet, while he thinks. All that matters now is for him to prevent that girl from boarding the international train. The passengers all seated and munching cheerfully witness the second stillest member of the carriage rushing to depart.

The station is great hangar arcs over trains; grubby halls with shanties of shops under ceilings of vaulted elegance. Dasha slips through the crowd, small steps helped on by invisible walkscalators. She is hard to follow. Her hood drops losing rumpled curls. God knows what colour you would call them. The stranger meets resistance with colloquial ease; shoving his way towards

her as she pulls her hood back up. She circumnavigates a huge babushka - an old woman with a head like a sack of potatoes who is schlepping her entire flat contents in two great tablecloth bales. The stranger is less successful now as he tries to fix sights on the girl again. His legs become tangled in the left bale and it gives in, evacuating all her possessions. The babushka misses the warning in the colonel grey of the stranger's coat and its higher-than-military cut. She turns the spectacular ruins of what must once have been a bust towards him; the heavy artillery of a long past eastern front. Lucky for her this cold fish has an eternity to fry and less than a minute to get it in the pan.

It is a relief to think of nothing but the risk of missing the train. She hears it getting up its electric steam. Doors are slamming and relatives are piling out, competing to throw the last kiss, pushing past each other's shouts of advice. Dasha angles her path towards a carriage, slips through gaps, sees the attendant waiting by the door to tick off his last passengers from a creased list. He has Trotsky-cum-walrus whiskers and a great uncle of a face. She's nearly there.

But then there is a rush of energy behind her - becoming dry and shameless hands covering her eyes. A louring growl close by her ear. She freezes as she is toppled backwards, the arms are thin and strong. No-one intervenes. The station sounds recede and for a moment, she slips back a week as well, to sitting with Vanya in Tula park. She sees him in tucks of silent laughter, there are schoolgirl gymnasts practising balance in pairs between the fountains, and then there is the furious wheezing sound of someone sawing wood as the station rushes back.

'Surprise!! Oh fuck,' the hands spring off her and a sheepish face peers round into hers, 'Oh fuck, sorry,' the boy pauses, grinning.

'Ambitious way to meet people ... ' Dasha begins and then she is distracted from the boy for a shake as she finally notices the grey-coated stranger behind him. He has fallen back a step or two,

thwarted by this callow intervention. She half-wonders what he is doing there, so close to her and so far from his train seat, but the occurrence of her oldest friend George - in Russia, in Moscow, on her very platform - supersedes this and her attention swivels back, 'George! How are *you* here?!

'Well,' says George, 'I just happened to be in the neighbourhood ... '

Dasha is still rocked by the memory of a parkful of happiness. It is great to see George. It is just disappointing that he isn't Vanya. The stranger keeps the page tucked behind him and watches as she connects with the boy, sees that they are at least friends, and in the background, the sawing wood resolves itself into a tiny teacup terrier, straining on its diamanté string and coughing out the whole nine yards in barks as it fails to catch up with the false alarm.

George goes on, 'I thought there was no point just waiting for you in London. After I got your message - the mood kind of took me,' he smiles, raises his eyebrows, and adds a shrug before picking up her bag.

'You scared the crap out of me.'

'Yeah, sorry about that.'

Dasha keeps her gaze down for a moment. From the floor up, she takes in the plain suit which has replaced George's usual splashy mix of chambray and Cavalli, she grabs it like a life belt,

'What *are* you wearing?'

'I'm flying under the Russky gaydar, dearest. Don't want to go on one of those Siberian corrective holidays for the sake of such a brief foray now do I.'

'Wow,' smiles Dasha, 'So I'm your beard as far as the border, I can do that.' She takes his free arm and they laugh their way together towards the carriage door. As the walrus checks her passport, Dasha looks back across the platform at the wrong train. The man in the grey coat, more than half forgotten, has made himself into just a back among other backs. His lost chance is lost on her; she boards the train.

The first class compartments are two berths, a bathroom, a screen and all sorts of napkins;

the second, four berths all women or all men. Dasha and George are third class till Warsaw. An open mixed carriage of clean and solid bunks with stowage beneath and on high shelves. There are pairs of facing single seats on the window side across the gangway, a table between which somersaults downwards at bedtime to become another bunk. Ingenious Soviet design which outlived the ingenious Soviets who designed it. Russian sleepers are commodious: long enough in distances for late nights, long lie-ins and endless geographical entertainment, wide enough in gauge for all forms of fat. The seats are big, the beds are comfortable, the linen is crisp. A samovar simmers at the end of each wagon, everyone brings loaves and fishes and even more miraculous, no matter how far they go, days and days of thunder and the heartbeat clack of iron wheels, they are always always on time.

George has already settled in. He welcomes Dasha to their rolling home as they move down the carriage, negotiating limbs,

'I can't believe I – well, attacked you - after all your trauma, sorry dearest,' he throws over his shoulder, 'You thought it was Vanya didn't you.'

'Noooo,' she replies, 'Thank god it's you.'

The screens suspended beneath the luggage racks flash palaces and clinical beauties. There are dark sticky stains of beer on the lino and sunflower seed kernels around the table legs. Hers is the top bunk but for now she takes her seat below with everyone else. She completes the company and her bag pushed in to the last slot starts the train: a gentle tug from the carriage in front, shouldering the weight of the carriage behind. So it is, Dasha's soul does the same, but without the ease of tough old Russian trains. They've seamed this landscape, zipped up and unzipped its history time and time again. The journey begins, and lost in thought, so tired, Dasha is momentarily derailed.

The stranger is still on the platform. He watches her train pull away. One hand has fallen at his side,

the other shielding the journal page pressed against his coat buttons. He is motionless, an unsolicited pillar of salt, the station population floating round him like ghosts.

The Way There

Dasha had reached the age of nineteen with good manners, strong grades, firm friendships and a hearty bank balance, but the death of her only parent at an early age slept in her like a dragon in a mountain until one day an unlikely occurrence caused it to wake. As strange as it is, alongside her year at the London School of Oriental and African Studies, a lengthy court battle came to a close with an order to exhume her mother. That rich earth was to be turned up as the last in a long line of cases - the State of Russia v The British Crown. Repatriation of a mother to a motherland not even her own, doesn't make linguistic or any other kind of sense but time waits for everyone one way or another and these events eventually rose to the surface of her clock.

She had left London late one Thursday afternoon, to return to the Lake House in the North. The exhumation loomed. It had been a week since the crisp white envelope bearing the die-stamped crest of a Knightsbridge legal firm had dropped fatly onto the mat of her southern residence. It had looked out of place amidst the pizza fliers and taxi cards, gaining a temporary reprieve as it was scooped up by a housemate on his somnambulent be-flipfopped trek from the bathroom to the coffee machine, then propped against the teapot amidst the chaos of a student kitchen table. The household had eyed it warily, knowing what it might contain. Their student lives drifted in and out of each other, but today everyone was present. George, as a medic, was usually out before anyone else surfaced, but today he was at home when Dasha rose. She had appeared in a dressing gown, with a pale face, but very much awake, to find her three housemates making like it was any other

morning, until she picked up the letter.

'The long and short of it is, my mum is being dug up next Friday,' Dasha had foregone breakfast in an effort to digest the contents of the letter, her feet tucked up on the chair, her chin on her knees while her friends bustled round ranting about this latest fall-out from rapidly unravelling East-West relations and they waited to hear what she had to say. Rain netted the windows, blurring the garden. Dasha said no more.

'I can't believe they still do that thing with the letter and the envelope. It's so last century,' Olivia, a second-year law student, picked it up for closer inspection.

'Surely they can't do it on Friday. The digging stuff. I mean, what about your statutory month to appeal?' Joe was trying to find something encouraging to say.

'That was the appeal. Already happened dumb ass,' said George. Dasha felt like Joe should have known this, still in fairness her friends had done their best to keep up: attending the first few hearings, making notes, helping her choose appropriate grey pantsuits and flats for the cameras and debating the madness of it all late into the nights which followed. Between them, they had emptied the shelves in the legal department of the SOAS library, underlined statutes and highlighted cases to assure her that this *could not happen*. In later hearings they had fine-tuned their origami skills and come up with endless acronyms for the Russian State's barrister. They had done their best.

'Who said the art of diplomacy lies in opening different areas of self-interest,' Olivia balanced a macbookful of essay on one knee while she encouraged detox herbals to infuse in a chipped mug, 'There's not much left to posture over after the dead have been repatriated. I mean, what comes next?'

Things had certainly gone a long way since the suspension of the Russian Premier's Netflix account and the ban on Russian oligarchs owning English football clubs. The War of Peace was a phrase showing wear. Its first noun in far stronger shape than the second.

Joe was making lattes. The flatscreen of the microwave cut images of marching and erect missiles pushing forward; a glass of foamy almond milk rotated primly beneath,

'There's gonna be a war baby,' he deposited their pet hedgehog, a very much endangered desert species which had taken well to student life, in Dasha's hands as he passed and she stirred to make room for it on her lap. He headed for the fridge. George changed the channel.

'I thought they were going to give up the case,' George's nearest thing to a relation status needed no explanation in London where their flat bath accent married them geographically, 'Isn't that what a birth certificate is meant to be for?' he was trailing a butter knife in his upturned hand, one foot resting on the other as he leaned against the bar, sleepy eyes.

Dasha stared hard at the corner of the table,

'That's just it. Turns out there is no existing documentary proof to be found that will satisfy them. They want direct DNA and it appears nothing else will do,' She sank back into reverie as the conversation continued, and the quotation duels, which were the loftier end of the household interactions when they weren't trying to Pritt stick each other to the ceiling or making wigs from pasta.

'So much for "only the dead have seen the end of war",' said Olivia looking quite chipper, 'The whole thing is a solid trainwreck. I mean, If the only thing keeping us from war is arguing over dead people, they should just go ahead and have the fucking war. I mean, Bring it.'

A tablet zizzed on the table and Joe said, 'Yours 'Liv,' from the depths of the fridge.

'Leave it,' said Olivia, 'It'll be my mom asking if she's disturbing me in a lecture, then asking why I'm not in a lecture. She can send me one of her capslock messages instead, but I should totally get a good score for the Plato quote, guys.'

It always got to Dasha, the dismissive way mothers were treated, or rather the way that a mother was the one person who could be taken for granted. She tried to balance it with the way she knew she was looked at by students who regularly ran out of money, but she knew which situation

she would choose given the chance.

George watched Dasha unconsciously fielding her pet as it snouted its way comfortingly from armpit to knees' end and back again,

'Does this mean you will be going home?' he asked. It was a while since she had.

'Looks like it. I'll book a train for Thursday.'

George glanced at her again and then thought for a moment before saying,

'Are you all right sweetheart? You do know if there was such a thing as God, he'd send a bolt of lightning down their spade handles, don't you?'

She looked up, returning the glint, 'Well, "there are no atheists in foxholes".'

'Oh, good one.'

Tucking the hedgehog into the warmth of her dressing gown pocket, Dasha rose and went to get ready for class. A short respectful silence watched her go. Then Olivia's languid tones,

'You don't think she'll really turn ... religious over this, do you?'

And George's,

'Nah. It'd take more than a superpower shovelling up her relatives to do that.'

The everyday kitchen sounds resumed and Dasha, halfway up the stairs, halfway to tears, found half a smile in the faith of her friends.

She always dressed simply. Loose black wool, short over holey überdenier tights and ancient converse high tops. A bit of matte powder and smoky kittyflicks above the eyes. Dasha avoided designers and labels, preferring things from obscure markets. 'I'm un-consumer-targetable from the ankles up,' was her explanation. No-one had yet proved that tablets watched for their owners' logos, but the evidence framed their screens with unconvincing precision - offers that mirrored the outfit of the day. She picked up her rucksack from the detritus in the hallway and opened the front door as quietly as she could.

George heard her anyway and shouted before she'd closed the gate. She turned.

'I'm so sorry dearest, I've just remembered, they can't exhume your mama on Friday. Isn't it your birthday?' He'd swung out slightly with the security grill. It was an inappropriately jaunty movement for a solemn moment, more suited to a Black Forest cuckoo clock, but neither paid it anything, except as ironic punctuation. Dasha tried for a smile but it died before it reached beyond her lower lip,

'Not any more.'

Thursday had arrived, and she watched most of London withdrawing beyond the glass as the HS2 shot out, then closed her eyes. She didn't open them again until well into the hills of home. It had been one of those weeks where you see a lot of hearses.

...

The sun was making its way below the rooftops, the Yorkshire air a little crisper as she saw the familiar red estate swing round the corner and pull up in the station square. She knew it was Sli, who drove like he played the sax, and lived like he drove. He was the partner of her mother's friend Eve. Sli had bypassed the career years after throwing out a couple of albums and, against the professional odds, had met the right girl. Eve was a wildlife vet, and when she wasn't in a Helimed chopper over some jungle, had always had a permanent room at the Lake House. She was not the only straggler from her mother's existence who lived there. The house retained traditions of hospitality. It was not uncommon in Dasha's childhood, to open the door and find some leathery traveller armed with gifts and luggage, beaming, in full expectation of several weeks' stay. Her mother had known a lot of people who were spread further around the world than the news of a death travels. Dasha had enjoyed these visits as a child. More than the stuffed koalas and little embroidered Afghan jackets that came with them, it was the stories of her mother, spiced with pipe smoke and strange customs, which were the gifts. Sli leaned across and thumped the passenger door

from the inside to open it. He grinned at Dasha. The old car smelled of weed and horses.

'Sup Jedi. It's madness at the house, they're cooking up a whirlwind in the kitchen. People are going to accumulate man. I'm serious. Brace yourself!' Not one for lifeless questions about exams or birthdays, or how long it's been, Sli cut straight to the sitrep as he slipped the car into gear and peeled out across the cobbles. The distance she had kept was dissolving. Dasha didn't need a situation report to know how it would be at the Lake House. She leaned back into the seat and tipped her chin towards the window, picturing the scene which waited.

Despite the conspicuous lack of parents, Dasha had been raised in sumptuous unconventionality and consoled by an abundance of guardians. Her father seemed never to have existed and her mother had died around the time when her child's memory was just forming. No formal explanation was ever given for the wealth which kept her safe, except that her mother had been an adventurer and an heiress, stellar in both until 'the accident', and that the magical pile of a place by a lake of its own in a valley its own too, had at one time been the home of her grandparents. The friends in residence bequeathed to Dasha, were as close a group to blood as second best gets however their own lives expanded or contracted, but they were second best all the same. When her place at university coincided with the death of the family dog Zoomo, Dasha had found herself unwilling to come back; choosing holidays spent in an empty student house as less empty for her than home. It was the sort of thing she felt guilty about, right down to abandoning her dog's ghost.

An elderly lady presided; something between a housekeeper and a duchess. She ran the Lake operations with a precision almost up to pace with the house's tendency towards the romantic, so that Van Goghian demises of bouquets dropped pollen and petals onto gleaming surfaces, neutralising the risk of Havisham. The lady, known to the inner circle as Gath, had learned to throw her vowels like the gentry ride at fences. She was precise about dress and matters of decorum only so far as they applied to other people, believing that her own ilk had a right to be above all that. She

was to be seen on Saturday mornings under full sail in tweed and any one of several incongruous hats, collecting the Racing Post from the village, along with sundry needments and local information, a little black poodle bobbing alongside. Gath was as timeless as the house itself, already ancient before Dasha existed. When she had been wont to sweep the front door open complaining about the accumulation of company, threatening up trays of crumpets as visitors climbed the staircase to the first floor to pause outside the library door. There was a notice carved into the central panel, shone in with gold paint:

Leila's Library

Open Only to Visitors of Interest

You Know Who You Are

The words are still there. They evoke the rise and fall of animated voices within, as if the old days were alive again and all sorts of curious types were gathered there to talk about the universe and everything in between. Now when the door is open, the room lies silent. The books sleep and the fireplace is cool. The desk is tidy. No hounds lounging against the pastels of the Chinese rugs. The globe sits unturned within its meridian, and there are no revolutionaries smoking on the balcony. No Leila. Time turns. Dasha might wake the room again, when she is no longer strange to all that passed there. When there was a password - an answer to the question, 'What hangs by the door?' And if someone was there that didn't know, the next visitor wouldn't be asked. It was a heads up that security was currently breached. And If someone was there that didn't know the password, the subject changed until they had gone.

The Lake House sits on a long rise of lawn within a complete ring of tall sycamores. It is square built with an orangery running along its south side. Its doors always seem to be open onto the lawn

and the sunset stretches through across the threshold of the sitting room. The kitchen is at the other end and Gath who refers, affectionately it is presumed, to Sli's partner as 'that damned Eve', would be sharing it semi-graciously, and putting up no more than a traditional fight over unsanctioned ingredients getting snook into old fashioned favourites.

Sli pulled the car off the lane and began the wind down the bumpy track, an approach only used by those classed as residents, disdaining the comfort of tarmac to roll engineless into the stable yard and slip into the kitchen through the old scullery.

But it wasn't madness at the house at all, apart from some over-activity in the culinary region, where preparations were being made for an army. After the enthusiasm of the canine greeting, depleted to one poodle, Dasha was left to be as if she hadn't been away all year and more importantly, as if her one and only set of parental remains were not about to be dug up next morning and poked at by strangers. She only knew she was being watched by how little anyone stared at her. She sat on the Aga top with her feet on the arm of a Windsor chair. A cup of tea was put into her hands and a tray of bread rolls placed beside her to rise. She didn't need to be told it was her duty to protect them from Omar, the old mynah, whose gnarly beak and domination of the kitchen airspace could be counted like rings in a tree stump. Dasha didn't look up until Sudo walked in. Then she slid down from the top of the Aga for a hug, while warm tureens and plates were retrieved from the bottom oven. Sudo lived in the coach house and did everything that Gath couldn't, like the gardens and the cars and gentle friendship. He closed the shutters and drew the curtains while limes were sliced and ice was cracked for aperitifs. No-one else arrived.

So, it was a quiet dinner that evening, with low lamps and the tinkle of cutlery, putting the old house in mind of a long ago Russian song about troika bells in winter moonlight, whose sound spoke much to the lonely traveller, of home and love so sweetly. But houses have a language of mood

rather than words and as Dasha went upstairs to bed, passing Leila's Library, she felt a longing as crystal pure as hoar frost and as melancholy as the moon on snow.

2

The Way Back

She has just woken. Something in her neck is grumbling about the position it was left in, and below that the steady knock of ties and rails. George is chatting convivially with the guy beside him. The Moscow suburbs have thrown up tower blocks of resistance before subsiding into scattered enclaves of summer houses along the river. Dasha is leaving Russia. She is leaving Vanya. She is going home. Her mother is very close now, having taken the same train, but after all the effort to get to this point she just wants to think of something else.

George is trying to draw her in. She resists a bit longer, closing her eyes again and remembers the strange man in the grey coat behind him at the station, looking at her with that sort of broken fury. She has that feeling you sometimes have for strangers; an awareness of their existence past the moment. The train shivers as it slows down through a station and Dasha sits up, scouring the platform for Vanya, as she might, after stealing out and running away in the middle of the night.

Back in Moscow, in the square before Smolenskaya station, the stranger is standing, indecisive, beside the Farewell of Slavianka monument. He looks uncharacteristically small next to the bronze greatcoat of the soldier wrapt forever in his girl and their goodbye and the siren call of war. Dasha's stranger takes out a cell and thumbs for a number. Couples slow around the monument, adding their partings to the history of the nation.

'It's Ratmir. I know where it is. Book me a flight to Brussels for the morning.'

The stranger, who is not really called Ratmir, sits down on a granite bench and reads the page again. There is something he has to do before Brussels.

The Way There

After the exhumation, I followed Dasha home along the lakeside. There are times on any clock where the hands meet. It was the first word from the grave in all that time and there was bound to be some pull. Most of the original funeral congregation were probably furrowing their brows over transport routes to Yorkshire already. All those who had filed past that stony face and talked through the repast about what would happen next, and nothing had happened in all that time. Cars could be seen across the valley, winding their way down the lane towards the Lake House gates.

Dasha walked between the twisty trees, that grow close to the water. From that day, they would remind her of the coffin upheaving and rustle it whenever she passed. The dull blond wood, such pretty tarnished handles cast in flowers and butterflies, washed down, then clasped solemnly by scientists and carried away to a ridiculous little plastic tent.

She had wanted to go alone to the churchyard, a sleepy little place across the water. She had stood apart, upwind, leaning against the lake, waiting for the business to begin, mindless of the curious faces accumulating from the village, a couple of spivvy provincial journalists and a surprising host of police officers keeping them back from the gates. The trees were budding and her blue hood was winsome against the remnant drifts of leaves. Dasha was as far from birthday feelings as a girl can get.

The coroner had picked his way between the headstones to present her with his most formal face of sympathy. He had laid his hand on her shoulder and said a few quiet words while they waited for all the officials to present themselves and the unpleasant proceedings to get underway.

The crowd of watchers kept damping down their mood to appropriate levels although the freshness and the beauty of the morning was welling. They were ready to give the Russians a proper Yorkshire un-welcome, rocking on their heels a bit, hands in their pockets, talking more loudly than usual. The hacks had affably elbowed their way to the front where they propped them on the wall top to peer into their devices. Dappled in shade the grave, like the mother, was unusual. It was an elaborate tomb for a hillside country churchyard. A huge local rock, more of a boulder problem than a formalised monument, with a wingless angel standing on the top. Taller than a man, the empty eyes alert. He looked gathered for a leap. He looked the sort to be difficult about having his hair cut. He looked like he had refused to wear his halo at school. Dasha wondered how they would get past all that.

The coroner had just finished briefing the workforce when a sleek ambassadorial car delivered the opposition. The crowd had growled and lammered. Dasha watched as he introduced himself and the young funeral director to their Russian counterparts. Both men's hands were shaken solemnly but vigorously. The Russian counterparts declared their credentials in a long list of technical accolades and formal positions, which were listened to with interest by the British, whilst the rising jeers of the crowd were attentively ignored. The elder of the Russians had a rather down at heel appearance which served to increase the sense of his venerability, while the other, a pathologist in a splendid suit, didn't look much older than Dasha.

The four stood side by side, and each nation talked amongst itself while the more arduous digging work got under way. You could see they were acutely interested in one another; they kept catching eyes as if conducted by the ring and thunk of the chisels. Before the angel was loosed and several extra men from the crowd had been let in to help lay its weight in the grass, the coroner was muttering comments across the front of his assistant and the Russian counterparts were nodding occasionally to demonstrate that they understood. Then a Hiab truck roared and grumbled its way towards the churchyard gates and loomed to a halt. It had been ordered for removal of the boulder

by someone with no concept of rural graveyards. The down at heel eminence stepped round the splendid suit and offered an opinion in accord with whatever the coroner was saying about it and the coroner and his assistant looked him full in the face and smiled. Dasha smiled. The crowd seemed to find this infuriating and began a new wave of taunts. They didn't get much chance to meet their enemies, in fact as is often the way with enemies, none of them had had any dealings with Russians at all, but they read the papers so they had to make the most of it.

Dasha watched the truck, still trying to extricate itself backwards from a lane fit only for a trickle of sheep and the men had brought chocks and blocks and were levering the boulder with wooden spars. She felt sick; aware of the pile of shovels and wrecking bars which were about to play their part. As her mother's defences were breached, she switched her focus to one of the workers, a thirty-something unemployed from the village, who seemed to have been brought to life by the challenge of getting ropes in under the box. His animated face kept bobbing up out of the hole as he called for tools and arranged the lifters round the top. He co-ordinated the raising with an enthusiasm she imagined had been long suppressed by job interviews. Dasha hoped someone from the crowd would catch his arm later and offer him some employment. She had a whole armoury at work deflecting her emotions.

When it was time to move off towards the tent, the two younger death professionals fell in together behind the two elders and in pleasing defiance of the upcoming war, the pairing was comfortably reconfigured. The ambassadorial driver, who looked suspiciously like this was the least of his role, waited by the car, staring ahead in silence. Little computers inside his aviators were formulating a report. As the tent flaps fell he repositioned himself before the entrance, his martial jaw on a precise parallel with the turf. The wafty walls of the tent did nothing to stopper the voices within. They sounded quite fondly like children, plotting something in a den made of ostrich head and sand. Their lively chatter rose over the noise of the young funeral director working on the lid. There were

a lot of sounds of effort and panted directions. Then there was silence.

Dasha remained standing near the grave's head looking like the angel. A photographer took advantage of the shot while the rest of the crowd craned its necks until the front row clearly heard the voice of the coroner preceded by a low whistle,

'Well I didn't expect that.' Another silence. A moment later, the coroner ducked out under the flap, walked round the driver and went up to Dasha. He talked to her for a few minutes leaning in to her face, then he took her arm and turned her away from the crowd towards the rear gate into the Lake House path. He had watched her set off before turning back towards the others who were now leaving the tent. One of them was actually scratching his head.

'I think we need a drink,' said the coroner holding out an arm to accommodate the Russians in this suggestion and they walked off together towards The Spotted Cow, past the half-formed questions of the crowd whose disapproval had unconsciously united them with the driver.

...

In the kitchen at the Lake House a sort of muffled bustle prevailed. The functional disfamily were in congress, turned and muted as Dasha came in through the garden door. Eve hugged her so that Dasha hid her face for a moment in thick yellow masses of hair.

'We just heard darlin',' said Eve saving Dasha from speech, with eyes full moon that were usually laughing crescents. The day wore on in a hum of bafflement, of 'Empty!' and 'What the hell?' and 'Fucksake'. Dasha, though, was a copy of calm, sitting in the kitchen till the attention slid to her and then taking a turn by the fire in the sitting room while the talk went on around. This sort of thing never happens does it. People accumulated bringing with them some variety of intonation to the same word, 'Empty?!'. She didn't want to talk about it. The emptiness grew.

...

The coroner arrived at the Lake House in the afternoon. He was shown into the library. By this time it was the only room left where there was privacy. A fire was cracking here too. Gath considered all dramas should be accompanied by a good blaze and had set the house to gently roasting its occupants.

The room engulfed Dasha. With her mother no longer contained in the idea of the grave, she was in everything, at large. The room felt lived in, the chairs waited to be sat on and the drawers felt full of useful things wanting to be used. The desk looked like desks look when you have work to do - it watched like a dog with a lead in its mouth. Dasha felt dizzy and could hardly hear what was being said over the hum of this room.

The coroner, having had more liquid than lunch with the Russian counterparts in the taproom at The Spotted Cow, declined the offer of tea.

'Suit yourself,' said Gath with a twitch of the nose as she lowered her slight frame heavily into the armchair between Dasha and the coroner, 'But now. Would you mind telling us what on earth is going on?' The coroner hesitated, glancing across at Dasha whose eyes were wide and middle distant. All her watchmen had left their posts and joined an emergency meeting well down in the soul. 'Spit it out, we've had enough mystery for one day. I can't wait to hear what you've got to say for yourself,' Gath stared her best headteacher's study face over gold-rimmed glasses. The coroner ignored it and spoke straight across instead at Dasha,

'Again, please accept my apologies for intruding on you at this very difficult time. I have known your family for many years and I did feel that I should update you on the situation in person. Because your mother's remains were missing, I'm sure you will already have realised that there will need to be a full investigation. Oh yes, our Russian friends are going to have a field day with all of this. And unfortunately this is just the sort of thing they want for continuation of their diplomatic

wrangling, I mean, who knows what er legal guidance is being sought as we speak, of course I shouldn't really venture an opinion on this ... ' he paused, his hands neatly crossed over his attaché case, his eyes travelling the book-lined walls, allowing time for his words to percolate before he went on, 'Our foreign office is in turmoil, feathers everywhere - they are as far as thinking that this could actually start the war ... '

Gath cut in on one of her tangents, designed to wrestle conversational control from anyone beside herself who might be gaining a hold of it,

'Well I don't like the term *remains*, I don't like it at all, but I must say that this is just the sort of trouble you get with Leila.'

The coroner looked a bit taken aback, but continued,

'There's not much more I can say at the moment, however, after closer inspection of the coffin lining it would appear that there are no signs of decomposition, or in fact, that it has been occupied at all, which raises all sorts of questions, but might appease our opponents a little.' Dasha raised her head at these words and seemed to notice the coroner for the first time. He met her gaze and helped hold it steady.

'But what is this nonsense,' Gath drew herself up and reined in her chin, 'We were there at the funeral, all of us. Half the damned county was there. I made a *beautiful* watercress mayonnaise for the salmon, which I recall you yourself saying was delicious.'

'I am quite sure it was, however if I may continue, the foreign office intend to launch a hue and cry, a full scale missing person hunt if it looks like the Russians are set to accuse us of foul play ... '

'Missing person? *Missing person?* I laid her out myself. We saw her lowered into the ground. That casket cost more than you paid me in a year, don't think I don't notice these things ... '

It was an odd thing to say, given that the kindly old man had never had a house-duchess in his employ, but Gath seemed to have forgotten the coroner altogether and was now addressing the

library itself in a rising fury, “Why can't you ever be normal? Why does everything you do have to create such a mess? Couldn't you even die without starting a war!” Dasha flinched with each new burst as if Gath was shovelling clattering loads of soil down on top of her. The coroner liked his county cricket as much as the next Yorkshireman, but it had been a hard day already, fielding forward short leg in a minefield. He had been doing this job for a long time though, so he caught the ball,

'Miss Morton-Smith!'

Gath pulled up sharp at the firmness of the tone. Not a man to resort much to decibels, the coroner returned to his usual balance, 'perhaps I will take some of that tea now, if it's still on offer.'

Dasha, who had been gazing at Gath in horror, came round a little at the chance of reprieve. The room glowed from its windows and its fireplace. It had felt like a house with a life of its own since long before iHomes developed. It didn't have exciting applications like eat+heat waste disposal or photobacterial lighting, but what it lacked in modern gadgetry it made up for in personality. There was a similarity with the housekeeper in that respect, although personally, I'd side with the house. Gath heaved a shuddering sigh and grappled with the chair arms to hoist herself up. The coroner frowned at his neatly folded hands while the old lady made her way across the room. He waited for the latch of the door to close, then he raised his gaze to Dasha.

'When I came here today I wasn't sure what to do, I had a dilemma, because you see the coffin wasn't entirely empty. And technically this is evidence and shouldn't be released, but I can't help feeling that you should see it before anyone else ... '

Dasha listened with increasing animation as he explained. The lid had been so heavy they could hardly get it off. It had been lined with stone, to make the weight. And the last 21 grams, paper. A journal, like an afterthought, tucked into the lining. She watched his hands unfold, then move towards the clasp of his attaché and she absorbed the end of his explanation while he drew out a soft leather case. He rose, holding it out and placed it in her hands. He chose not to think about

how he would justify himself back at the office. Some explanations have a better chance if they're left to come fresh from the tap.

There was a rattle of china as the tea tray was placed on the hall table outside the door. The coroner suggested that she should keep the journal to herself for now, so she slipped across the room to secrete it in a mahogany writing slope which stood on the desk. The door handle turned and Dasha hurried back towards her seat.

Gath reversed into the room with the tray and was met by the coroner with his coat and case, 'I regret I must decline your very kind offer of tea after all, I have some urgent business to attend, I'm so sorry to have put you to such trouble,' as he manoeuvred past her, Gath's mouth fell open, denying her the chance to admonish the coroner for his reckless indecisiveness and the wasting of a fine Ceylon.

Dasha accompanied the coroner to the front door, her mind in a flat spin, relying on Gath to do what remained of the talking. The coroner paused on the step, buttoning his coat and reminded them that the police would need to come and ask some questions. The valley was tactlessly blooming as a backdrop to his gravitas. Little fat birds skittered across the grass. The coroner's eye rested briefly on a pile of brightly wrapped parcels on the hall table before he shook hands with the ladies and took his leave.

'Well I must say the years aren't doing him any favours,' said Gath as she closed the door, drawing Dasha with her along the hall, 'No. No. And he was no oil-painting to begin with.'

Dasha pictured the kind and serious face of the coroner; routinely incredulous at Gath's signature ability to dismiss people on any whim. She used the momentum to step softly out of the old lady's slipstream and slowed to watch the crow-hunch shuffle off towards the kitchen, then she made for the staircase. She gave the second and twelfth steps a skip, treacherous creakers that they were, and paused on the landing to hear Gath muttering 'High five.. High five,' to herself, cheering her own aged advances as she pushed the baize swing of the kitchen door below. Dasha waited a

second, then hung on till the twelfth before making for the library. She was intent on the journal, in its case, under the silence and suspense of the room.

In the short time since its arrival, she had been imagining all sorts of rituals and emotions in the opening of the case, which was made like an envelope, saddle stitched along the edges. Now it was in her hand she hesitated, found herself drained of all feeling, then lifted the flap and drew out the journal. There was no note. She looked again to be sure.

It was bound in goatskin of a soft blue with a curious pattern of dashes tooled across it in copper. It looked dispiritingly new, as if the coroner had picked it out on the way over so as not to arrive empty handed. As if there had been a fine Florentine bookbindery next to the chippy in the village. There was a ribbon tied round it with the loose ends restrained beneath sealing wax. Dasha stared hard at the bow but its neatly balanced loops offered nothing of the tier. All the same she didn't undo it, but reached for the paper knife and slid its edge between the cover and the ribbon to loosen the wax before she worked the bow gently over the top edge of the cover. In the weeks after she had lost her mother, nothing got done in the house. Dasha had screamed if anyone opened a drawer or moved a napkin, and the teacup by the bed had grown little green Jurassic islands as she fought for everything to be left to hold her mother's last touch.

She opened the cover, releasing a smoky floral scent. There was a faded quotation in her mother's ornate hand, and all the things knotted inside her stirred.

Nobody's immortal, but some of us have lived to write about it.

There was no other dedication. She leafed through it and found it to be satisfyingly full. There was a curious system in place of numbering at the tops of the pages, where Russian letters and little stars and scribbled animals seemed purposeful in some way. She turned back to the first page.

Today I began to see my reflection in unreflective things. I drove him to the station in the silence where he is unreachable remote and fails me on every attempt. It was spring when we left the house and when we got to the station there was snow lying over everything. He got out and walked away without looking back. I don't mind that, I know how he is, but how will I know when he is never coming back. I drove again between green fields and when I got home the garden was covered with fresh snow. In the war, he told me about leaving his company in a shell hole to take a message to another one. When he returned his company had suffered a direct hit and no longer existed, so he went to report at the other one again and it no longer existed either. He said it was the most liberating and damaging thing about war, that life for a soldier is only in the moments between two shell holes. This love is the same. He is incapable of dealing with the life in me.

Here was her mother's voice on the page. The smell of otherworld conjured up the lost sound of her laughter, as they'd rolled together in the snow sometime in thick fur coats. She felt the cold on her face and the warmth beneath. It had been so long since she'd unearthed a hidden memory and it kicked. What else was hidden from her inside her own self. Dasha wondered who 'he' was - her father? Was she the life he was incapable of dealing with? She sat for a moment with the journal pressed against her forehead and waited for tears which would not come.

'Here you are, dear,' Gath leant on a hand against the door post and laboured to compose herself after making the final furlong of the journey to the library with a remarkable return of early form, 'No. No. This is the last place I expected to find you. You had better come down,' her eyes narrowed and she made her way across the room, rising imperious, 'What is that you've got?' She paused as if the gap was for an answer, then changed tack, 'You had better leave that till later dear, whatever it is ... you have guests!' she made a play for the journal in Dasha's hands but met an unexpected resistance and was forced to wait, muttering justifications, while Dasha carefully slid

the ribbon back into place and re-enveloped her treasure, making sure the old lady's shadow didn't fall across it. This was all the power she really had and not for the first time she wished for her twenty-first birthday and the chance to pension off her housekeeper. Not for the first time that day either. Why did Gath always have to turn up when she was not wanted. Dasha lifted the lid of the writing slope and placed the journal inside. It fitted snugly but Dasha was reluctant to leave it. She looked at the photograph before her on the desk, of her mother's head and hers, facing away towards a background of lake. Little Dasha was almost resting against the shoulder, with one hand raised to the thickly braided bun of hair. It could have been her own head now she has grown up in full accordance with the blueprint, but she didn't find this maternal omnipresence helpful. She was imagining her mother's face behind the bun, far away from her and the moment, thinking about love and stations. Drawers were being opened and more napkins moved. She turned the little key and put it in her pocket. She didn't know yet that wherever a mother is, she is with her child. She didn't know this because however grand the legacy; rejection is the province of orphans. Dasha hadn't taken a good look in the mirror for a long time, or she might not have been so subdued. You can't keep hiding from it forever once you begin to see your reflection in unreflective things.

She had intended to return to the library almost straight away but she knew that Gath would be keeping a watchful eye. Dasha was overwhelmed by the one page she had read, or she would have noticed that the door of the housekeeper's sitting room was closed for a short while with the cord of the old hall-telephone just keeping it from latching. And then, before she knew it, a sort of wake was in full swing. Her parcels lay unopened on the hall table, receiving neither the real or faked enthusiasm which is the destiny of all birthday presents; and the journal lay alone in state on its desk, ticking.

...

Dasha had retreated to her room for a brief reprieve. She couldn't wait for everyone to go, but they kept on arriving: people she'd never met, or met once, or didn't recall. They made it impossible for her to read the journal. One single page had miraculously brought her a moment of sledging just from the mention of snow, her wet face hidden in the velvety warmth of her mother's collar. It had also brought a 'he'. Dasha had been lugging the corpse of her mother through cheerful parties for years. It had been important for this to go unnoticed. Now the burden of her body was apparently lifted, she was breaking out in the memories of all these visitors. All they wanted to talk about was Leila. It was an exhausting new offensive after a long hard march. The doorbell rang again and footsteps followed footsteps that had followed it down the hall. Pockets of activity stirred under her. Voices and the opens and closes of doors spiked across the last of the afternoon. She would have to go back and face it.

At the pause where the banisters curve into the landing, she looked down and saw a group gathered in conversation at the foot of the staircase next to the statues of Gog and Magog which guarded the sitting room doors. A tall, healthy, young man with a woollen hat jammed down to his eyebrows, stretched his arms wide and said something which made the others laugh. She heard Eve among them. As Dasha watched, the young man turned and headed for the door. Quitting on a good line. In silhouette he seemed familiar, but she knew that she'd never met him. He wasn't old enough to be one of Leila's. It gave her the strangest feeling that she was the ghost at her mother's party. Then he disappeared into the garden.

Back towards the foot of the stairs, the story had melted away leaving the hallway free of impediments, apart from the pile of presents. She chose the old service passage instead. It came out into the kitchen down a twist of dusty stairs. Dasha loved this part of the house. There was a little window halfway up, of ancient glass that bent the trees, and a faded sill of daffodil yellow that held the last of all sun and was home to a blue spotted cream jug. The top step was just the right width for a grown-up bum, a small one and a bedtime storybook, and the jug - whose purpose in life came

every May when it housed a handful of forget-me-nots - formed Dasha's earliest memory. It had also formed her mother's, which goes to show that Time is kept in many clocks.

Once back in the open it was hard to know where to go. Had there been invitations, what immortal hand or eye could have shaped such a guest list. Scanning the assorted contents of what couldn't be described as her birthday party, she saw unsettlingly familiar strangers mixed with total strangers chatting like old friends with her old friends. The house was looking timelessly beautiful. Laked in sunlight, it's the sort of house that grows with the number of visitors and seems to put on its own music. Gath hustled past, jowls quivering with a humph, 'The dishwasher is playing up again, right on cue...' people fell out of her path as she drove her hostess trolley laden with provisions, whiffling to herself through the tulgey woods. A group of people had taken occupation of the sitting room fireplace. Some were asking questions *sotto voce* and some seemed intent on inward thoughts. Three Londony women with an air of media tolerance were holding court by the window. One of them was a famous clairvoyant. They spotted Dasha as she entered and made polished efforts to look like they hadn't. Dasha kept moving, making sure to offer a welcome without traceable eye-contact. She sensed nudges and whispered comments around her and she raised her hands before her in a gesture of apology, hoping to look like she was busy but couldn't wait to return. What a show to be the star of. She couldn't understand what they were all doing here, or why they seemed to be staying. But it *was* the first word from the grave in a long time.

A sort of Scandinavian contingent with outdoor smiles was taking an interest in something in a China cabinet by the door. Sudo was trying to act his way through an explanation Dasha recognised as being about the mummified tongue, by far and away the least appealing thing in the cabinet, but it had always seemed to draw an unfair amount of attention. As she tried to slip past, a whiff of flowery perfume was all the warning she got, before the famous clairvoyant caught up with her. It was too late for Dasha to put her phone to her ear and pretend to be talking; she was trapped.

'My, there hardly seems a need for introductions,' began the clairvoyant, in a well-drained

gush; carefully irrigated to suit the occasion. She had beautifully sleek hair of a sort of greenish gold and her powder was warm as cinnamon. She smiled kindly, an intelligent smile, and offered Dasha a veined and jewelled set of neat nails to shake. The hands always show the age, Dasha thought as she looked back at the face and waited for it to continue, 'I don't know if you know my work, but of course I know you already – you are the image, the very presence of Leila,' she rolled the *r* theatrically and looked almost sharply at Dasha for a hint of recognition.

'Er... yes of course,' Dasha went for, 'Although I don't think we've actually met before.'

'Of course, of course we have, but many years ago. No need for formalities, my gifts tell me everything I need to know,' and with scarcely a pause she went on, 'Now my dear, about this strange business. Tell me everything.'

Dasha was about to laugh at this but caught the guileless look just in time. It was disappointing to realise that the famous clairvoyant's gifts didn't include some sense of irony or self-mockery - attributes much prized by Dasha, 'It's such a peculiar situation isn't it. We are all agog. And we have very little to go on despite coming so far. Could you shed some light. You were there at the exhumation?'

Dasha felt sure she needed no gifts of her own to be forming a healthy dislike for the woman before her. Travelled so far have we, she thought, and here come the Frankincense and Myrrh. The clairvoyant's companions arrived and flanked her. They too beamed at Dasha from beneath expensive haircuts, and added their encouragement for her to confide, while offering names and hands. It was just the sort of encounter she'd been dreading.

'We would very much like to know what was in the coffin.'

'We are here to help. This is rather our area if you like.'

'I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean,' Dasha hated herself for beginning sentences with an apology, a habit which grew from an inner disdain for bullies and a thick outer-coating of county manners.

The leader called them off with a remark more aimed at the casual,

'The house is looking just as gorgeous as ever. Do you get to spend much time here with your studies?'

'Not really,' said Dasha.

'I used to love coming here,' she looked as if she really meant it, 'Yes. An unusual place. I live in one of those oh so serviceable apartments nowadays. Somewhere along the line I changed romantic clutter for functional elegance. We should be able to predict that it fosters a certain emptiness, but it is hard to go back.' Dasha tried to picture this neat creature rolling on the floor with a hairy dog, or slipping on chicken shit outside the kitchen door. The famous clairvoyant cut short the defeat by continuing, 'Avoid success. It rubs off all your edges.'

'But think of all the money saved in furniture polish,' Dasha had previously noted that there were two kinds of response to such an unclear remark. People either pretended they knew what you were talking about, or on rare occasions caught it like a rope and used it to pull alongside with something refreshing. It was the clairvoyant's last chance.

'Quite, quite. As you say ... It really feels like your mother is here doesn't it. What did happen today? There must have been something. A message of some kind? Perhaps you will not find it strange under the circumstances, when I say that I can see the hues which surround you.' Dasha winced an almost undetectable wince which was promptly detected, 'And even if you don't believe in our *mumbo jumbo*, you have to admit, anyone close to your mother could tell you about her love of boxes. And none of them was ever left empty.'

Dasha wondered if that was what all the visitors were doing here, expecting a rabbit out of a hat. She glanced round the room, it was such a broad mix of people she couldn't read it. It was as if the immigration department, the job centre and Harrods had all been evacuated into one market square. She caught Sudo's eye. He raised an artefact in a gesture of encouragement as he listened to one of his mountaineers. She thought of the journal, could they know? More likely a wild stab

given their profession, and her mother's box collection was no big secret, it was just big,

'Actually I found one just today with nothing inside it, so that makes two,' it came out quite crisp.

'Really? Well how fascinating, and what sort of box was that?' These women seemed ready to bite on to anything.

'Oh.. er, you know, just a box. They're everywhere.'

'Yes, fascinating,' said the clairvoyant, more to herself than anyone, her eyes flitting around, as if following the patterns in the carpet would lead her to something. Dasha braced herself for what might come next then felt a hand on her arm. Sudo. He towered over the ladies making vague noises about catering as he steered Dasha before him out of the door.

'Sorry dude, couldn't get here any faster, vile creatures. I'd try the garden if I were you, softer crowd.'

'Mmm. Cheers,' said Dasha, 'Might be safer, they probably have to avoid daylight, along with garlic and silver bullets.'

As she passed the dining room door, Dasha caught sight of Eve handing plates around and went in. It was pleasanter in here, more familiar faces, and she took the plate she was offered glad of something to do. A couple of people even wished her a happy birthday and suggested nice things to tempt her instead of firing questions at her. She hovered beside Eve for a while, listening to her talk about her next expedition and then slipped out to the garden so no-one would see her ditch most of her food.

Little white tables were dotted around the lawn. You could almost smell the croquet. A couple of guys with guitars were strumming and comparing chords. There was a lot more effort going into drinking out here and a more festival feel. Some younger teens, the offspring of cousins, had been set to field a baby and kept breaking off from their screens to catch it before it crawled into the pond. They waved cheerfully. There were some glamorous women smoking and talking

earnestly in proximity to the musos and a guy in a creased linen suit who was wandering between the borders with a half-decent bottle of Fonseca 17 in one hand and a cigar in the other, commenting occasionally across the lawn to no-one in particular. Sudo had made his way out too and was deep in with a group discussing whether the ancient Egyptians had help from space with the building of the pyramids. He'd brought the mummified tongue out to see if it would give any comment.

'Wow, there are people I actually know here,' said Dasha as one of the girls put her feet down and made room for her at the table. One or two people who still did the kissing thing, came up and kissed her. One of the smaller cousins brought her a flower. The man with the bottle was negotiating a wasp in the background, legs planted wide - more on account of the late bottled vintage than the wasp, which he kept making swipes at with his cigar.

'Who's Linen Suit Guy?'

'Don't worry about him, one of Sudo's designer buddies, a bit Merchant Ivory but he's harmless,' Sli said looking up from his guitar, chin still doing the beat.

'How come you're all here guys?' Dasha asked the general vicinity as lightly as she could.

'Nearest thing to a drama we could find.'

'Free drinks on a Friday afternoon.'

'Mate, it's your birthday. And your mom's resurrection. May as well celebrate.'

'Wow.' said Dasha again, sitting down and accepting the glass of fizz which was handed to her along with the kind of comments you can take from your own kind. She pushed the food around a bit on her plate, admiring the even crumb of Eve's lemon Madeira, wishing she could do it justice, she let herself rest amidst the familiar conversations.

'You know Cleopatra lived closer to the time of the moon landing than she did to the building of the pyramids.'

'They re-opened Cern to break physics, man. They smash atoms together and get all these micro-singularities and they enlarge them into windows on parallel time ... '

'Who takes things from the mini bar?'

'Except Sli, he calls reception for the pillow menu for fuck's sake. '

'In a BB in Wolverhampton.'

'All she cares about is if my tits and my arse are more or less beautiful than hers. I bet Dasha knows who I'm talking about- hey cuz who is it who's obsessed with...' she didn't need to finish,

'Veronica,' said Dasha without looking up and the girls laughed.

'Exactly.'

'You can't help becoming your parents. I realised recently, when I point at something in the distance, I'm pointing with my dad's finger. '

Dasha thought about the journal. She could feel its presence beyond the upper windows. Not in the famous clairvoyant sense, more the million pounds cash, or freshly loaded gun sense. Over and over, who is 'he', what else did it say, and why was it there at all? She forgot to wonder much about the missing body. For the moment, it didn't feel like there was a body because the journal felt alive. The shadows were slow to grow across the lawn and the guests showed no signs of departing, their numbers grew. Dasha watched cars arriving more than leaving and a swiftmarkt courier appeared twice with supplies. Someone she didn't recognise rocked up with a roar and a spray of gravel, leaving a regal Delta Integrale running as he went up the front steps. The car, observed by all but its owner, cut its own engine, raised its own windows and flashed a smug flash from all four corners as he entered the house. She kept half an eye out for the tall young man with the woolly hat she had

watched down in the hallway. He had seemed so familiar. She wanted to know who he was. He appeared to be one of the few guests who had actually left.

3

The Way Back

Dasha watches the forests and rivers rise and fall and waits for George to return. An old lady with a straight but smile-creased face is the only other occupant at the moment, it being nearly dinnertime. She sits comfortably upright, staring intently, her feet hovering squarely six inches above neatly placed slippers.

George is smoking in the next carriage which is a coupé with a corridor running alongside the compartments. These places can be quite sociable although George has been tamping himself down in a fit of homophobiaphobia. By now it's his third smoking foray and he will be starting to realise that unusual levels of a sort of national gusto are to be had from Russians. It's what they call *dusha*, the soul, the Russian soul. He has already witnessed one man being clutched by the legs while suspended out of the window to retrieve a half-smoked cigarette lodged in the footgrate. As they hauled him back in, he seemed delighted it was still lit. He held his prize up to George and said thickly, 'Smoking. Dangerous for health'.

The carriage has a technical translation professor - the one with the whiskers - as its steward. He smokes like a navy. There is a tradition for carriages to be hosted by engineers and academics, lured out of university staff jobs and industrial middle management for the firmer wages of train butling. This one is shuttling east and west in a blissful limbo of bitterness, with more opportunities to speak English than he ever dreamed in his linguistic role. He could have been a revolutionary before he became a walrus. He is delighted with George, and not at all pleased that there is a

contender in their midst, a doctor on the way to a conference, who speaks a similar sort of English to himself. The walrus keeps pulling conspiratorially at George and pivoting round as he speaks until his back is towards the doctor. He has been telling George how the great Kalashnikov himself, rest his soul, had worked on this line before landing the job in automatic weapons. He had wanted to invent an engine that could run forever, and liked to say he could have designed a new train if he'd stayed on the railway.

The doctor beats him to his finish line, 'It would have looked like an AK-47 though, if he had.' And the walrus sags a little, as if it will be a long winter with a lot of competition for the last of the fish.

Dasha hears George returning, saying goodbye to the talkers in the corridor. She shortens up her gaze while he slides into his seat behind the table. There are two glasses of tea with spoons in them. They have metal holders round them which form a handle. A small glass dish of honey sits between.

'You know what,' he starts in, 'I hate honey.'

'You do? You used to like it.'

'No I hate it. It smells of bees.'

Dasha sighs and leans forward a little with a humour-you shake of the head while George goes on, 'And I hate people who say "wherefore art thou sugar?" because they think it means, "where's the sugar?"' he gazes meaningfully at Dasha who looks like she is going to cry for a second. He waits for her reply.

'Because somehow they avoided doing Romeo and Juliet? As a valuable and enriching part of their curriculum?' she asks.

'That's quite a small part of it, but no, you're right. It changed *my* life. Why not theirs? Now, what about you young lady.'

'White Buddhists,' she mumbles, 'I hate them.'

'You're not even trying,' says George.

'Okay,' she pulls herself together, 'Getting a lift from two people in a sports coupé,' she says and George considers,

'Hmm. One of them has to get out, they have to pull the seat forward and you have to clamber into the back, yeah that's utter bobtash, you can have that one.' He watches Dasha carefully remove the spoon from her tea so as not to stir up the bed of sugar it inevitably conceals.

'And you have to do it all again for the goodbyes. And it's probably raining,' she says.

George smiles,

'Yes, okay, we're getting somewhere, now what about organised fun? How much do you hate that? Corporate ice-breakers, party games – not this obviously, this is a military technique – but hating organised fun in general, can I count on your support?'

'Oh, I hate organised fun. We're in company there.'

'Good,' says George, 'Now, how about Brody's lip?'

'Brody is widely regarded as serious to severe silver screen eye candy George, I don't see it with the lip at all.'

'No, I'm telling you, the lip is all wrong. It renders the perfection of all his other features ghoulish by association.' They laugh. The game takes hold. They have played it all their lives, to pull each other back from the abyss.

'You know those old packets of dry instant noodles? I hate it when people get a saucepan out and cook them. Their instant status disqualifies the pan. Surely people know this. And people who cut pizza with scissors, even though it's not a bad idea. And I bloody hate melon ballers.'

'Thick and fast now, you get it all out.'

'Oh, I intend to. What about movies, when they show a horse and there's always a whinny on the soundtrack. Or if there's a dog there's always a bark or a whine. Or a pig ...'

'You hate overly dubbed signature vocals when animal actors are in shot. They do it with

ventilators in hospital scenes too. Makes perfect sense dearest. But now let me tell you what I hate most of all,' he pauses dramatically, 'I hate people who let you haul your cookies all the way to Russia in a heroic act of friendship and you get there, and they aren't in the mood to tell the fucking story,' He stirs his tea, tastes it, then looks aghast at the bowl of honey the steward brought, 'Two days. *Two days on a train!* Two days one way on a train full of honey.' He glances across at the old lady. She's in it for the long haul, and doesn't understand a lick of English. She's taking this opportunity to acclimatise though, having lived through times already where no preps for what might lie ahead were wasted. She stares on.

'Okay. Where do I start?' says Dasha.

'With Vanya of course. What happened?'

'No, not there. It's too recent,' and now that she is reminded of just how recent it is with one of those stabs reserved for heartbreaks, she goes back as far as she can from getting to that. Right back to the Lake House.

'Good tactic,' says George, 'Specially given the length of this train ride. Did I mention it takes two days.'

The Way There

Dasha slunk into the orangery, to the last of the light falling through fig trees and the familiar tendrils of sweet bush smoke from the stoners. God bless the stoners, chatting like they'd chatted round the coffee tables and campfires of a stateless Bohemia longer than life. She got a nod, 'alright Dash' as she passed, heading for the far end where the oldest trees were and windows that looked out to the lake. The mynah bird waddled close along the edge of a trough, eyeing the fish that rose up to the surface before dissolving under fronds. The volume of conversation behind the windows

receded and the journal pounded in her head. She had loved to hear Leila stories, till adolescence when she drowned in resentment, till her mind had pushed opaque cushions of fog towards the idea of her mother. Now the journal burned like summer and everything was starting to evaporate.

'Your mother liked to say she would have to become immortal to avoid her own funeral.'

Dasha was startled by a deep desi voice behind her. She turned to find smart snowy hair bent over the filling of a pipe, as if the intrusion was a casual continuation.

'I'm sorry?'

'She said the guest mix and their variety of Leilas would be, cacophonous. And that everyone would leave feeling like they never knew her at all,' The pipe was ready but for the press of a thumb to tuck in loose ends before the lighting. Dasha was surprised to find herself waiting for this, and even more surprised when it happened, just as her head had expected.

'She had a point. She's my mother and I know less than anyone,' it was a whisper with a crack in it. The old man gazed at her, keen eyes in a nut brown face. It was like walking into light. She recognised him as the owner of the Delta Integrale which had made quite an entrance when she had been sitting in the garden. She recalled a photo and wild tales of prison and money and political antics in a far away homeland, and though the photo, like most others in the library, had him turned away from the camera, it was close up, he was waving over his shoulder from a retreating cabriolet, you could feel him laughing, and she knew it was the same man. There were tribal spirals coming to fine points where his haircut turned into a shave.

'You're Tabriz,' she said.

'At your service,' he raised a gold lighter to the bowl of the pipe and puffed it to life. The smell was magical, 'It's good to see you again.'

'Have we met before?'

'Sure. Your mother and me, we go way back. All the same, it's shocking, you are shockingly

similar.'

'I don't like talking about my mother.'

Tabriz formed a smoke ring, his jawline tightened, a long scar whitening across his cheekbone to match. The smoke ring broadened and shimmered into haze.

'Shame, she's a great subject. And she demands to be talked of today don't you think? She was always one for switching it up, always up to something our Leila,' The easeful tone went well with his air of power, 'It really is good to see you again.'

Dasha had the strange feeling he wasn't talking just to her. The smokers had gone from the far end and the sounds of the party were softened by the darkness which grew beneath the leaves. Despite the silver of his hair, and a slight stiffness to his standing, he seemed close to her and his claim of kinship had a misdated feel to it, like nothing was what it was any more. Dasha felt herself relax. A man of complex mysteries Tabriz, I wonder if he knew this time. An ancient friendship was beginning.

There's a word in mynah that announces a car or a cat coming up the driveway and it rings in the marrow of the nearest bones; a precursor to the Jeevesian sonorousness of the front door bell. The doorstep was certainly racking up some material for its memoirs. Through the window they heard Gath's salutation and a responding volley of posh and fruity tones.

'Agatha my dear! What a business this is!'

'That's Pete,' said Tabriz, 'Boy is this ever a museum.'

Dasha smiled, 'Must be getting on for dinner time, Pete's clock is a big plate with knife and fork hands.'

'Times don't change. You're even sounding like your mother,' Tabriz watched Dasha begin to look offended and then realise she wasn't. He laughed. She laughed. They listened again, but the voices had dropped to a muffle. They waited and, as if someone had fiddled with the cables in the back of her, Gath suddenly resumed full volume,

'Certainly no topic for the doorstep I'm sure. You'd better come in, *an' shut yer trap!*' Her faux-Yorkshire sounded like the call of some extinct creature rather than the patois of local humans, but that's Gath for you. There followed a pause long enough for Pete's jacket to be hung in the boot room. Dasha stole a look at Tabriz and saw his gaze fixed middle distant and an internal audit being undertaken, then Pete loud and clear again commenting on the number of coats,

'Balin and Dwalin here already I see. Is there talk of goblins and gold and the depredation of dragons?' English professors are known to save money on business cards in this way, but Gath on her day was a match for anyone and she certainly knew her hobbits which she made clear as she preceded Pete along the hallway,

'Make way, make way, I fear a most *wretched* adventure has come into the house.' The Professor's reply to this, all but the chortle, was lost in the interior.

'Haven't heard those two sparring forever,' Tabriz ran a rueful hand round the back of his neck.

'How long has it been?'

He tapped out his pipe on the sill,

'No time at all.'

'How did you come to be here now?'

'One of those things. She always gathered a crowd your mother, I bet I'm not the only one here who expected something odd to happen.'

'Whatever that means.'

Tabriz looked at Dasha's pale face. He seemed to realise something,

'You know, your mother had a gift for knowing things. You'll have it too.'

'No. I really don't.'

'Well if it's any consolation, your mama didn't know shit at your age, I'd say you have the edge,' He smiled rather impishly, 'and once you know something, it finds a way to exist - you learn

a new word, someone uses it the very next day, right? That's how it goes,' He laid his hand on her shoulder. A smooth gesture despite his being half a head shorter, 'Whatever was in that coffin, it will help.'

Dasha tensed, 'But the coffin was emp ...'

'Yeah, so I hear, so I hear. When Leila was killed off, that wasn't the last word. It couldn't be. We're talking about a woman who wrote notes for her dog here, we're talking about a woman who always had a plan.'

'Are you saying she knew she was going to die?'

'I'm saying, if I know Leila she would have made sure that if anything happened to her she'd leave a last word, and somehow, this is it. Have you considered how you'd be feeling this evening if they'd just taken a DNA swab from a corpse and put it back. Sorry, but doesn't this feel a bit more upbeat? Empty vessels, you know.'

Dasha wondered if she should tell him about the journal. Tabriz seemed like an ally, but where had he been all these years? What if he already knew about it. She stayed silent. When he spoke again, his tone had changed,

'You know what I think. I think it's getting gloomy out here. That damned bird has gone to bed, how about we go and see what's cracking in the kitchen,' He offered her his arm with a courtly flourish. She took it, and drifted a hand across the trough as she let herself be led away. It was satisfying to watch them linger and laugh at something by the door, bathed in domestic light. I enjoyed that evening, that wake, that birthday, whatever it was, seeing old faces, making connections, marvelling at the turnout, more than I could have imagined. The hands on the clock turn. The thaw sets in.

...

'She loved this sort of joke you know. She put an advert in the local paper once - Spy work undertaken. No job too small. If your cat is missing its fleas give me a call,' It was later evening now and Eve was buttering rye toast, right up to the edges in brisk scratchy swoops, 'She didn't put any contact details, it just made her laugh to see it there in the classifieds. It's just what she was like.'

The kitchen was quieter, with conspiratorial lamplight which cast the palms into tropical shadows and put the tall arches of the ceiling to blur. Gath was serving brandies in the big sitting room and keeping the guests entertained, whilst Dasha was enjoying the sanctuary of the inner circle. The poodle, well into sleep, had untucked his paws and lay flat out on his side.

'Yeah man, remember that plaque?' Asked Sli, twinkling Cockney enthusiasm like he does. Dasha didn't. 'I bet it's still there. This house keeps everything, come on let's have a look. You'll like it,' He swept the joint that he had been making off the counter and Sudo stirred. The toaster popped again and Eve turned towards it. Dasha rose to join them knowing it could be something or it could be nothing more than a way outside. She paused by the door and turned back,

'Eve, who was that guy you were talking to in the hall earlier? The tall one with the woolly hat.'

'Guy with a hat? I don't remember any guy in a hat.'

'It was this afternoon. You were in a group by the statues of Gog and Magog in the hall. You were all laughing. He had blond hair, or the bits sticking out of the hat looked blond. Tall. Kind of sporty looking.' She had wanted to say hot looking.

Eve gave her an odd look,

'I don't remember talking to anyone in the hall. Too busy feeding the endless hordes.'

'Okay, never mind,' Dasha set off out of the door before calling back, 'And thanks so much for holding it all up as usual.'

Eve smiled to herself as she went back to the toast.

The garden lay like dreams. All whispery and redolent. They walked under the trees, away from the deep and shrill of party voices, down a path which led sneakily to the main gates. Dasha followed the guys, thinking back through everything. Talking to Tabriz had been the start of all sorts of conversations about her mother. He had made her see that in some way, she had more of her mother now and it made her feel less threatened by the guests, although they kept coming, and she had made more effort to engage. People she'd never met had spoken warmly to her as if she was part of their lives. For the first time in a long while, Dasha had begun to feel at home in her own house. When she and Tabriz had gone inside, Pete had got onto first meetings. She had never known how he and her mother had met. She had never imagined him as anything other than a bookish sort, but he had told her about becoming her mother's gardener once upon some time or another,

'It was a little house, very old, a wizard house she would call it. It made itself invisible in the street but once it had called your attention, well, it was delightful. An usual place. Timeless of course, ill-tamed chaos, it was a place where you had ideas. She didn't have much money then so I decided that I could make her gardens a showcase for my work. They were lovely sunny gardens. And I suppose I was drawn to spending time there. I suspect I may have been a little in love.'

'With the house? Or with her? No. Don't answer that. That's a thought I could do without, so please don't go any further with that,' Dasha had said, although she quite enjoyed the unusual feeling of normal teenage disgust.

'Alright,' said Pete, 'Point taken. Now where was I?' He had a habit of telling his stories like he gave his lectures, with a sort of rehearsed feel which flattened the tale. Dasha definitely preferred that to the spontaneous addition of emotional details so she put on her sweetest most-interested face while Pete clicked on his next slide, 'Ah yes. The doorstep was indicative, with scenty climbers gone wild and a lion with the door knocker in his jaws. Proper old door you know. Then it had this porthole, and when you knocked, the glass went clear for a blink so she could see who was there.'

Eve had passed a glass of port across to Pete and he had rumbled appreciatives at her before returning to his speech, 'Anyway, I put the plan to her - a glorious garden at no extra cost. She came straight back with, But what about the poor dandelions? As if they were her life's work. And I looked at this desultory collection of weeds and half-throttled poppies and things, I mean it wasn't very appealing, but she insisted, the dandelions had to be part of it.'

Some of the other listeners had shown amusement at this and Pete, who never let an opportunity for explaining something pass, had explained, 'Your mum could make big things happen, but she did it by focussing on some very small inconvenient detail and giving it a legendary significance. It was her trademark. Say she wanted a bridge blowing up, she could get right round you ever actually agreeing to it by diverting you into the glory of some small part of the project.'

Dasha had found this example worth a query, although the day had held enough surprises for incendiary moments not to stick out much,

'Did you say blowing up a bridge?'

'We-ell, I don't know, if she *had* wanted a bridge blowing up you would never actually have been asked in so many words, it would have been the challenge of making it authentic that would draw you in. Could you create the moment for her, running along, low to the ground, unspooling wire, culminating in one of those old fashioned detonations where you grasp the handlebars and push down. It was all about how good it would feel, the spooling, a bit of cover to dive behind, then the proper T handle. Boom! Never mind all the rest of it, the danger, you know, the acquisition of enough C4 explosive, yards and yards of PETN detonation cord, the risk of prison, that wouldn't matter a damn,' He was twinkling at her, 'I should say I am in full accord with the spool. And the handle. There's really no other way for these matters to be conducted.'

Dasha digested this as she listened. Pete had a well-ploughed face, and for a second she could have imagined him in some distant past with streaks of gunpowder mapping out the future creases. And behind, a vivid image of a bridge being raised to a skyful of kindling, completing the

curve of its moment, raining lumps and shards to thunder the name of gravity, 'Well it was just an example ... I made a lovely little feature of the dandelions, with bluebells and hellebores. Beehaven she called it.'

He had brushed it off, but Dasha made a shift from looking at a professor of literature who used to be a gardener, to looking at a man who seemed to know a lot about detonation cord. She was now wearing the face children level at their grandparents when they find out how babies are made and have counted their uncles and aunts. She had no idea how much it was going to become this season's face.

'She told me she had found a better way to grasp state brutality by perfecting her technique at weeding out dandelions,' said a guy who had been set to work slicing more cake and arranging it on a tray.

'She told *me* that a lawnful was one of the most affordable and accurate clocks,' said the famous clairvoyant starsign columnist. Her voice was a gentle waft, but Dasha wasn't fooled. Tabriz had raised an eyebrow for Dasha, and Dasha had wondered if the family acquaintance with the clairvoyant was Gath's fault. They certainly had features in common - abrasiveness for one - and they both used 'my dear' in a way that reminded Dasha of the application of roses to imprison Sleeping Beauty.

'You know how she'd justify those contradictions?' Eve had said. And Sli and Sudo had answered more or less together,

'She was surfing divergent time frames.'

'Of course,' Dasha had said, 'You know, you two should try divergent time frames yourselves, or quit going halvesies on your scripts.' It was a common target for mockery, the way the guys often spoke in unison.

It had been nice to hear them laughing at Leila. She had become a bit sanitised in the hallowed guise of death and Dasha had often felt unworthy hearing stories of her mother's

supervenient existence. It's amazing what cheer you can find even in the most unpleasant conditions; there are some damned good parties in foxholes. The air was soft. The day so far had left her alive. In a one-snowdrop-of-spring kind of way, it had left her mother alive as well. An idea too far out for Dasha to let herself think about, so she refocussed on the path through the trees and whatever it was Sli wanted to show her.

As she came up to the perimeter wall, she found the guys rummaging in the ivy. It gave off a rich earthy scent as they stirred it, lifting its curtains to search the wall.

'It's here somewhere ... '

'Must be ...'

'The other side of the gate?'

Dasha stood back drifting with her thoughts and had pretty much forgotten what they were looking for when called back by Sudo as he unveiled a rusted blue circular plaque about eight feet up. He leaned into the fight with the ivy to keep it in view for her to read.

The Vremyanovas
Innovators of Time Travel
and
Heroes of the Great Anticapitalist Revolution
lived here in
2016, 1475, 2143, 1998, 1846, 4BCE etc.

The ivy, deciding that the plaque had won for now, gave way and deposited Sudo head first

into the twiggery and woodlice that it had lovingly collected for just such a moment and laughter secured the plaque's victory.

'I feel like I remember it,' said Dasha, with a look of wonder, 'Was it put up by a guy with a bandanna and the sort of beard that looks like it has birds nests in it?'

'Dunno. Sounds about right, Wherever there's a garden there's a dude with a beard with nests in it,' Sudo's voice had thumps in it as Sli helped get some of the compost off his back, 'It was probably Pete.'

Dasha smiled,

'The guy who put it up, I think he gave me a Mr Tom bar.' Not for the first time that evening she found she knew more than she thought. From some recess, she recalled thick red socks, horrible short shorts and hairy old legs. It was almost like time travelling, the way this memory appeared, 'He's probably here actually, in the kitchen right now, eating our toast.'

In fact the whole day had a feeling of history re-shuffling itself. Dasha's head was swimming. Time was jangled and the reason had gone on the lam from its own grave. She badly wanted peace now to read the journal. She was tired of the houseful of characters, 'I'm sorry but who *are* all the people ... here. Tonight?'

Sli swiped his hands clean on his jeans,

'Fuck knows who half of them are. Saw you chattin' breeze with Tabriz though, eh. The guy is a legend, I knew you'd get along.'

'But why are they all here?'

'It's in the news, innit? The non-exhumation. Inhumation? Whatever it is.'

'Yeah. But they started arriving before anyone could've known about all of that,' She looked from Sli to Sudo. She was getting that feeling again that everyone knew more than she did, and the more she tried to find out, the vaguer the answers became, 'It doesn't make sense.'

'Yeah, it's crazy.'

Dasha hesitated before asking, 'But why did we let them all in?'

'They must've knew the code, man,' Sli chuckled the cockney chuckle, 'Sorry dude, come on, we'd better get back.'

Dasha didn't follow immediately. Her nerves were fraying again, the old feeling of impotence, sidelined from her own mother who belonged to everyone but her. She looked up at the plaque and her mood softened. There was something about it which grew the scent of the journal and lessened the lonely ache. She took her phone out of her pocket, snapped it with the flash, and sent it to George. The evening was still. Her phone lit, everything became very dark around, and a wind stirred and she looked up from the screen waiting for her eyes to readjust. Events were taking such an odd turn. Just because everything had been odd enough already, didn't seem like an adequate excuse. She found herself half wondering if Tabriz and the clairvoyants, maybe even Pete with his incendiary knowledge, were really time travellers. It was the kind of thought that would have delighted a mother who went to the trouble of putting up such plaques. Then she heard a noise. Something was pushing towards her through the thicket. Something large and unconcerned by the undergrowth. Her vision blotted and her skin prickled. Something with bulk and heavy, twig-snapping feet. Sli and Sudo were just faint syllables in the distance. She felt a Hansel and Gretel shiver of lost in the woodsness. She felt a wolf on the next pageness. She didn't wait any longer, setting off at a run to catch up with the others.

Almost out of earshot, the guys were strolling along,

'I knew it'd be there,' said Sli, 'This house keeps everything.'

'It's the parable of the coke bottle ... ' Sudo raised the joint and used it as a conductor's baton and Sli joined in the chant, 'Retrieving Which, Zoomo (Fox-Red Labrador, 20th Century) looked Into My Eyes and Each Saw The Other's Soul.' They laughed.

'Ah the good old password. I'm just so glad she's back,' they laughed again, then a few more

strides, slowed in a cedar shadow to relight, and settled there for Dasha to catch up, which she did, in uncharacteristically expeditious strides.

'What's up Dashers? Seen a ghost?'

'Heard something big in the bushes. I confess to panic.'

'Probably a badger, there's loads of em in the covert. Here, we were just talking about The Code.'

Dasha hated the code. A silly reference to an old Coca Cola bottle her mother had had framed after a nice game with it and the dog. The inner circle used it as a greeting, in answer to the question, 'What hangs by the door?' Dasha had never looked into Zoomo's eyes and seen anything but frosted glass. He had nosed and eared his way through the latter years of his long, waggy life, occasionally bumping into chairs which had been moved. Dasha thought passwords should be the province of children not mothers. But the plaque was working a feeling in her that was quite new. She'd found her dedication. 'The Vremyanovas'. That included her.

There are eleven times in a twelve hour clock cycle, when both hands overlay. The tell-the-same times. This time, someone opened the door of Leila's library. Someone who should have knocked. It caught the room unawares but it was not a room to be defeated. There was a light switch just where you would feel for it but it was sealed in a little Tiffany frame. The actual switch made you think again and brought up a rich glow of lamps arranged for dreamfulness in places and for detailed focus over the most useful-looking surfaces. A tall cabinet containing shelves of boxes, some of great value with gold inlaid, rare and beautiful woods. The collection had outgrown this formal housing so that some of the light pooled over carved sandalwood and lacquer and intricately painted caskets and a whole timeline of chests and trunks stacked like Inca wall behind the desk. It was hard to know where to start. Beside the closing of the door, somewhere between the first and second light switch, was a glass case where reposed the muddy plastic coke bottle against green satin with 'RW,

Z (F-RL 20C) LIMEAESTOS' inked beneath it on a white card. As the intruder leaned in to scrutinise the explanation of this mystery, someone was heard approaching the room, which caused the intruder to jump, which caused a beat up little box to be nudged off its shelf towards the floor. It hit a corner of something else on the way down and released its noisy contents on the carpet. Someone was climbing the staircase, getting closer, grumbling to themselves and muttering 'high five, high five' at each step. The intruder scraped together rings, scraps of leather, worthless looking trash, not what they had been looking for at all. Haste was all there was time for as the shuffly footsteps outside closed in.

Gath had seen the light under the door as she attained the summit of the stairs and stopped. Hearing nothing, she opened the door. She took in the room, the half-closed box on its shelf beneath the coke bottle, and made her way across to close the balcony doors, wrestling the curtains as if they had wind behind them. 'High five, High five,' Age makes mountains of the smallest task.

Back in the kitchen, Dasha settled herself by the Aga and read George's reply,

-- Excellent. Everything now makes total sense +_+ --

A googly-eyed sort of a fellow with impaired speech, was making small talk with Pete. He was telling him his sister had a cat. Pete for once in his academic life looked conversationally rudderless. The guys and Tabriz were sharing the humour of it. The doorbell rang again. A short blast followed by a longer one. Before Pete could think of something to say, the googly-eyed sort, whose name was Adam, said,

'Izotfeez,' and looked delightedly at Pete.

The rarity of unbridled joy flashing its beam across Pete's windows was wasted somewhat on his failure to comprehend and give any sort of encouraging reply. Adam began to repeat the word

over and over with an urgency which rent the ears, 'IZOTFEEEZ!'

Pete appealed to an athletic-looking specimen, apparently Adam's companion. The athletic specimen smiled encouragingly, but wasn't about to spoil the fun of seeing all that education and privilege ruffled. The doorbell rang once more and this time it didn't stop. An authoritative palm was grinding the button into its housing with little thought of mercy.

The effect was impressive. Seemingly everyone in the house took the tolling to be for themselves and the ground floor rooms spilled people into the hallway. By the time the kitchen delegation reached the scene, the front door, which was putting in as much overtime as the step, had had its bolt drawn, and the penultimate guest stormed it from the exterior and fell into the assembled crowd.

'Christ!' he said in well-ironed Gordonstone, 'Half the county standing round and no-one takes the initiative? I was actually being *hunted* out there! Why the hell is that beast loose?'

'What beast?' someone asked as Sli made it to the front and offered up the customary password prompt to a man that he knew only too well,

'Here, what hangs by the door, man?' He had meant it as a sort of greeting, but the newcomer didn't receive it in a particularly positive way,

'It wasn't a fox red twentieth century Labrador I can tell you that much, it was a *fucking bear!* I don't know why such an animal has been let loose in the garden but it stalked me up the drive, so stop behaving like children and let me get in for chrissake!'

No-one seemed to know what he was talking about. Dasha had met this man many times before. The Meissen cups and thins instead of biscuits went onto the tray when he came to the Lake House, never by appointment, and he drawled his way through accounts and statements and patted her on the back of being richer than before thanks to his visionary management of the estate. Rupert Stanhope had studied with her mother. They had both joined the officer training corps in freshers' week. She could perform the tactical reload faster, but it was he who had gone on to a military

career, overseeing the carve up of defence budget, toting something far more dangerous than guns. He was charismatically revolting. A public school physique swelled by good wine at the front. His slacks were drawn slightly tightly across the pelvis as if wallet bulge was considered in the cut. Dasha had never seen him so ruffled. He seemed convinced there was a bear in the grounds. She scanned the assembled audience for Tabriz to see what he made of it, but he was nowhere to be seen. She messaged George,

--what fresh hell is this? The Tory just arrived--

A delegation of more spirited guests set out into the garden with torches to see what sort of creature had unseated the government. Sudo soon reappeared, throwing the door wide and backing into the house, people falling out of his way,

'I've found it! It's a monster. Seriously! Someone call the zoo!' He turned to reveal the little curly face of the poodle sticking out of the top of his jacket and blinking in the bright light. The Tory had never experienced the mood for ridicule and he wasn't about to become that person now. His lip had the hint of a twitch to it, just where the clipped moustache would have been a couple of generations ago, ordering common infantry over the top,

'If the zoo were called, the first thing they would throw a net over is you Sudo. Do you think this is all a joke?' He did look uncharacteristically dishevelled: soft leather loafers covered with dust and a tear in his cashmere sweater, as if the garden had been on the side of the bear. Dasha recalled a moment from childhood when she had believed there actually was some sort of monster hibernating in the mystery of the raspberry bushes. And the large something that she had heard by the plaque only half an hour before. It was the closest to empathy with Rupey Stanhope she had ever felt. She didn't like it.

Gath re-materialised at last and coaxed the Tory into her own sitting room where she set

about soothing him with a large glass of whisky and a string of blandishments. The door closed, trapping the last of a phrase, 'another damned trick of Leila's no doubt.'

No larger predator than the poodle was found in the garden although the hunt went on for some time. The guests returned with a renewed enthusiasm for refreshments, until the grazing was interrupted, somewhere around the second or third sandwich mark, by a shrill cry from the hall. Someone had discovered the last guest of the night who had taken advantage of the open door and had made himself at home in the deserted front room.

It turned out to be a dog. Not a bear. A black dog with paws like a castle gate lion which was sloughed out on the hearth rug almost entirely concealing it. Gath's poodle was staring up at, stiff on all four heels, no bigger than the shaggy head of the great beast which looked back unconcerned. In fact there was something remarkably self-satisfied about it as it began to absorb heat from the fire and kept grinning to let some out. Despite its monumental dimensions, Dasha had thought for a second it was Zoomo, and in the realisation that of course it wasn't, a sense of betrayal grew. The dog looked so pleased with itself.

Sudo stuck his head round the door of Gath's fascist enclave to report that the mystery of the bear had been solved, at least in part, then Adam caught up with the crowd and began repeating "Sima! Sima!" in a harsh squawk. Adam's companion followed at a leisurely amble, asking repeatedly what the fuss was about. Adam stopped shouting 'Sima' and stood quivering with hands clasped. He beamed at the mossy sphinx now looking very much at home before the roar of the fire. A Newfoundland with an old found face. Unusually expressive. And strangely glittered here and there, battered rings of tin or silver, plaited into its mane. The guests discussed its advent and conjectured on possible owners, all considered it was not un-bear-like, come to think of it. Dasha looked at Adam, dribbling slightly from protruding teeth, little glinty eyes tipped up towards the corners of the sockets as he absorbed the soothing words of his friend, 'Sima,' he murmured again.

The dog looked up at him, thumped its great tail, and was temporarily named.

Dasha withdrew, leaving the dog to be doted on. It was making quite a hit with the coven of clairvoyants who were declaring it had 'presence' and with some horsey looking females with sturdy thighs and regular foddering habits. They were wondering who owned it and deciding what might tempt its appetite. Given its size, absolutely anything, thought Dasha. The dog unsettled her. Being an animal lover and loving dogs in particular, the fact that it frayed her, frayed her some more. Then to make matters worse Rupey caught her in the hall and put his hand out to corral her before she could slip past.

'Ahh! I was hoping to get a word. I suppose we will be adding a big game warden to the staff bill next. Not the sort of welcome one anticipates, though of course I always expect *some* sort of eccentricity to endure here,' he let forth a hawhaw to demarcate the humour of his remark and continued, placing his whole self where the arm had been to prevent her from using one of his oratory pauses to escape, 'Of course it's nothing compared to this ticklish business of your mama. Of course. Condolences Daria! Are you bearing up?'

Dasha considered pointing out that as some small children somewhere nearby were probably clutching a couple of metres of leash and weeping inconsolably while their dad combed the district for 'the bear', it was not quite the time to be opening the grounds for safaris, but she knew from long experience that Rupey Stanhope engaged in conversation to say what he wanted to say and not because he hoped you would join in, so she took advantage of her re-bereavement to say nothing and look sad. 'Good girl, good girl. It is all rather awkward, however. There are plenty of people out there who like to believe she really is Russian in the hope our stocks will fall. Funnily enough though, they've gone up, so it's not entirely an ill wind. Awkward sort of business all the same.'

You are blessed in the art of consolation, thought Dasha, but she kept quiet. 'I suppose you've not had much chance to look at this book as of yet?' he asked.

Dasha had been about to drift off listening and bumped back. She felt resentment rising, but

she rode the pause out without a word. 'Not much time I imagine,' he was forced to go on, 'But you see there may well be things in there that it would be, beneficial to be aware of, I'd be happy to give it a quick skim if that would help,' he raised his eyebrows slightly and gave her an encouraging smile, 'Your mama and I go back such a long way and of course I have your interests very much at heart.'

Dasha was muttering a reasonably polite refusal when a breathy voice on her right flank joined in,

'Yes, as I said, she *never* left a box empty. Well my dear, I too would like to offer you my clarity in this matter. We could take a look right away,' The famous clairvoyant starsign columnist beamed at the Tory and at Dasha and back at the Tory before she settled her gaze on the ceiling. She began gently indicating the staircase, as if she hoped to convince Dasha of her abilities by guiding her to the journal. Just then a procession, apparently led by the dog, came towards them heading for the kitchen and the Tory dropped his veneer of affability long enough to push his way between the ladies and scurry to a safe roost on the staircase. It was a small point in the animal's favour and Dasha took advantage of the confusion to slip away, leaving the unpleasant and unlikely social pairing in the hallway to repel each other at their leisure. She made her way round the outside of the house this time to get to the orangery in peace.

'Hey, out here again, what's up? you were doing so well,' It was Tabriz, out of sight in the shadows.

Another Henley hawhaw emanated from the kitchen, offering a reason,

'I'm avoiding Stanhope,' said Dasha, 'I can't stand the guy. I don't know why my mother would have had anything to do with him. He tried to corner me and congratulate me on the goldmine to be found in the empty coffin market.'

'She'd have her reasons. There'll be more to him than meets the eye. Like Adam.'

'Oh. Do you know Adam?' asked Dasha.

'I do. He was quite a pal of your mama's.'

'Do you know how they met?'

'He answered that ad in the paper.'

Dasha laughed.

'Serious. He came into quite a lot of money at some point. He has a car. That guy Olu who's with him, that's his driver. Good guy. They're thick as thieves those two. When Adam gets an idea in his head, well ...' he took his pipe out and a little leather tobacco pouch, 'He cruised the area spotting houses he thought looked likely and knocking on the doors. Took him weeks. Scared a few people I don't doubt. He gets an idea in his head. Eventually, he came here.'

Dasha watched him thumb his pipe.

'I'll bet you something else as well,' smiled Tabriz

'What's that?'

'I bet he really does know that fucking dog.'

As Dasha's nerve ends greeted the dreamful smell of the smoke, she tried to recall whether she had seen Tabriz witness the arrival of the dog. She thought about Adam, and realised what he had been trying to tell Pete in the kitchen.

Izotfeez. It's got fleas. Of course.

...

The wood pigeons were starting to wake. The house had all but settled for the night and the front step had worn its last shoe. Gath was in the kitchen putting cloches over the remains of the feasting. The dog was glopping water from a bucket in waltz time. Dasha was lying in bed putting cloches

over the events of the day. She would soon be asleep. It had been an interesting birthday. She would read the journal first thing. Aye, for there is nothing lost, that can't be found, once you start looking for it. A skein of geese honked in low over the lake.

When she woke, the journal was gone.

Recycling science fiction: using natural time travel in the near future to re-engage the past in a novel titled 'In Tempo'

Portfolio Extract

In Tempo is a novel about time and loss; falling out of step and resynchronisation. My portfolio presents the opening extract of the narrative. A young woman, Dasha, is brought to confrontation of her mother, Leila's, death by an exhumation demand in the fallout from hostilities between the British Ministry of Foreign affairs and the Russian Ministry of External Relations. Leila's remains are missing from the coffin and Dasha receives the journal which was there in her place. Dasha is isolated in the strange world of bereavement and beset by a host of unusual visitors who help her towards the idea that her mother may be a time traveller and may be alive. The novel is a split narrative, intercutting Dasha's outward journey to Russia and the two day train journey she takes to return home. As she begins the homeward journey, she is recognised by a mysterious stranger who makes his own way to intercept her before she reaches the English Channel. This extract offers an attempt to create a science fiction setting for the reading of a real world narrative; adopting its symbolism to create a time travel mystery through the real human states of grief and privilege, and to ready my heroine, Dasha, for a hereditary journey to an alien world – Russia.

Dasha hunts down the secret of Leila but learns along the way that she does not need to solve the mystery: the journey has helped her to find her locus in real life, and her mother in herself.

Introduction

Science fiction (SF) is critically regarded as resistant to definition, and yet most of us feel that we know it when we see it: that it “offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way” (Scholes, 1975: p.2). In

my novel, I intend to create a form of sustainable science fiction, by building the illusion of the genre through triggers which customarily identify it, but restricting the content to prevalent reality: Dasha, is presented as a rational member of the *known world*, seduced by grief into a journey which will allow her to confront it, through an erosion of the *radical* or *discontinuous* she hoped to find. My aim is to contribute towards bringing the safe-distance open-mindedness of social speculation inherent in SF, to a more direct confrontation of immediate human concerns. In particular, the issue of alienation through externalisation which grows apace in contemporary society and is of importance to me as a theme. In this extract I have tried to create a setting in which plot, narrator, and mega-text (the conglomeration of tropes which confirms the SF genre), begin to gradually confirm the consensual milieu of SF without abrogation of direct contact with current reality. I hope to contribute to broadening the speculative opportunities that SF presents; to engage readers who, like myself, have a preference for “carbon-based life forms” (Adams, 1979: p. 14) over androids.

Research into the Creation of a Sustainable Time Loop

In order to apply SF as a retrospective device, my research has consisted of identifying the contemporary trends in SF: establishing what constitutes the “mega-text” (Broderick, 1995: p.155), its interpretation, and an exploration of a scientific premise through which I can justify my notion of a sustainable science fiction. Sustainability can be practically defined as closed systems that indefinitely maintain their productivity: a concept which, on the surface, is opposed to the speculative scientific leaps inherent in science fiction. However, being notoriously difficult to define and classless both in its readership and its contributing authors, the scope of the SF genre is inviting. At best scholars achieve a form of cluster-definition for SF which is a “wide-ranging, multivalent and endlessly cross-fertilising cultural idiom” (Roberts, 2006: p. 2), and although often

dismissed as technology-orientated predominantly male-read pulp, the quality of its writers and its subject matter cannot easily be ignored. There is no disputing the critical regard for Ursula K. LeGuin, Margaret Atwood or Stanislaw Lem as serious literary writers among the many who turn towards SF as their medium, giving weight to the argument that “science fiction is of all forms of fiction today the one that bears the deepest and most interesting affinity with the rigours of dialectical thinking.” (Friedman, 2000: p. xv). Nobel laureate Doris Lessing made the leap to hyperspace amidst howls from the literati at this apparent dereliction of her authorial class. Lessing's response was that they “didn't realise that in science fiction is some of the best social fiction of our time.” (Leonard, 1982: p. 145) Despite my agreement with Lessing, I am still reluctant to put much SF on my reading pile. And yet I believe the whole function of engaging with literature, or simply with stories, is to transport ourselves to other worlds discreet from our own, from which we return to confront our “known world in some cognitive way” (Scholes, 1975: p.2).

Although it could be argued that recycling aspects of SF is not new in itself, the way that I combine the time travel concept with a real world narrative refreshes the use of this core element of the genre. As far as aesthetic criteria can be applied to literary genres, those of SF are reducible to a clutch of well-worn general tropes: spaceships, androids, futuristic technology, time travel, alternative histories, utopia and dystopia. This constancy is often regarded as “the poverty of mass-market SF” (Broderick, 1995: p. 12), a “comfort” for habitual readers who seek the familiar under the guise of alterity. Darko Suvin argues that, on the contrary, SF is symbolist and not allegorical, applying a “symbolic system” centred “on a novum which is to be cognitively validated within the narrative reality of the tale” (Suvin, 1979: p. 80). Suvin's 'nova' reference 'points of difference', such as H.G. Wells' time machine, or the interrelated technologies aboard *Star Trek's* Enterprise, which Adam Roberts explains as being “grounded in a discourse of possibility”, that is to say technology, science or at least pseudo-science. SF incorporates material 'difference' as opposed to purely imaginative concept. Whereas Gregor Samsa, in Kafka's absurdist novella *Die Verwandlung* (1915),

wakes up transformed into an insect-like monster without any explication of cause, Seth Brundle in the science fiction horror film *The Fly* (Cronenberg 1986), teleports himself in a pod which has a fly in it, causing the computer to merge two life forms at a molecular genetic level. The nineteenth century symbolists drew on a similarly recycled bank of motifs, often relating to mysticism, otherworldliness, the sense of mortality and the power of sex, which the poet Baudelaire asserted as “correspondences” for art to bring to epiphany “the spiritual world” which stands 'behind the fallen natural world' (Taylor, 1992: p. 436). SF replaces the spiritual with the material in its use of limited and well-established props. In effect SF “give us a unique version of the symbolist approach, one where the symbol is drained of transcendental or metaphysical aura and relocated back in the material world” (Roberts, 2006: p.15). The emphasis on 'nova' and the elaboration of the consequences of these differences “is the strength of the mode” (Roberts, 2006: p. 7). In adopting the classic time travel trope as the central 'novum' in *In Tempo*, I want to establish it as a form of consumerism which has undesirable consequences in contrast to the simple value of self-exploration and introspection: suggesting Leila's time travel strand as the hare and Dasha's train journey as the tortoise and allowing the train to win.

I am promoting the notion, therefore, of the next advance being retrograde, a return to introspection. As the novel progresses the aim is for Dasha to relocate herself as the central character in her own life, rather than her mother. This she does, invigorated by travel, discovering and accepting Leila is dead and getting to know her through her people, through her journal and through herself as biological “blueprint” (27): taking the same journey at the same age and with similar emotions. The sci-fi element of her mother's existence recedes as Dasha finds her inner locus of control. The circle turns. The paradox of how past actions will affect the future, the theme explored in Ray Bradbury's *Sound of Thunder* (1952) where a time travelling dinosaur safari hunter from 2055 steps on a butterfly while visiting the past and returns to his future world which has changed dramatically in consequence, is a theme still going strong in SF. A recent example is

Stephen King's *11.22.63* (2011) where a time traveller returns to the titular date in order to prevent the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Time travel stories focus more in general on the consequences – paradoxes and alternate time lines - than on the time travelling itself, which serves to provide the “necessary distancing effect” (Redmond, 2014: p. 114) that allows science fiction to address contemporary issues in metaphorical ways. This focus on general consequences is of value in an attempt to offer an idea which is seemingly future extrapolation, yet grounded in current established reality. To properly endorse the notion of a sustainable SF, however, I feel my time loop needs to be justified within the tradition of the genre as “a fictional exploration of human situations made perceptible by the implications of recent science” (Scholes, 1975: p. 8). Given that “the insights of the past century of science are accepted as fictional points of departure” (ibid), I hope to imitate what science fiction sets out to do: postulating a scientific discovery which is a justifiable next step and adopting the classic time travel convention of the causal loop, with Leila as my real world chicken and Dasha as my real world egg.

It is commonly acknowledged that future development of technology looks to SF for what it will work on next and sci-fi looks to technology in a similar way. It is a cyclical process. Although science fiction works have been produced for hundreds of years, the actual term came into use in the 1920s. The 20th Century also brought quantum physics, “the place where ancient philosophy and new science meet” (Schäfer, 2012: p. 1). This connecting up of the circle, or to borrow a SF symbol, this forming of a time loop between the advance of scientific research and the return to ancient mysticism, has provided me with my entry point into a form of sustainable SF. “In Environmental Science, sustainability is defined as the quality of not being harmful to the environment or depleting natural resources, and thereby supporting long term ecological balance” (Dictionary.com) and my time loop, between the future advances of physics and teachings of the ancient sages is rooted biologically in a mother and a daughter. Quantum physics assesses the elementary constituents: electrons, atoms and molecules and demonstrates that: “the basis of the material world is non-

material [...] there is a part of reality that we can't see but it is real, because it has the potential to act on us [...] reality is an undivided wholeness [...] consciousness is a cosmic property” (Schäfer, 2012: p.1). The discoveries of quantum physics revive Aristotle's notion of the three modes: real being, non-being and potential being. Although we can't monitor or know what may exist in the sphere of potentiality, ancient thought understood that if matter is explored down to the level of atoms, actual matter disappears and non-material forms take power. In contemporary physics, Erwin Schroedinger describes these as “probability waves” (ibid), dimensionless mathematical forms which although invisible, have influence on the visible world. This echoes Pythagoras' teaching that “all things are numbers” (ibid) in the 6th Century BCE. It has taken more than two thousand years therefore, for it to become scientifically official that invisible forces act in the empirical world. To advance on the discoveries of quantum mechanics is to regress to an older simpler time, to look at human progress as comprehensively circular. The theoretical physicists find themselves travelling back to “that old potter's shop,” listening to the clay pots criticising the skills of their maker and posing the question, 'Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot' (Khayyàm, 1048 – 1131: verse 60). Human experience is not just circular any more, however, it is multivalent. Our awareness and retrieval of a broad spectrum of philosophies and information permits an ease of juxtaposition in the modern consciousness. The mash up of seemingly disparate ideas is much in evidence in current creative trends: the BBC's *Sherlock* (Moffat and Gatiss, 2010) which uses modern technology and increasing engagement with the complexities of mental health to reinvigorate Conan Doyle's original (1887), *Dickensian* (Jordan, 2015) advancing from endless reproduction of Dickens works as dramas by merging characters into one referential piece, and at the more extreme end *Cowboys and Aliens* (Favreau, 2011) and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Austen and Graham-Smith, 2009) which acknowledge the paradigm of the modern audience and its ability to surf multiple genres, technological interfaces and time frames simultaneously for a richer media experience. This holds a material place in the development of SF. As the future of science advances, it emerges that

much of SF already deals with nostalgia rather than prediction. Over time SF is coming to engage less with scientific extrapolation - an essential feature of the genre propagated by one of the founders of the term, Hugo Gernsback (1884-1967) - and more with recycling its tropes in “materialist, symbolic fiction for reconsidering the world.” (Roberts, 2006: p. 25). This is achieved via the modification or removal of contemporary constraints. SF critic John Clute identifies a sort of Sputnik shift, citing the 1957 historic launch of the Russian satellite:

“There may have been a time, in the morning of the world, before Sputnik when the empires of our SF dreams were governed according to rules neatly written out in the pages of *Astounding*, and we could all play the game of a future we all shared, readers, writers, fans ... But something happened. The future began to come true.” (Clute, 1995; p. 170).

Thus, a viewing of Ron Howard's *Apollo 13* (1996), a classic space odyssey on the SF trajectory, incorporating a space mission, a malfunction, and survival of its heroes against unlikely odds, gives us an experience through which special effects recreate the 1970s and we time travel in a sense to the bygone age of our ancestors for whom 'going to the moon' was a futuristic concept. As “science fiction is less a genre ... than an ongoing discussion” (James and Mendelsohn, 2003: p. 1), it is not a leap too far to develop the idea of a mysterious time travelling mother fading in importance and being a little outmoded in contrast to the real world development of the daughter. In order to achieve this, I have explored SF creations which do not behave like science fiction for me as a reader, but which apply the genre for specific literary effects: to engage with contemporary issues at a safe remove from the extant world and yet retain real world contact between central character and reader.

Literary Works Used for Analysis

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) and Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) are all works that qualify as science fiction and yet they far outreach the SF stronghold, retaining permanent suites in the nation's tower of Best Loved Books, and doing what best-loved books do – becoming life-long friends. While their SF tropage cannot be ignored, they are not traditionally read as SF. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (HHGTTG) is satirical comic science fiction and *Cold Comfort Farm* (CCF) is a parody of literary portrayals of rural life, containing science fiction elements which facilitate Gibbons' exploration of social issues. Gibbons suggests that modifying the environment can modify characters, and like Adams, uses humour to offer a restorative Weltanschauung. *Slaughterhouse-Five* (SH5) is a postmodern metafiction which combines historical, psychological, sociological and autobiographical elements with science fiction. Travelling through time to the planet of Tralfamadore is asserted as factual within the narrative of SH5, whilst it is a memoir of the second world war, an account of coming to terms with death. Through its skilful narration of the peculiar tale of Billy Pilgrim, it retains a sense of engaging more directly with its subject matter than a traditional book about war. The cosmic setting of HHGTTG is almost incidental to a reading of this very human contemporary satire, which charts the progress of a two-headed galactic president, an alien species of bureaucratic poets and a paranoid personality android across an impossible universe in a spaceship driven by improbability whilst the point of view remains anchored in a lovingly cynical 'forever England' with Arthur Dent, a reluctant and unlikely adventurer, still in his dressing gown and constantly in search of a decent cup of tea. Adams uses the cosmic perspective to engage with a critique of bureaucratic, political and social issues very close to home. CCF adopts a futuristic setting, some time after “the Anglo-Nicaraguan wars of '46” (Gibbons, 1932: p. 160) so subtly it is easily forgotten amidst the wilderness of fecundity and passionate wallowing presented as rural England, where Aunt Ada Doom, the curse of Cold Comfort, prevents her family from living happy lives because she saw “something nasty in the woodshed” (Gibbons, 1932: p. 113) as a

child. Categorised as a parody of the *loam and lust child* Gothic novels of D.H Lawrence, Emily Bronte and Thomas Hardy, this compartment is as unimposing for its loyal followers as the time setting, allowing Gibbons to explore issues of feminism and the pursuit of happiness in close contact with a modern audience. Central to the achievements of these works are the use of intrusive narrators, the often ambiguous roles of the central characters and a cosmetic veneer of unreality.

Recycling the Science Fiction Mega-text

While these works adopt safe distance unreal settings for the exploration of human themes, my portfolio offers an attempt to establish a sustained human reality from which to advance the SF paradigm. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of SF is “imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes, frequently set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel” (Roberts, 2006: p. 3). The unreality created in the novels I have explored fulfils the definition criteria in varying degrees, but offers a greater discontinuity from the known world than the sustainable science fiction I am attempting in *In Tempo*. In *HHGTTG*, Earth is destroyed for the creation of an inter-galactic super highway and its two surviving inhabitants (or 'exhabitants') Arthur Dent and Tricia McMillan coincide in a galactic adventure in a spaceship propelled by an “Infinite Improbability Drive” (Adams, 1979: p. 68). This affords Adams limitless space for his satire of the “ape-descended life forms” on this “utterly insignificant little blue green planet” who are “so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea” (Adams, 1979: p. 1). As a literate ape descended life form who remembers the digital watch, the reader can enjoy looking back from the perspective of space at this insignificant planet. It is comfortably disconnected. Destruction of the planet is equally distant from a notion of sustainability, for which I require a sense of future in my time setting without creating new technologies or concepts. In *CCF* a young London woman, Flora Poste, goes about tidying up

the lives of her rustic relatives. Gibbons creates a near future which combines the fetid straw of the farm where thorn twigs are used for “cletterin the dishes” (Gibbons, 1932: p. 59), with television dials in rural phone boxes, plane journeys between the village of Howling and the fashionable precincts of Lambeth, and glass ballrooms where they can “look down through the glass floor at the moving river and watch it flow between their slippers as they dance” (Gibbons, 1932: p. 8).

Gibbons was a staff writer for *Lady* magazine at the time of publication in 1932 and required this extreme juxtaposition; deploying an alternative future backstory to minimise controversy around propounding overtly feminist themes. She subverts her literary aims by hiding in the SF category. For example, Flora advises Merriam the hired girl to use contraception to protect her from her annual encounters with the highly-sexed cousins. This was a risqué attitude to promote in the thirties but Gibbons puts it at a safe distance. Moreover to confound the time setting for her modern ideas, Gibbons allows fecund young Merriam the position of being deeply shocked at the suggestion, “‘tes wickedness. Tes flyin' in the face of nature.” (Gibbons, 1932: p73) and her elderly mother, Mrs Beetle, who has to care for all the offspring to be the one to comment, “All the same, it might be worth tryin'.” (ibid). My setting also includes a young woman with a London life who finds herself surrounded by a complex mess in the country however, the 'near future' innovations - the flatscreen microwave (10), switchable glass in Leila's porthole (45), photobacterial lighting (23) and the use of intelligent bacteria to 'eat' household waste and turn it into heat (23) - are all existing products. By regular allusion to technological details, I am coaxing my reader into an expectation of their relevance as “postulated discoveries” (Roberts, 2006: p. 3): I have tried to build the illusion that they are commonplace to activate a sense of SF megatext (the accumulation of tropes which confirm the genre). There is a flatscreen microwave in a student kitchen for example, and an acknowledgement of the lack of normal modern conveniences at the Lake House, which like many old country residences, retains its character and defies the need for the latest technology to assert its status:

“It had felt like a house with a life of its own since long before iHomes developed. It didn't have exciting applications like eat+heat waste disposal or photobacterial lighting, but what it lacked in modern gadgetry it made up for in personality” (23).

Although I created the concept of iHome applications to legitimise this idea, as a brand so embedded that it would need no explanation, I find that this service already exists for streamlined interfacing of domestic technology, which gives credence to my 'eat+heat' app. Similarly, I have expanded an idea already in the nation's pockets, by suggesting that the personal devices in my work are collecting data on users:

“No-one had yet proved that tablets watched for their owners' logos, but the evidence framed their screens with unconvincing precision – offers that mirrored the outfit of the day” (11).

I have combined here the manner in which Google collects data on retail searches and pushes advertisements for similar products back to that IP address, with the technology expressed in the Samsung Galaxy S6 which automatically pauses digital footage if the viewer looks away. This hybrid approach, a combining of existing elements for reuse, is also represented in the “War of Peace” (9-10), a new cold war situation between the West and Russia which I have exploited to create a broader tension surrounding the mystery of Leila. I have mixed real diplomatic action, “The suspension of the Russian Premier's Netflix account” (9) with actifiable reference, “Russian oligarchs owning English football clubs” (9) which are already present in reality, to validate the idea of a near future extreme to delay nuclear war: repatriating the dead.

Application of an Existing Alien World

In the opening Outward scene, it is as part of this diplomatic wrangling between Britain and the State of Russia that Leila's coffin is disinterred. In the opening Homeward scene, Dasha is observed and pursued by a mysterious Russian stranger who wants the journal. I have hinted at his role in national security: the “warning in the colonel grey of the stranger's coat and its higher-than-military cut” (5) to raise the idea of the potential strategic importance of Leila's work and to activate a sense of Red Threat. The teetering on the brink of world war which, at the zenith of the atomic age, Faulkner described in his Nobel Banquet speech as “the universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it ... the question: When will I be blown up?” (Faulkner, 1950) has not been eradicated, but normalised: the risk of star wars is a real societal trope as well as a SF one. Within the current escalation of sanctions and Russian intervention in Syria, the barely dormant fears of global war resurface and I have adopted them to create a setting suggestive of the risk of “spectacular environmental changes” (Roberts, 2006: p. 3) with Russia as my “other planet” (ibid). In a BBC broadcast on 1st October 1939, Winston Churchill said, “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” This attitude snowballed through the Cold War (1947-1991) when the Red Threat achieved Wellsian dimensions, creating a palpable fear of an alien invasion in the West with superweapons that could destroy the world. *The War of the Worlds* (Wells, 1898) is founded on the fin de siècle concern that the predominant global power of the British Empire might come under threat of invasion by aliens toting an imperialist agenda of their own, a concern which Hollywood as a soft power has been fuelling ever since. The recent Ukrainian Crisis has hammered in a fresh wedge of hostilities between the West and Russia, the thin end of which lies in diplomatic stick waving and the retrenching of travel freedoms. In the spirit of advancing in a counter direction, I have tried to trigger this trope of Western entrained prejudices against Russia, although I ultimately hope to counter this in Dasha's experience of Russian as the novel progresses. It is easy to find westerners who have visited Moscow and St

Petersburg, and not too difficult to find those who have experienced the scenic limbo of the Trans-Siberian railway, however, it is still rare a quarter of a century after the fall of the Soviet Union to find British subjects who have experienced normal life in the Russian provinces. It is an alien world. I aim to draw on my own acquaintance here, having spent part of my life living and travelling independently in provincial Russia. I have laid the foundations for elaboration of Russian culture in the descriptions of the Russian delegation at the exhumation, who have much in common with their English counterparts and in George's experience of Russians in the train corridor on the homeward journey. It is an important theme to me: despite the advent of the internet and the expansion of adventurous travel, the 'otherness' of Russian life prevails and is reflected in political conflict to this day.

Use of Structure to Emphasise Theme

My novel engages with bereavement through a navigation of the experience and I have considered this in the structure. Vonnegut, Adams and Gibbons all take the issue of loss as their starting points. SH5 has Vonnegut as character in the introductory chapter, “an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown” (Vonnegut, 1969: p. 2) up alone late at night “obsessed with and oppressed by time, the past, and death—particularly death” (Harris, 1976: p. 228) and his failure to portray it artistically. Vonnegut's use of metafiction, presenting himself as a character in the first and last chapters to discuss his concerns over the success of the novel within the novel, creates a sense of the layers of distance he needs to confront the traumatic events which, although narrated through the life of Billy Pilgrim, are in fact, autobiographical. In the novel within the novel, time is 'unstuck' so that Billy Pilgrim shifts indiscriminately between moments of his past present and future, a future including time spent on the planet Tralfamadore, creating a flashback/time travel disengagement from reality. All concepts of narrative are deconstructed: there

is no continuity of plot, no climax despite the novel's subject being the Dresden Firestorm (1945), the single most destructive attack of the Second World War. There is no confrontation: the narrative is devoid of emotional reaction to the deaths which it everywhere contains, and Vonnegut informs us at the start what the first and last lines will be, "It begins like this: Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. It ends like this: Poo-tee-weet?" (Vonnegut, 1969: p. 18). Despatching the traditions of plot and climax excludes the option of reading about war in the usual manner thus "forcing the reader to concentrate on more important aspects of the book" (Matheson 1984: p. 240): the lasting impact of trauma. The Tralfamadorian notion of perceived time forms a simultaneous time structure, "not linear but spacial" (Harris 1976: p. 243). The inability to control this renders Billy serene, as if a gravity has been created for him inside the spin of the violent and traumatic events he experiences. HHGTTG begins with Arthur Dent trying to stop his house being bulldozed - a devastating event quickly superseded by his planet being bulldozed - leaving him nowhere left to turn but to the galaxy. While the adventure begins with the destruction of Earth it culminates in its recreation right down to Arthur Dent's house on the planet Magrathea, the home of a "specialist industry: custom-made luxury planet building" (Adams, 1979: p. 92). This allows the critique of human society to be simultaneously broad in perspective and qualified in its proximity to the relevant experience of earthlings. Whereas SH5 seeks greater layers of distance, creating a metafictional line-drawing of a character in Billy Pilgrim, "tall and weak and shaped like a bottle of Coca-Cola" (Vonnegut, 1969: p. 19) and "spastic in time" (ibid), alienated from everyone and the planet itself, and HHGGTG adopts humour and the absurd from which to critique the fundamental unhappiness of humanity, I have tried to confront Dasha with facing up to her bereavement in real life. The exhumation, coinciding with her birthday, brings her back to her childhood home which she has been avoiding: it equates to her inability to deal with the loss of her mother. As with Arthur Dent's double bulldozing, she finds herself re-bereaved when the coffin turns out to be empty. I wish to emphasise here the notion that life gives you the same lesson until you learn it: that to

progress, concealed impairment needs to be faced, and that if it is not faced, it festers.

Rock bottom is a fertile place, in art and in life. Anyone with experience of creative endeavour is familiar with the dark night of the soul, the “period of spiritual desolation in which all sense of consolation is removed” (Stevenson and Waite (eds), 2011: p. 364). It is the moment of blackest failure in which something comes to glitter. 'Vonnegut as character' has spent twenty-three years trying to write his great war novel and at the point of failure, creates one of the most original anti-war books of all time. Psychology regards rock bottom as the point at which a spark sets new life in motion; when all reliance on externals is lost, internal resources become apparent and the locus of control returns to the self. Gibbons begins with the newly-orphaned Flora Poste who having just lost both her parents, finds herself at the age of twenty possessing “every art and grace save that of earning her own living” (Gibbons, 1938: p. 9) and departs from her familiar cosmopolitan world to the alien environment of the farm. It is the point when Flora chooses of all her relatives' invitations, the grubby envelope with the Howling postmark, the point where all that remains for Arthur Dent is the universe, and for Dasha it is the point when she steps back into the circle and begins to live: It is, in fact, her birthday.

In the circularity of advance which is my inspiration, setting off in the wrong direction is still advancing. I have structured my novel as a split narrative between there and back to emphasise this, and to suggest the notion of time travel. Dasha's journey is structured around the Stages of Grief¹ which are not discreet, but are nevertheless necessary steps towards acceptance and recovery. The extract opens with her beginning the return journey, lonely and depressed (Stage 4) and beginning the outward journey in denial (Stage 1). Both directions are bringing her closer to happiness in herself. Dasha is a rational and informed young woman, yet when confronted with the empty coffin she begins to believe that her mother may actually be alive somewhere engaged in time travel. It is my aim to suggest this to the reader alongside Dasha, to set the SF wheel in

1 The Five Stages of Grief are generally defined as: 1. Denial, 2. Anger, 3. Bargaining, 4. Depression, 5. Acceptance.

motion.

The Application of Otherworld Mystery

Creating the sense of a SF mystery for Dasha to solve is important in driving the plot, although the actual solving of the mystery is not. I am attempting to build this time travel possibility gradually so as not to let my reader lose faith in Dasha as a real world character when she comes to suspect this wild notion, and to pave the way for the two strands to separate. In *Cold Comfort Farm*, Gibbons sets up mysteries which parody those of rural melodrama – Flora's rights which all her relatives allude to but resist explaining, the wrong that they say they did to her father, and what the nasty thing was that Aunt Ada saw in the woodshed which has rendered the whole family emotionally subjugated. These mysteries remain unsolved, with Gibbons declining to do more than hint that they are wholly trivial. They exist only to allow the narrative to awaken the reader's curiosity, while the relationship between him and the central character is established as more important, and yet some of the interest of her narrative depends on the reader's curiosity about them. Similarly in HHGGTG the super computer, Deep Thought, spends seven and a half million years calculating the meaning of “Life The Universe and Everything” to achieve the answer “42”. This has become a standard reference in British society, often considered to be as good an answer as any. It is possible therefore to default on solving the mystery satisfactorily provided the reader develops a closer involvement with the journey of the central character and is happy to follow when the paths diverge.

I have tried to build the potential significance of the journal through the interest it arouses amongst the strange and powerful friends of Leila who congregate at the party. They are an eclectic mix, a government minister, a famous clairvoyant, an Asian vigilante among them, and they are all expecting something. Still, Leila “was an adventurer and an heiress, stellar in both” (13) so it is reasonable for her to have an unusual set of friends. My aim is for them to be seen as acting on some pre-ordained instruction in arriving and creating a sort of guard around the journal. Dasha is at

the centre of the party, feeling that she is significant to these strangers in some way that she doesn't understand, but that entirely concerns her mother. She, like the reader, is excluded from the mystery and yet the journal has a very real significance for her in the absence of memories of her mother. Dasha feels like she has nothing of her mother at the start. That everyone else has more. She feels she has even less when the body disappears, so that when the journal fills Leila's place, it all begins to change. It brings life. The novels I have studied all employ books as supportive friends and this is an important part of the success of these works. They reinforce their own companion status with the regular reminder of the value of books. The journal ignites the sense of impending mystery in the manner of its appearance, in the way it is coveted by the guests, in its suggested significance to the Russians and in its disappearance. Its real world power, however, is its potential to awaken the mother for Dasha. I made Leila's death occur "around the time when her child's memory was just forming" (13) specifically to render her devoid of much live experience of Leila, whilst allowing for embedded memories that she can gradually access. As an example, when reading the journal, snow is mentioned, conjuring up for Dasha "the lost sound of her [mother's] laughter, as they'd rolled together in the snow in thick fur coats" (26).

For the purpose of activating my two threads, there needs to be some complexity to the status of the journal. Max F. Schulz suggests that in applying "strategies of uncertainty, contradictions and vagaries that constitute an aesthetic of dissonance" it is possible to create "metaphors for an indeterminate universe" (Schulz, 1973: p. 45). In the front cover, Leila has put "Nobody's immortal but some of us have lived to write about it" (25), a message intended to build the suspicion of time travel which is reinforced by Tabriz, her mother's friend, saying: "Your mother liked to say she would have to become immortal to avoid her own funeral" (39). At the same time, the characters at the party serve to undermine this suspicion, showing their peer experience of Leila as a game player: Eve tells Dasha, "She put an advert in the local paper once - Spy work undertaken. No job too small. If your cat is missing its fleas give me a call" (43), there is a password that the

guests all know, and there is the blue plaque hidden under the ivy attesting to Leila and Dasha's fame. I have tried to create more uncertainty around this by offering hints that these are more than just games: Dasha is told that one of the guests, Adam, answered the advert in the paper even though it had no contact details, Pete jokes about Leila blowing up bridges, but seems “to know a lot about detonation cord” (46). I have tried to further contradict this by allowing the plaque, with its humorous assertion that she and Dasha were “Innovators of Time Travel” (47) to begin to awaken this idea in Dasha. In her emotional state she comes to suspect the guests, like the journal, hold a mystery. She finds herself “half wondering if Tabriz and the clairvoyants, maybe even Pete with his incendiary knowledge, were really time travellers” (49) before the point of view switches back to an external one to remind the reader again that Leila is a joker, “It was the kind of thought that would have delighted a mother who went to the trouble of putting up such plaques” (49).

Creating a Character as an Anchor for Reality

The SF strand represented by Leila, separates from the real represented by Dasha, between two generations. To further this aim, It was important to create Dasha as a grounded and reliable character alongside whom the reader should feel himself in step and detached from the air of unreality around “her mother's supervenient existence” (47). In the midst of the growing Leila mystery, Dasha remains sympathetic. She is transparent to the reader and is presented as having a natural sensitivity and an affiliation with animals. At the exhumation she retains control of herself by focussing on an unemployed man “who seemed to have been brought to life by the challenge of getting ropes in under the box” (19), she doesn't resent him for digging up her mother, she hopes “someone from the crowd [will] catch his arm later and offer him some employment” (19). Her affection for animals extends to the imagery of her thoughts and feelings and it underlines Dasha's natural-world location; to her, “the desk looked like desks look when you have work to do - it

watched like a dog with a lead in its mouth “ (21). Her real world normality is shown in her interactions with her peers, for example when messaging George, “What fresh hell is this? The Tory just arrived” (53) and I hope that presenting Dasha in this way will emphasise the validity of her experience: overcoming the C S Lewis dictum – How odd things affect odd people is an oddity too much.

Gibbons' and Adams' central characters are presented in contrast to the worlds they inhabit, emphasising their alienness. Their loneliness of position is their stronghold amidst the madness of their external environments. In CCF “Flora is like Lewis Carroll's Alice, unintimidated by people who talk nonsense, refusing to be drawn into their mad world” (Truss, 2006: p. ix). The Lawrencian earthy sensuality of her cousins not only contrasts with Flora's rationality, Gibbons establishes two worlds. This is clear in the first meeting between Flora and her cousin.

“I feel sure you must be Reuben ... How do you do? I'm so glad to see somebody has come in for some tea. Do sit down...”

* * * The man's big body, etched menacingly against the bleak light that stabbed in from the low windows, did not move. His thoughts swirled like a beck in spate behind the sodden grey furrows of his face. A woman ... Blast! Blast! Come to wrest away from him the land whose love fermented in his veins, like slow yeast. ... The land, the iron furrows of frosted earth under the rain-lust, the fecund spears of rain, the swelling, slow burst of seed-sheaths, the slow smell of cows and cry of cows, the trampling bride-path of the bull in his hour. All his, his ...

“Will you have some bread and butter?” asked Flora, handing him a cup of tea.'

(Gibbons, 1932: p. 77)

Faye Hamill in her exploration of English literary culture between the wars, observes that seen from Reuben's point of view, Flora represents the intrusion of a separate social world, while to the reader,

it is clear that they speak to each other in the language of two totally different kinds of novel. A juxtaposition of ordinary social intercourse with the highly-coloured metaphor which is an “obvious imitation of Lawrence's rhythmic prose” (Hammill, 2001: p. 840). More than a mere parody, Gibbons is creating her central character to “articulate a common-sensical outlook” (ibid) in opposition to literary texts. Thus she retains her reader for Flora's side when she approaches the feminist ideas Gibbons holds. In HHGTTG, Arthur Dent is a reluctant hero: baffled, uninspiring and ordinary. In the entirety of the novel he never even manages to get dressed. He is the personification of the punchlines which hammer home Adams' critique of society. When the Magratheans, bespoke luxury planet builders bankrupted the universe they placed themselves into suspended animation as one of them, Slartibartfast, explains to Arthur:

“The computers were index linked to the Galactic stock market prices you see, so that we'd all be revived when everybody else had rebuilt the economy enough to afford our rather expensive services.”

Arthur, a regular Guardian reader, was deeply shocked at this.

“That's a pretty unpleasant way to behave isn't it?” (Adams, 1979: p. 125)

Arthur Dent and Flora Poste retain a travelling companion status with the reader, which allows them to interact with a bizarre pantomime of personalities and events without confederation. They remain, as it were, with us. This is important for me to achieve if I hope to separate a time travel strand from a real world strand. Whereas Gibbons offers characters interacting in separate genres and Adams presents one Earthling amidst alien species, Dasha encounters her mother's generation of eccentrics in that most alienating of environments, The Family Party, which she has to negotiate bereft of family. Her good manners and her customary isolation are shown but beneath this her thoughts and feelings are exposed:

“Dasha had been lugging the corpse of her mother through cheerful parties for years. It had been important for this to go unnoticed” (29).

In the party scenes, Dasha is of central importance, and yet she feels she is the only one who is excluded from her mother's life. She has “the strangest feeling that she [is] the ghost at her mother's party” (28) The bizarre and influential collection of guests, come uninvited and make themselves at home as if it is their right, while Dasha skulks and apologises. The library, where “the journal [lies] in state on its desk, ticking” (27), offers the impression of being the hostess and this is an area of the house which Dasha has long avoided, preferring the old servants' staircase with its “top step [...] just the right width for a grown-up bum and a small one and a bedtime story book” (29) where she is actually connected to her mother by memory. The guests making free with the house and its cupboard contents all share a past with it and their confidence suggests that the relationship is still active, or more particularly since they have been absent for most of Dasha's life, has been reactivated by Leila's seeming escape from the grave. Their swift arrival in numbers and their air of expectancy encourages the idea that everyone knows something that she does not. The house feels lived in, but not by Dasha, “with her mother no longer contained in the grave, she [is] in everything at large” (21). I have tried to show this isolation in the transition from Dasha's student life in London to her family home in Yorkshire where she is forced to confront her grief and the otherness of her mother's life. As a student she is very much part of her household which she shares with George, her oldest friend whose “nearest thing to a relation status needed no explanation in London where their flat bath accent married them geographically” (10) engaged in normal functional university life: going to lectures and “making wigs from pasta” (10). Returning to the family home is disturbing at face value in the way that it is for a student, stepping into memories as a sort of visitor, where every room and object is suffused with meaning, but for Dasha it is a return

to her inner turmoil, the natural isolation of her bereavement: “as crystal pure as hoar frost and as melancholy as the moon on snow” (16). To her the house has been a mausoleum:

“After she had lost her mother, nothing got done in the house. Dasha had screamed if anyone opened a drawer or moved a napkin, and the teacup by the bed had grown little green Jurassic islands as she fought for everything to be left to hold her mother's last touch” (25).

She has not advanced in dealing with her grief since this initial child's response, she has merely become more passive and remote. The guests see her differently; as active and central to their expectations, which makes Dasha feel more alienated: she retreats to her room or the orangery. For the guests she reflects her mother; she is “the image, the very presence of Leila” (30). “The thaw sets in” (43) during her interaction with Tabriz who coaxes her into a more positive perspective of events and the suggestion that she is beginning to take her mother's place, with a hint of the time loop:

“Dasha had the strange feeling he wasn't talking just to her ... Despite the silver of his hair, and a slight stiffness to his standing, he seemed close to her and his claim of kinship had a misdated feel to it, like nothing was what it was any more ... I wonder if he knew this time an ancient friendship was beginning” (40).

As the party wears on Dasha begins to feel more involved in the circle, fulfilling the journal's prediction that “you can't keep hiding from it forever once you begin to see your reflection in unreflective things” (27) and she acknowledges that the day has “left her alive” (47). In the world of the story, Dasha is now the age her mother was when she was born, so she can experience the journey and the journal from Leila's age perspective; memory, imprinted neurological pathways and

heredity can all come into play. I want to give the impression of a dormancy which bereavement has fixed; “the death of her only parent at an early age slept in her like a dragon in a mountain” (8). I have included allusions to *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1931) in the opening outward scenes: Tabriz blows smoke rings and tries to kindle Dasha like the wise old wizard, Gandalf, the guests settle in and eat everything like the dwarves and Pete the old English professor comments on the number of coats already amassed in the boot room, “Balin and Dwalin here already I see, is there talk of goblins and gold and the depredation of dragons?” (41). These references accumulate here not just to suggest a mysterious adventure is afoot, but also to suggest a pedigree for adventure which will come out, albeit reluctantly, and with a diminishing sense of separateness from the visitors who are already part of it. Dasha, like Bilbo, achieves a rational companion status, despite her coming to suspect that her mother is a time traveller, but for my reader to stay with her as the adventure gets underway, I needed to give considerable thought to the use of narrative voice.

The Role of Intrusive Narrative Voice

The sense of unreality with which I want my reader to engage alongside Dasha, is assisted by the role of the narrative voice. By creating a narrator who stands outside and within I hope to build the idea of a sort of 'Schroedinger's mother'. While she can't be seen, like the cat in Schroedinger's potentially contaminated box, Leila remains simultaneously alive and dead. In considering Schulz's literature of a pluralistic universe, where “the narrative and surface details refuse to verify the plot, undercutting its thematic statement with a contrary set of referents” (Schulz, 1971: p. 5-6) I have tried to suggest to my reader that the narrative voice is somehow that of Leila. The application of intrusive narrative voice is troublesome in a narrative already quite complicated for the reasons explained above. Popular in nineteenth century literature, it is a technique which subsequently declined due to its negative effect on the immediacy of a narrative. In *The Art of Fiction* David Lodge notes that around the turn of the 19th Century:

"The intrusive authorial voice fell into disfavor, partly because it detracts from realistic illusion and reduces the emotional intensity of the experience being represented, by calling attention to the act of narrating. It also claims a kind of authority, a God-like omniscience, which our skeptical and relativistic age is reluctant to grant anyone" (Lodge, 2011: p. 10).

Yet it is a technique not impossible for a modern reader to accept, particularly when used specifically to create a narrator as character with more direct involvement in the development of plot. Contemporary works such as *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2005) whose narrator is death and *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold, 2002) whose narrator is the undiscovered murdered child around which the narrative centres, have brought this into greater currency. Gibbons, Vonnegut and Adams all adopt intrusive narrators in a way that counters the distancing effect which has made them unpopular. By allowing their narrative viewpoints to stand outside and within in order to comment from multiple perspectives, they reduce the distance of their othertime-otherworld depictions. SH5's Billy Pilgrim is a putative protagonist whose biographical experience of war coincides with that of the author. He is presented in SH5 as a character created by the author-as-character who appears in the first and last chapters. Vonnegut uses "contradiction and uncertainty as fictional devices" (Harris, 1976: p. 239); on the surface Billy serves the distancing technique which Vonnegut-as-character has employed, however, the third person narrative switches to first and first person plural, "I was there", "We were there" in scenes from the war where Vonnegut as author was in fact present, contradicting the reason for Billy's creation and emphasising whose story we are really engaging with. HHGGTG has a third person omniscient narrative perspective. The POV is arguably more that of the *Hitchhiker's Guide To the Galaxy* itself, than it is Arthur Dent's, but it expands and contracts between the two. The Guide "*the standard repository of all knowledge and wisdom*" (Adams, 1979: Prelude p. 2) offers a (literally) universal perspective which is idiomatically friendly and cool,

acknowledging it contains “*many omissions*” and “*much that is apocryphal, or at least wildly inaccurate*” (ibid),. This is made clear in its comparison to the Encyclopedia Galactica, an “*older; more pedestrian work*”(ibid) which has similarities with the POV of Arthur.

“Here's what the Encyclopedia Galactica has to say about alcohol. It says that alcohol is a colourless volatile liquid formed by the fermentation of sugars and also notes its intoxicating effect on some carbon-based life forms.

The Hitch Hiker's Guide ... also mentions alcohol. It says that the best drink in existence is the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster.

It says that the effect of drinking a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster is like having your brains smashed out by a lemon wrapped round a large gold brick” (Adams, 1979: p. 15).

Through this point of view, Adams can permit Arthur to be fairly constantly lacklustre alongside the attractive travelling companion of the Guide itself, but more importantly, he is enforcing the wisdom contained in the *wildly inaccurate* and the *apocryphal* through which he critiques society. The reader may be far away from his recently destroyed, and thoroughly mocked home planet, but he is cheerfully in step with the narrator. *Cold Comfort Farm* is written mostly in third person, and the point of view remains predominantly with Flora who “functions as a reader as well as a character” (Hammill, 2001: p. 831). She 'knows' the farm before she gets there because of the novels she has read. Thus she anticipates the names of her cousins, “highly sexed young men on farms are always called Seth or Reuben” and she looks forward to the prospect of it being mysterious and ghastly due to her first cousin's name being Judith. “That in itself” she asserts, “is most ominous. Her husband is almost certain to be called Amos, and if he *is*, it will be a typical farm (Gibbons, 1932: p. 22). She assesses her Aunt Ada Doom as “The Dominant Grandmother theme, which was found in all typical novels of agricultural life” (ibid: p. 57) and is excited at the

conflict this will bring her at every turn as she seeks to tidy up the lives of her relatives. She is aware of the need to create tension in her own plot. Flora justifies the decision to go and live on a decaying farm as an opportunity for “collecting material” for a novel “as good as 'Persuasion'” (Gibbons, 1932: p. 19) which she intends to write and she “rewrites the plots of the Starkadders' lives” (Hammill, 2001: p. 832). She sets about arranging their future fates as a novelist would. Thus she is present as writer too, a remarkable and abiding creation, “She is a character in a novel who reads the other characters as characters and rewrites them as people” (Truss, 2006: p. xvi). Gibbons' “contrasting of different fictional discourses” (Hammill, 2001: p.832), highlights an emphasis on the “subjectivity of perception” (ibid) and it is this subjectivity that I am relying on to justify my intrusive narrator. The suggestion of Leila as narrator has the function of assisting the reader to relate to Dasha's forlorn hope that her mother is out there somewhere waiting to be found, offering evidence which I can later undermine. I hope to achieve a deliberate dénouement for my narrator by encouraging my reader to believe she is Leila and then exposing that she is not; allowing my reader to be confronted by our habitual reading of symbolism which distances us from the here and now, and coinciding it with Dasha's acceptance of her mother's death and in consequence, her rightful place as the central character: an inversion of the Billy-Vonnegut intrusion. Creating an intrusive narrative voice without interrupting the flow of the story was a problem in earlier drafts, particularly given that sporadic intrusive narration is often regarded as a mark of amateur writing. I have tried to overcome this by editing out the intrusion until the point where the coffin is disinterred, and allowing the narrator to join the accumulation of characters for the party. It is suggested that the narrator is present in the graveyard: “After the exhumation, I followed Dasha home along the lakeside” (17). I wanted the intrusion to appear purposeful, making this the first instance in which the narrator appears actively within the story and enhancing the mystery aroused by the empty coffin, suggesting that the POV is that of the released ghost of Leila who “enjoyed that evening, that wake, that birthday, whatever it was, seeing old faces, making connections, marvelling at the

turnout” (42), and who makes familiar observations on guests that Dasha herself does not know, “a man of complex mysteries, Tabriz” (40). Giving the narrative voice the character of someone who is nostalgic about Leila, who suffers her loss and who lives through telling the story (a writer in effect) is also problematic. I want my narrator to be a little romantic about the past, using literary quotation and allusion to reinforce this, describing the old housekeeper Gath as “whiffing to herself through the tulgey woods” (29) for example, without sounding like I'm just an annoying writer. I have worked in references to time which are intended to unstick the conventional industrial clock in order to set the suspicion of its importance to the mystery ticking: offering the illusion of Leila-as-narrator preparing the reader for a revelation about her time travel and the suggestion of a time loop. For example, the jug “whose purpose in life came every May when it housed a handful of forget-me-nots [which] formed Dasha's earliest memory. It had also formed her mother's, which goes to show that Time is kept in many clocks” (29). The risk of over-writing in creating this narrative voice is a minefield and it has been a significant part of my editing to try to suggest this without losing the confidence of my reader. I consider this is something which will bear further refining after the novel is complete.

Whereas Adams gives credence to his narrative's humorous critique, it is my intention to invert the overriding importance of my intrusive narrator as the journey develops: the narrator is simply a third person omniscient narrator engaging the POV of Leila's nostalgic associates, and as such will lose status as Dasha gains it. I have tried to enhance this sense of purpose through graduation of the intrusion in the outward and homeward sections of the journey. In the outward sections it is incremental, to suggest the growing possibility of Leila's live status. As the homeward scenes develop, the intrusion of the narrative voice recedes in deference to Dasha's point of view. In the final homeward scene of this extract, Dasha is presented mostly in dialogue with her friend George, while an old lady who does not understand their language, remains mute and watches them (38). Dialogue presents an opportunity for writers to let their characters live and breathe without

being percolated through the narrator, and I have tried to use this recession to show how Dasha is of central importance as the journey nears its end. I have chosen to end this part of the novel here with the final outward scene showing Dasha feeling part of the house and closer to her mother, falling asleep after an interesting birthday. She doesn't know that the journal has been stolen, but she feels that Leila exists somewhere: "there is nothing lost, that can't be found, once you start looking for it". This gives way to the departure on her journey, and the planned conclusion of the novel, that acceptance changes loss and brings new life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think my extract works successfully as a form of sustainable science fiction. SF is a division of literature "distinguishing its fictional worlds to one degree or another from the world in which we actually live: a fiction of the imagination rather than observed reality" (Roberts, 2006: p. 1). I believe I have created a closed system combination of these two worlds in this opening. I have established a near-future perspective by recycling existing technologies, conflicts and concepts, which will activate a sense of the SF genre. Through use of Russia as my alien world, I have prepared for the idea of travel to a place of cultural otherness as an opportunity to engage the distancing effect traditionally inherent in SF, which will allow me scope to explore a culture I know well as the novel progresses. By creating a grounded travelling companion in my central character, I have begun to enforce the idea that the real world adventure is valid despite the suggestion of involvement in a time travel mystery and I have given consideration to this aim in the structure.

The emerging possibility of Leila as time traveller offers a form of spiritual awakening for Dasha; permitting the idea of her mother being somehow alive. It is a spiritual awakening predicated on a scientific discovery (time travel). The fact that she is not, does not preclude the SF paradigm entirely, rather brings it into closer connection with the real world of the story. It is a

quasi-religious experience and one which complements the notion of quantum physics closing the circle with mysticism. Similarly, in acknowledging that she completes the circle, Dasha is no longer separate from her mother. SF has strong similarities with religion in that religious belief in some respects conjoins an understanding of the world in which we live and a posited world which is completely different. Roberts suggests considering religion as a metaphor for SF: that religion is “a speculation about the nature of the cosmos that operates symbolically rather than literally” (Roberts, 2006: p. 146) and that science fiction “plays with the way the world is not in order to reveal truths about the way the world is”(ibid: p.147) in a symbolic sense. Leila offers a suggestion of what the world *is not* and will come to confirm truths instead about the way the world *is*: she operates symbolically. I have made her a playful character; so playful that in the end it should turn out to be sufficient for what is and what is not to co-exist. Roberts concludes that SF is more (profoundly) playful than the literatures of other genres, being “predicated on a fundamental *hospitality to otherness*” (Roberts 2006: p. 148). It is the idea of play as important to aesthetics which Thomas Docherty underlines citing Isobel Armstrong's *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000) ,“Play, that fundamental activity, is cognate with aesthetic production [...][It] transforms perception, as when a stick becomes a horse [...] The stick becomes the “pivot” for severing the idea of a horse from the concrete existence of the horse,” (Docherty in Jougin and Malpas, 2003: p. 31). Roberts concludes that this is where SF lies in its use of symbolism or metaphor to sever an idea. In my sustainable SF, Leila is alive and dead simultaneously and she is active in both roles. The narrator invokes Leila as a super-mortal urging Dasha to live, when what is in fact super mortal about her is that she is Dasha's mother, and in this capacity she has power to effect change in her daughter's life from beyond the grave. In this way, it can be said that in connection with Dasha she operates both as horse and stick in equipoise: no *flux capacitor* is required and no plutonium is required to power it.

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