



GOOGLEHEAD

Alistair Gentry

There is a wide concrete ditch between us, and a wire mesh fence. This is to prevent them from throwing things at me, or rather to prevent the things they throw from hitting me.

I also recognise this physical separation from the masses as some kind of semaphore, which is when one thing represents another. Not many people in Lodnon know what a semaphore is these days. I suppose that's why I find myself on this side of the mesh— within the fence— and not without and ignorant and free.

It was my mother who taught me about semaphores and simians and other such secrets of the American language. She was an ugly and brooding woman who had been beautiful and outspoken before she was battered by circumstance and by antilectual vigilantes. When my mother was young, it was still common for these antilectuals and other cultural revolutionaries to roam the streets in large gangs, even in re-civilised areas like Lodnon.

This is one of the reasons why the authorities need to keep some distance between we who are kept here and the people who come to ask us their mostly stupid questions. There is a certain residual distrust of people

like us because we are dedicated to knowledge and not the People's Work. We remind them of everything that they have chosen to repress or repudiate.

One woman asks me why all four of her children are mutants, and I say: Madam, have you looked at your husband recently? I say this because I'm bored, the questions they are asking are too easy, and because these people are such large and slow moving targets. Either that or I just don't know the answers, because the heads that held those answers are gone now, smashed now, splattered across walls, because of these wilfully or woefully ignorant masses. The thought of all the knowledge we have lost makes me furious and frustrated, sad and jealous.

Several people in the crowd titter cautiously at my half-mocking reply, but the woman herself seems to think that I have answered her question in some meaningful way because she nods and then turns to her husband—who has only one eye, in the middle of his forehead— as if seeing him for the first time. Sometimes all I do is tell them what they already know, even if they don't know that they know.

Another woman asks me what the future will be like, and I tell her honestly that I don't possess that knowledge. I don't think anybody does. Some things will be different and some things will be the same. That is all I can say. She does not seem satisfied and I don't blame her. I'd like to have an answer for her, for myself, but I don't.

They keep the wise apart from each other, too. A little knowledge is all they allow us because it is a dangerous thing. Therefore we who have a little of that little knowledge are also dangerous, though we are little and few and outnumbered.

People have recovered at least a veneer of civilisation now, but really those of us who contain the knowledge that is left are safer inside. Two generations ago, anyone who wore glasses, or read a big newspaper, or expressed dissenting views about national mourning days and Public Justice was suspect. Many of these people would be dragged into the street and shot in the head or crotch by members of the local Neighbourhood Watch Scheme. Luckily, in Lodnon at least, we are not so barbaric now. But I am not interested in safety anymore. I am interested in wildness and

stupidity. That's why I will take the opportunity presented to me. That's why I will escape from this place. Tomorrow. And I'll never come back.

I feel guilty now as well because I should be considering the others, how will they get out? But if I'm honest with myself what I'm really thinking is let them stay here; let them make their own getaways. It seems Kylie didn't think of us when she saw a way out. Some people said that she was over ninety years old. They came simply to look at her for that very reason. Most of the people in those crowds didn't even care what Kylie knew, what she had stored in her brain. Nobody born in Lodnon now will live to be ninety.

Kylie didn't come back. Perhaps she died out in the city somewhere; perhaps she passed away peaceful and free and not thinking of us. On the other hand (or with the boot on the other foot) she could have gone out beyond Lodnon into Whoknowswhere. Perhaps the keepers shot her as they said they would have to if they didn't recapture her alive after two days. After two days she would become A Danger To The Public and when they found her they would shoot Kylie full of arrows like several of the less effective Christian martyrs in England's lawless Wild West of the 1980s.

The next morning at dawn, before the keepers open the gates to the public, I escape. I run as fast as I can down into the moat. It is summer and there is little enough water at the bottom that I can splash straight through it. My momentum carries me high enough up the opposite side that I can grab the tree branch I have watched growing for nearly a year. With a grace and strength that surprises me, I swing from the tree, cling to the fence and clamber over. The barbed wire on top cuts me and holes my clothes, but cannot stop me.

The fields of the Regent's Park are full of stiff golden maize with all the added goodness of whole wheat. I run through the rubbery trunks, much taller than I am, green at the bottom and gold at the top. Two planks of the fence are missing so I force myself through the gap sideways, tearing my clothes and scratching my arms anew. It's almost like being born again. This is hyperbole. In reality I just emerge into the weak daylight and the dirty street and I narrowly avoid a trampling by one of Lodnon's famous

red buses. It is drawn along by a harnessed team of Lodnon's famous whores or horses.

It is an officially sanctioned Commonly Held Belief that everything changed on the day humanity made contact with the Clangers, whose civilisation, skill and efficiency were far in advance of ours. To me, though, there is something timeless about Lodnon. Only the superficial details change, only the set dressing distinguishes one era from another. The traffic moves as slowly as it ever did. The cabbies— as they have done since Roman times— still extinguish their lights and accelerate when they see a man in a wheelchair. The man in the wheelchair curses, plosively. The people of Lodnon ignore him, as they disregard me. They pretend that they are oblivious to the cross-legged beggar or bugger and the cardboard sign he holds, which reads HUNGRY + HOMOSEXL, PLS HLP. WILL BLO STRANGERS 4 FOOD.

For the first time I realise how lucky I am that I was transported to Lodnon after they caught me. Here in the city there are so many ignorant people, both native and immigrant, that their selfishness and solipsism and sheer numbers all serve to protect the fugitive. Outside the city walls, there is anarchy. A hundred newspaper vendors' boards obsessively tell the same few anecdotes, sometimes in pictures and TXT MSG for those who are illiterate. Most people are. The vendors cry out the stories they have for sale, in dialects throttled into thin cords by time and repetition.

They say the Iceni have destroyed Colchester and St Albans, raping and cottaging all who stand in their way. The cattle markets of Romford lie in smoking ruins, silent now. Never again will they play host to official state reconstructions of Euphoric Trance Music c.1999.

In other news, the siege of Heathrow has ended. The besieged Israelis, entrenched there since before the miner's strike, preferred mass suicide to the simple alternative of capitulation to Lodnon's army. The burning fuel depots of Heathrow still cast inky shadows they say, still light up the night sky, and will continue to do so for many weeks.

Thousands besiege the gates of Lodnon, shouting I AM NOT AN ECONOMIC MIGRANT I AM A PERSECUTED MINORITY IN MY HOME STATE until they are hoarse or whores. I have tried counting to a

thousand. Until you've tried counting to a thousand without cheating or skipping or going wrong it's very difficult to properly appreciate how many a thousand is. There are thousands of people at the gates of Lodnon, and hundreds (or thousands) of thousands inside looking at newspapers and muttering BLOODY IMMIGRANTS OR INGRATES.

She is adjusting her too much makeup by looking into a little round mirror with rainbows, which is a compact disc formerly used for storing musical instruments, though nobody knows how to get the music out anymore. I look at her reflected face and she holds my gaze for so long that I almost forget to breathe.

Her name is Sonnet and she will do everything except Greek for a hundred, and no kissing. I am not sure what this means. I try to explain to Sonnet where her name comes from and what a sonnet was, but I don't know any sonnets. There's no text I can recite to her to make her understand my feelings when I am reminded of the beautiful word that is her name. Perhaps a sonnet is one of those things that are their own best description. They are all gone now. This woman-Sonnet doesn't have the luxury of worrying about such things.

A guttersnipe on the opposite corner flashes some kind of hand signal to another of his kind across the road. A dog meat vendor folds up his cart and runs it away. The vendor and the snipes merge seamlessly into the streaming pedestrians and are gone. Moments later, a police car comes prowling along the middle of the street, driving rats with wings into the air. Sonnet grasps my wrist and we run away, through Lodnon's tangle of grimy barrios and plague houses. It seems we run far but not very fast because I am not used to running so much. There is little room or opportunity for me to run in my usual home.

She lives near the summit of the Smoking Mountain. From a distance, the surface of the mountain shimmers with movement. Get closer and you can see the children swarming constantly across the mountain's surface, scavenging for plastic bags and polythene sheets to sell for recycling. Sonnet tells me that sometimes people also find bodies on the mountainside; victims of Lodnon's death squads, voted the world's best in a recent Wallpaper* magazine article.

The rubbish fires never seem to go out. All afternoon and into the dusk curls of smoke unwind into the sky continuously, like a perpetual offering to the satellites and the Clangers above the clouds. Presumably both are still out there. In space. Talking to us, though we can no longer hear. Most people believe that the satellite televisions and radios and internets will not return until we are civilised again and worthy. If we all burn long enough and hot enough it might be possible that we can make everything clean, including ourselves. On this matter I am an agnostic.

Sonnet's shack is disgusting. The carpet smells worse even than most of the decomposing crap that constitutes the Smoking Mountain. It was woven long ago in a pattern I know is called paisley, after a famous Arch-Bigot.

There is a small colour photograph— or rather, a remnant of a photograph— tacked to the wall. It seems that two of the individuals in the original picture were unbearable or unwelcome enough to deserve a tearing off. The remaining, central figure is a sunburned woman dressed in the summery style of a fashionable London lady from thirty or four hundred years ago. I surmise that this woman is Sonnet's mother, or that Sonnet found this picture on the Smoking Mountain and saw something in this woman's face, something redolent of a mother she once knew or wished she had. Sonnet will not speak about the picture, and slips it away between the mattress and the bed frame. She carefully replaces the pin in its hole in the wall.

The only other decoration is a laminated but faded image of Lady Die, who according to legend crashed her motor car and went directly to Heaven without passing go or collecting two hundred pounds. Its significance to Sonnet is unknowable.

Sonnet and I sit beside each other on the bed. The bed is horrible and I think infested with insects of some kind. I recall very well my own lonely but comfortable bed. We do not have sexual intercourse even though Sonnet is a prostitute. In any case, I don't have any money. We talk for a long time. I can't remember what we talk about. End of sentence prepositions don't worry me while I am with her. This is a conversation

with no purpose; the kind I have dreamed of and wished for all these years.

Eventually, as the sun sets and she declines to waste her last candle by lighting it or burning it at both ends, Sonnet says: In truth, sir, I recognised you right soon. I often have been to The Regent's Googlelogical Park and I seen you many times on the other side of the moat, from a distance, like. I never did have a question for you. But I watched you oft and you seemed so kind and sad/kind of sad (I'm not sure which Sonnet says to me, so I offer both). And now (Sonnet says) I have you up close it seems you are just a man like all the other men. Perhaps I will keep you as my private laptop or fount of all knowledge.

She smiles, and some of her teeth are missing. I wonder if somebody knocked them out.

We go outside to watch the sun's last few minutes in our sky. I alone in Lodnon know that this wondrous burning circle comes back every morning because the Earth is a gigantic sphere; the sun, bigger still, orbits our world at a distance greater than thousands of thousands of miles or kilometres in the metric system. The sun will come back every day, always, long after Sonnet and I and even Lodnon itself are gone and ashes. Tonight— for one night only, subject to terms and conditions— the sun sets only for us, for Sonnet and for me.

For once, I do not know what to say, but Sonnet fills the silence, saying furthermore: I have my question for you now, I have saved it—

I recognise them by their funeral or funereal hoods. They are a death squad, not come to take me back but instead to kill me. Filthy, ragged children see me run and they pause in their scavenging. Some of them recognise me, as Sonnet did, and begin to chant OH GOOGLEHEAD GOOGLEHEAD. The most agile children scurry in death's wake, eager to be a part of this pursuit, torn plastic ponchos and capes fluttering and scratching at the cooling air behind them. OH GOOGLEHEAD GOOGLEHEAD.

Soon I run out of run. It doesn't matter because I have reached a precipice, probably formed by the children systematically undermining a section of the Smoking Mountain in order to retrieve the oldest, most

valuable layers of buried junk. The air scrubs neglected corners of my lungs and makes me cough. I waver on the edge for a moment, forever, dancing at the edge of the city, the death squad's bullets and arrows cracking or snapping through the air towards me or into me.

I fall and I fall and I fall and when I stop falling, it seems absurd to think. Something inside my own mind bids me to lay silent and still and then I dream perchance to sleep for a little while and forget who, what and where I was. Where was I? I am so hot and so light that I unravel into the sky, like the fumes from a burning tyre. Or perhaps I die there.

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