

An impossible wind rustles the silver leaves of the ancient, leather-barked tree. Its branches slowly move also, and creak a little – not in protest at the gust, but more in concert with it, as if the sound the leaves make are sorrow or pain, and the branches are keening in sympathy. Behind the tree’s canopy, the blue-black curtain of the eternal night provides what is almost an anti-glow, the light of the universe being sucked into it, to later pour forth onto the little planetoid and its two inhabitants.

My Guru sits cross-legged in the dead, dry dust at the tree’s base, his threadbare robe scarcely shielding his skin from the chill of the wind. In one hand he holds a smoke, although what the evil-smelling roll-up is made from I have no idea. In the other, a small bottle of an equally evil spirit. And in a third, a book from which he perpetually reads, and apparently draws much pleasure: his thin, wheezing laughter periodically competes with the wind’s low groan for dominance.

Beside him sit I. Waiting.

After a moment, or an hour, or a lifetime, he lays the book by his side and looks at me quizzically. There is a question in his eyes – but what that question is, I have yet to find out. No matter. He does not wait for an answer. Rather, he places the fingers of two of his hands across the sores and rents that permeate his trunk-like proboscis, and starts to play his nose like a flute. The tune is, I think, Yankee-Doodle-Dandy.

He clicks his fingers... ...and I’m back in the room.

Elephant in the Room

by Nic Ford

Nobody knows where I come from. Some say Manchester, some South London. Even I’m not certain. My voice changes, you see. My words change. Nothing is solid anymore.

My name? It's Dorothea. I think that's what it is, anyway. Or better still, Dodo. Um... it was given me by a stammering uncle and I never shook it off. Yes, I like it more.

Why am I here? I don't really know *where* I am, so it's hard to answer that one. Probably because you asked me in. But I like it here. It's sunny, and the plants are nice. And there are big windows, and I can see the garden. Though you could do with some more furniture.

All I know is that I was sent here for some reason. Why? I... I don't quite remember. The Doctor sent me.

Yes, that's right, the Doctor. Why? You look surprised...

Days, or moments, later I'm back beneath the tree.

The Guru holds my arms, and pulls me to his book, makes me look at it. There are no words on the first few pages. There are rarely any words in this dead place, just the Guru's wheezing laugh. But it is a story, I think. One told in pictures. A comic book.

There's an old man, with an eagle nose and long, white hair. I feel that I recognise him but I'm not sure where from. The pictures show him walking up the steps to a building. He knocks impatiently on its door with the knob of a black Malacca walking stick. After a few moments the door is opened, and he walks in – and I go with him, consumed by the story. It becomes a movie in my mind.

When did I first meet the Doctor? What a funny thing to ask! I think I've always known him. Only... no, that can't be right, can it? Sometimes I think I hardly know him at all. A lifetime ago. Or ten minutes. One of those two.

And when did I last see him? Ooh, you do ask a lot of questions, don't you? I... I'm not sure. There was a machine. A war machine. It scared me, more than I've ever been scared. And... that's it! That's why I'm here! I've come to get away. I've come for a rest.

The old man found his way into an office: a bare-ish sort of room, but full of sunshine

and pot plants. It was a little familiar. There was a desk there, and seated behind it a man in a dark suit. Quite a handsome man. But sullen.

“Can I help you?” the handsome man asked. His voice was deep, and his accent harsh and Eastern European. And it was without a hint of desire to help, despite the words.

“You may be able to, sir,” the white haired man replied. “Yes, you may indeed. I’m looking for a friend of mine. A girl by the name of Dorothea.”

“Dorothea... Dorothea... Dorothea...” The handsome man repeated the name while flicking through a rolodex – but it was apparent that he was playing this for effect rather than making any real search. Throughout, his piercing gaze was on the old man, and the hint of a sneering smile played at the corners of his mouth.

“No,” he said eventually, his eyes not once dropping from those of his visitor, “no Dorothea here.”

“Is that so?” the old man snapped. “I am afraid, sir, that I must beg to differ. She is here, I am certain of it. I should know, I sent her! I must ask you to look again.”

The handsome man paused a moment, grinned, and then spun the rolodex with his hand to a quite alarming speed. Suddenly he slammed his fist down on it, halting it.

“No Dorothea at all, I’m afraid.” And not once had his gaze faltered. “May I at least ask who is enquiring?”

The old man frowned. “I, sir,” he said, “am the Doctor, sir!”

“The Voctor!” the handsome man said with delight, his accent corrupting the word curiously. “It has been so long!”

Yes, yes, I needed a rest. It was all getting a little too much for me. They must have sent me to you, and that’s why I’m here.

My early life? I don’t remember much. I had parents, I’m sure – but mostly, I lived with my aunt. And then I met the Doctor, and we went travelling. Oh, so many places! So many wonderful places! And frightening, of course! Only... only, I can’t quite remember them.

What’s that, you say? I should close my eyes? Why? Isn’t our conversation

interesting enough for you? Oh! You want me to have my eyes closed as I talk! To remember the Doctor better! Oh well, I'm sure you know best – you're a Doctor too, aren't you?

“Voctor! I haven't been expecting you!” the handsome man in the comic book movie said. “Please, take a seat. It has been so long! So long!”

The old man – the Doctor – looked around. There was a stool against one wall, a rude wooden affair. He pulled it over, and sat on it, his hands crossed over the top of the Malacca walking stick which was itself braced against the floor between his legs. The stool was slightly too low, so sitting on it gave him a somewhat ridiculous aspect – no way to treat an old gentleman.

“I take it that we know each other, sir,” the Doctor said, accusingly. “But at the moment, you have the advantage of me.”

The handsome man smiled. “It was ever thus,” he said, aggression disguised as platitude if ever I saw it. “My name is Strom.”

“And how do we know each other, exactly?” the Doctor demanded.

“We met a very great while ago, Voctor,” Strom replied. “A very great while indeed. But much water has passed under many bridges since then, a great deal has changed. You. You have changed: you are hardly recognisable. And I am... I am not the same beast I was. Then, the world was mine to play with. Many worlds. Many suns. Now, I just wish to help, in whatever way I can.”

“I confess, I do not recall you, sir,” the Doctor said. “And I believe that I would.”

“But I recall you,” Strom said, “and that is the important thing.”

The Doctor tapped his cane against the floor impatiently, and pointedly looked around the room, rather than meet the other's gaze, with what appeared to be not a little frustration. “That's as may be,” he said. “But it is not what is important right now. I need to find Dorothea. I am responsible for the child.”

“Don't worry,” Strom replied. “She is here.” And he indicated the French windows leading out into the gardens. “She is out there. Somewhere.”

Can I open my eyes yet? I've answered so many questions, but that was minutes ago. And you've stopped talking, stopped asking me questions now. Why is that? Please, can I open my eyes?

You're just looking at me! You were just watching me, sitting here with my eyes closed! Were you waiting? Waiting for me to do something?

Please don't. I don't like it. Can't we go outside? The gardens look lovely out there. There are rhododendrons, and lavenders, and I think I saw a Red Admiral fly past just now. Please, can we go into the gardens?

Oh. Well, all right then. Maybe later?

Oh, why are you staring at me so?

I put the book down. It makes an indentation in the grey dust of the planetoid's surface, and its jacket gets a little dusty too.

I look up, to see my beloved Guru. He's grimacing at the book, as if somehow it is my fault that it's got dirty. I suppose it some ways it is – but then, there's nowhere else to put the thing, is there? Unless I balance it on one of the tree's branches.

I look up at the branches themselves. They are now bare, bereft of anything but a few silver leaves, and they sway gently in the wind, creaking with it. But from one of the highest branches, I now notice, there hangs a fruit. A single, bloated fruit. Not one I recognise: this is long, and scarlet to the point of poignancy, bent and with sharp protrusions at its ridges. It is so queer that I laugh without meaning to. The Guru furrows his brow, and looks at where I am staring – and then he laughs too! That wheezing, unnerving laugh again, the only sound he makes!

Quickly, he removes his robe, and scrambles up the tree. He is surprisingly nimble, for a creature so ancient and diseased – the sores that cover his body look painful indeed, but he shows no concern about them, (and I suppose that this is one of the advantages of having four arms and prehensile toes) quickly scaling the tree to its highest branches. The slight, elastic ones at the periphery bow under his weight, such that they point almost vertically down. And from here, on the highest branch of all, by stretching his trunk to its fullest, he manages – at last! – to pluck the fruit from

its anchor. He throws it down to me.

When he has clambered back down to the ground, he takes the fruit from me and slits it along its length with a gnarled, blade-like finger nail, offering me half. We eat hungrily – it tastes of peaches and fish – and then sit back together against the trunk. He plays his nose again, this time the hits of Lonnie Donegan, and laughs, for some reason, once more.

We make love. It isn't all that.

No. No, I won't. I won't answer any more of your questions. I've had enough. Why can't we go outside?

I've already told you! Dorothea, Dodo to my friends! Why do you keep asking that? P... please! Please stop asking that!

Now see here! I won't take this! I came here for a rest, that's all, a rest! My friend Steven... he'd gone, you see, and it was... I'm sorry? Oh. Oh, yes. He... he left me. You could say he left me.

Anyway, I came for a rest. Something was wrong... I'd been, I don't know, hypnotized, and I let the Doctor down. They sent me here. To rest. I just want to rest!

And I won't answer any more questions! I won't!

No more bloody questions!

The Guru lolls against the tree, emitting vulgar snores. He hasn't bothered to dress again, and lies obscenely open to the world. I don't know where to look, to be honest: not because of his nakedness, but because of the sores which cover his skin. They are deep, and some are festering. The pain must be excruciating. I wish that he would at least acknowledge them occasionally, but he never does. Maybe that's why I love him so.

I love him?! Really? Do I love him?

I take his robe and lay it across his stomach and legs, giving back some of the dignity he refuses to take for himself. He barely notices. I sigh, and turn away.

I find myself facing the book, half buried in the planetoid's dust and its cover

slightly stained from the juices of the fruit we had consumed. I pick it up from the ground, and turn its pages to the one with the bent corner, where I had stopped reading previously. I turn the corner back up, start to read again, and I'm back in the room. In the comic book...

...the Doctor stood up, angry, his Malacca cane slamming down on the desk. He was facing the handsome man and glowering.

"I shall not have it sir!" he said. "I shall not have this dilly-dallying and obfuscation. I shall not have this messing!"

He rounded the desk and, despite his apparent frailness, took the handsome man by the lapels and raised him from his chair.

"Do you know," he demanded, "how many laws of time I have broken to be here? Do you know how much trouble I may be in if my people discover I have done this? I have paused the world, sir! Yes, paused the world! I have borrowed the time between the beat of one heart and that of the other! In order to break from my busy schedule, in which I should be thwarting a trumped-up abacus's attempts to take over the world, to come and find a child for whom I am responsible! Yes!"

The handsome man – Strom – cowered in the Doctor's grip. Despite his arrogance, he was not the suave sophisticate he pretended to be. Rather, he was a pathetic little man who could be intimidated by nothing more than a grumpy geriatric, and at that moment, reading the book, I despised him. Nonetheless – and actually all the more pathetic – he tried to put up something of a fight.

"An abacus, Vactor? Come now! Surely a man of your calibre could defeat errant technology of a far more advanced stature! A ZX81 perhaps?"

The Doctor cackled. "Ha!" he said. "I have you sir! The year is 1965! Sir Clive Sinclair is nothing more than a spotty pubescent, and your knowledge of the future, yes, somewhat gives the game away! You are not of this world, Mr Strom, not of this time! And I have had enough of your diversions – where is Dodo?"

Strom coloured, and roughly pulled himself away from the old man's hands. For one frame of the comic book, in his fury, his nose was strangely ever so slightly too long for his face; but by the next frame he was back to the handsome, albeit still apoplectic, man. "Do not call me that!" he thundered. "Do not insult me! I am no

mere mister! I am..."

But he stopped himself; looked away and took a deep breath. Then turned back.

"It does not matter who I am," he said. "What matters, Vactor, is that you are here. And that I have been waiting for you."

"Waiting for me?" the old man grumped. "You said, sir, that you hadn't been expecting me."

"Expecting you, no," Strom replied, brushing down his lapels. "But hoping for the Doctor's – your! – arrival... every day! For millennia, I have been waiting and wondering; but since Dorothea came to me, and I realised – at last! – what I had in my grasp! Hoping for you... oh, yes!"

He pushed the Doctor, gently but firmly, from behind his desk, and moved past. He went to the French windows and nimbly opened them wide. Far too nimbly for only two hands: somehow he had managed to unlock the windows both top and bottom in a single stroke. It was not clear how.

"Come," he said to his nonplussed visitor. "Come, Vactor. Let us visit the gardens. I am sure Dorothea will be pleased to see us."

Look, I'm going now! I'm going out! Into the garden. That beautiful garden! And you can't stop me.

The French windows are locked though. Oh, why have you locked them? Are you keeping me prisoner here? Please, won't you open them?

Thank you! Thank you! Here, you're fumbling, let me pull them open. I'm going outside, just you try and stop me! I've had enough of your silly, bare room.

Oh, it's heavenly! The sun is so hot, and my arms are bare: it's like it's kissing me. Mmm!

And the aroma! It's wonderful! Bougainvillea, and hyacinths, and the smell of freshly mown lawns. And I can hear birdsong, and bees buzzing around flowers. It's a beautiful, early summer day. Which is strange, because it was November when I came to you, and that was only a few weeks ago.

But it doesn't matter. This garden is too beautiful for me to care. I came for a

rest, and this is where I want to do it!

The gardens slope, gently, up to a small copse crowned by a huge tree, of a type I've never seen before. Wide, reaching branches tipped with silver leaves. And, there, sitting beneath it... is that you? But you're back there in the room... aren't you?

It is you! It is! But... there's something different. Your suit, it's rags! And you have four arms, and... is that a trunk? And... oh you poor thing! You're covered in sores!

With surprise, I find that I am unsurprised. You're so different, not even human – and yet I know it's you. No longer the man behind the desk, no longer that other doctor, that psychiatrist, with all the silly, intruding questions; but...

Now, that *is* strange! I thought you scared me! You asked those questions, the ones I couldn't answer. And you wouldn't let me out. But...

How long have I been here? Answer me that! It feels like both moments and lifetimes. And I hate you. And I love you. How can that be?

But all I know is, there against the tree, is... you! The light in my darkness, my carer and teacher, my lover and guide. The one who loves me best.

My beloved Guru!

I sit beneath the tree, the juices of its fruit still staining my fingers and mouth, still engrossed in the book. But suddenly I am jolted back to reality: the Guru's vulgar snores take on a more desperate tone, as if he is choking. And I look up to see his eyes wide, filled with fear. He is struggling to breathe. And he fades, back and forth, in and out of existence.

I move urgently towards him – but there is little I can do. His flesh is insubstantial to my touch, and I can give him no succour but my presence. He gropes in his robes for the bottle of that evil smelling spirit – but his muscles are far too weak: it falls from his grasp and cracks against a stone, spilling a dark, viscous liquid onto the planetoid's dust. Oily smoke rises from the lupid stain.

I hear a noise, and look up to see two men slowly walking towards me. They are the men from the comic book, the Doctor and the handsome Strom. They walk,

side by side, obviously in deep conversation, patently not at ease with each other or in agreement, but each allowing the other to talk with respect.

They are walking a path I know: a direction in which, once, there were flowers and trees, butterflies and birds, the aroma of bougainvillea and hyacinths. Where once there was a door, a set of French windows; and where now there is only a little planetoid's dust.

I notice that, just as my Guru fades in and out of existence, so too Strom changes. When the Guru is solid, he is Strom; when the Guru fades almost to nothing, Strom in turn becomes, well, the Guru. All arms and proboscis and breathless laugh.

The strains of a wheezing, atonal music fade in and out with Strom. It is possibly Colonel Bogey; or possibly not. Whatever it is, he is playing his nose like a flute.

"I am dying, Voctor," Strom said as they walked. "These sores that cover my body: perforated leprosy. It will consume me."

"I am sorry to hear that, sir," the Doctor replied. "It is a painful disease – and usually contracted through over-exposure to temporal radiation, unless I am mistaken. But whatever its provenance, it does not condone your kidnapping of the child!"

He looked around at the gardens through which they walked. Strom alternated between two forms: the man who had stood behind the desk, and a four-armed, two-legged, stocky elephantine creature, skin tinted blue. The garden vacillated with him. Now, lawns and flowerbeds, insects and birds; the next moment, a lifeless rock in the darkness of space.

"The human likeness," the Doctor asked, "it is not your true form, is it? The real you is the elephantine creature. A Thrandehar, unless I am very much mistaken, hm?"

"Quite so, Voctor, quite so," Strom replied. "You remember me from before, then. You remember what you did to me."

"I do not, sir," the Doctor replied. "We have not met, I am sure of it." His brow furrowed a little. "But I have a feeling that we shall." He paused. "The sores –

do they cause you much discomfort?”

“They are not painful. The lepers’ reward: there is little enough feeling, let alone of pain. It is the gods’ gift to their beloved sinners.”

The Doctor sniffed derisively. “Piffle-paffle!” he said. “Self-indulgent poppycock! Tell me, Strom: what have you done with Dorothea?”

Strom stopped, and looked at the Doctor quizzically. “I have done nothing with her, Voctor,” he replied. “You have!”

“I?!” the old man asked, incredulously. “I sent her north for a rest, that is all!”

“And that is how you damned her,” Strom replied. “Let me tell you a story.”

I turn back to the comic book, to see pictures revealing Strom’s story as he told it. A duel on an airship, between Strom in his elephantine form, in military uniform, and a handsome man – the same face as Strom, and yet somehow less craven, more noble.

An exploding shoe. The airship tumbling. A city appearing from nowhere, and Strom escaping in a small flying machine.

Then the city folding in on itself, multiple dimensions collapsing into one. An explosion that fractured time and space, and Strom’s craft caught in the middle of the maelstrom, battered and splintered, rendered apart, by the shards of different realities that punctured through it.

And finally... a dream of revenge.

“You left me with nothing, Voctor!” Strom said. “In the Wandering City of Arraki’ish, you took my empires away from me, and gave me this disease instead. I don’t know how – some poison you extracted from the city’s time engines, no doubt – but you tainted my body with the perforations, a long and lingering death.”

“How long? How lingering?” the Doctor demanded, and I was not sure how much this was concern, or how much he relished his adversary’s demise. In that moment, I thought that I remembered him a little: sometime compassion personified, but so often a bitter, vengeful man. Not the girl Dodo’s saviour as he presented himself.

Dodo? Who was she?

“Oh, a very long time, Vactor,” Strom replied. “Very long indeed. One of the side effects of the illness is longevity. Decades – centuries – of disease.”

He bent in towards the Doctor, a cruel smile on his face. “Aeons, even. Enough time to plan a revenge!”

“A revenge, you say!” the old man countered. “Against me, I take it. Well then, out with it. What was it you planned?”

“First,” Strom said, “I searched for a serum. I had heard it rumoured in the fairy tales of my youth, not truly believing it existed. But exist it did – and with much work over many lifetimes I found it, in a forgotten shop in the disregarded backstreets of a nondescript city on an ignored world.”

“I’ve been to such places,” the Doctor said. “Snake oil, that’s all they have.”

“Not so,” Strom replied. “Not this time. Oh, that serum! The fairy tales had not done it justice! A mere drop could change the world! And of course, I took the whole bottle, after a little... negotiation. Oh, the marvels it enabled me to do!

“First, I took a new face. Not any face, of course: your face, Vactor. And then, I travelled the time lines. Searching. For you. Setting a trap.”

“And you have found me!”

“Indeed I have,” Strom replied, “at last! At long, long last! I had given up hope, you see. Thought that I never should find you. But then the girl Dodo came into my grasp, and I realised! The poor, fragile girl! She was the honey in my trap!”

They are here! Their walk has brought them to the tree, where I and the Guru sit!

No, where I sit! The Guru... he is no more! His body has faded from my side, leaving no more than an indentation in the dust. I look up – and there he is before me, walking with the Doctor, his arms and nose and sores as large as life. And in the dust behind him a pattern of footprints that is part human, part elephantine.

The Doctor at last notices me. He drops to one knee before me, takes me in his arms.

“Dodo!” he cries. “My poor child! Are you well? Have you been hurt?”

I look at him, and smile. The silly man! He is deluded! I have never met him before outside the fiction of the comic book.

“So, what is my fate to be?” the Doctor asked, crestfallen, as he rose from the bemused, smiling girl who still sat in the dust before him.

“Ah! I have dreamed of this moment!” Strom replied. And I saw now that he was less and less the handsome man, more and more the elephantine creature, the Thrandehar. His proboscis whistled as he spoke. “I have dreamed of what I might do to you! Death? Maybe... but no! Too simple! No, my plan for you is more... delicious than that.”

The Doctor sighed, and there was an unfathomable sorrow in his eyes. “Don’t do this, Strom,” he said. “I ask you, as a fellow citizen of the universe. Please, don’t let it continue!”

“Ha!” said Strom. “The Vactor begs for mercy! No dignity!”

“Not my fate, sir,” the Doctor said. “The child! Please, I ask again, don’t do this. Let Dodo go!”

Strom ignored him. “What I have planned for you, Vactor, is delicious beyond words. I am – at last! – nearing the end of this tepid existence...” – and he coughed, the phlegm ripe in his throat, as if to punctuate the point – “...and I shall take you with me.”

“You intend to kill me?” the Doctor asked. “Ha! Such a failure of imagination!”

“Oh, so much more!” Strom spat. “I shall take you with me, out of existence! This curse you’ve given me does not allow me to die. Fade, is all. Fade to a rumour. And this shall be your fate too. You shall be a rumour! A story! A disbelieved gossip! A thousand stories, and all of them bad!”

“I thought as much,” the Doctor said. “You plan to excise me from reality, leaving no more than a trail.”

“Exactly!” said Strom. “And a corrupted trail, at that! Rotten! Stenchful! One rumour for every sore and tumour you bequeathed me, and every one of them diminishing your name! Liaisons of ill repute! Diseases of the most foul variety! A depraved and injudicious life, ill thought and ill played! Chemical diversions and venal pleasures – that’s all that history will write of you. None of it correct, and all of

it believed. This shall be your legacy!”

“Then take me now,” the Doctor said, “if that’s what you want! But, by all that is merciful, let the child go!”

Strom laughed. I could see now that he was unwell, even more than before. The sores that permeated his body were seeping a thin, clear liquid. His breathing was laboured, and his eyes seemed to find focus difficult. And like my Guru before him, he was increasingly insubstantial. I believed, then, that he was about to leave the universe one final time. He was about to fade from reality, and it was his intention to take the Doctor with him.

And he laughed.

“Revenge!” he cried, spittle dripping from his leering lips as he approached, his four arms opened wide to envelope the old man. “So sweet! A dish best served cold, they say. But this will burn!”

He was sweating, and his perspiration was obviously venomous, for the suit he had worn in human form steamed and sizzled and fell away from him. And at last I recognised him properly. He had looked like the Guru for the past ten minutes; but now, naked and ugly, rent with sores, he *was* the Guru.

He was my beloved.

I pushed past the Doctor, to stand before the Thrandehar, basking in his strange, awful beauty.

“Please, my love!” I said. “Take *me* with you! Take *me* beyond!”

The Guru tried to push me aside – but already he was too insubstantial, too weak. He couldn’t stop me.

And neither could the Doctor. He tried to pull me back too, to stand between me and my Guru. But for some reason, his grip too was weaker than a butterfly’s kiss. Not that I cared. My only thoughts were for my love. For Strom.

“Get out of my way, girl,” Strom’s voice whispered against the breeze in the tree’s branches. But it was all I could do to hear it, and I ignored him. If he, my love, were leaving, then I would go with him.

“I thought as much!” The Doctor’s voice. “Please, Strom, call this off. Whatever I did – will do – to you, I ask you to have mercy now.”

“Never!” the Thrandehar shouted back, although his voice was quieter than silence. “I shall take you with me, Voctor! You’ll pay for what you did!”

“You imbecile!” the old man said. “Don’t you see? The girl is suffering Stockholm syndrome! She believes she loves you! She is, as you say, the honey in your trap. But your trap has made nonsense of the universe! It has weakened reality! And only she, now, has the strength to manipulate it! Not you, not I. Only she. And what do you think she will do, hm?”

I could see my Guru, for the first time, question what he had done. I could see doubt in his eyes. And that made my resolve all the stronger: what he needed now, more than anything, was me.

“I do not believe you, Voctor,” the Guru’s beautiful, wheezing voice croaked. “You are mine! I shall have your reputation!”

“Please, Strom, please,” the old man begged. “Stop this now, before this child – this woman who loves you – is lost forever.”

“Never!” the Thrandehar replied. And his voice was quaking now, the sores across his body lengthening, weeping, tearing him apart. “We go! You and I! We...”

But I held him, held him close, as his body faded the final time. And as he went, it was I that went with him.

In his final moments, he played his nose like a flute. A quivering, off key medley of George Formby’s greatest hits. I like to believe he did it for me.

He was gone before I, my lover the Guru. But as I faded too, I looked down on the Doctor, and felt that I could read his mind. Already, memories were entering it, memories of me. An illicit affair with a musician. A drug induced coma. Death, of venereal disease. The rumours of disgrace that Strom had promised to the Doctor: I had taken them, against my Guru’s will.

Not memories of actuality, of course; but real enough, nonetheless. Just as he had planned, the Guru’s manipulation of the serum had changed reality, so that all that remained of me were rumours of degradation. And I could see now that this changed reality had pushed back, back into my past. Nobody any longer knew where I came from. Some said Manchester, some South London. Even I could no longer be

certain.

But it did not matter. I was with my beloved. My Guru.

I saw the Doctor, a broken man, supporting himself by his Malacca cane, and weeping for the child he had failed to save. And then I saw him rise, wipe away his tears, and walk from the planetoid back to the universe proper. To un-pause the world, no doubt. To defeat the war-machines. And to return to others.

Maybe he'd have better luck saving them.

I have just left your room and entered the garden. And I have seen you, leaning against the tree. Reality feels... different. Something is changing it. I think I love you. Can that be it?

I start walking towards you, and my walk turns into a run. And as I run past the trees, the lawns and flowerbeds, the birds and squirrels and butterflies... they tumble into dust. Grey, lifeless dust, covering the curved surface of a moon. Hardly a moon, even: a rock.

And the sky, too, falls away, the sunshine and blue vanishing into the darkest night. All that remains from before is you, and the tree. That tree!

I run towards you faster and faster, laughing. For a moment, I think I hear you call my name: Dodo! Dodo! But it's the wind, in the tree's branches.

And then I do hear you, for real. You're laughing, too: a thin, wheezing thing. But it's you, so you!

I run on, faster still. I cannot wait to be with you.

I wonder what shall happen to me?

