

Colin Palmer

*SHORT STORIES TO READ ON A BUS, A CAR,
TRAIN, OR PLANE
(or a comfy chair anywhere)*

Includes the novella "Duck Creek"



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Short stories to read on a bus, a car, train, or plane (or a comfy chair anywhere). Includes the novella «Duck Creek»

«Издательские решения»

Palmer C. D.

Short stories to read on a bus, a car, train, or plane (or a comfy chair anywhere). Includes the novella «Duck Creek» / C. D. Palmer — «Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-8-38-104943-6

A little dark, a little romance, at times deep, a little devilish and thought provoking but always taking you somewhere... Be careful though because maybe that somewhere is a place where you won't want to be alone!

ISBN 978-8-38-104943-6

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Colin David Palmer

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ISBN 978-83-8104-943-6

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

“THE ORPHAN GENIE”

Evan Floyd stepped out onto the dark street on the most momentous day of his life. Not that anything had occurred ... yet! To Evan, it had just been another day like any other day, nothing remarkable to think about and no additional stress in his already over-stressed life which sort of made it good day. But he never got to think that way as events transpired to change his life in a most unusual manner and everything that happened before was relegated to another time, another life even.

I could see him coming down that dark street as I'd seen him on previous occasions, sometimes during the day and sometimes like now in the early evening, his thoughts utterly dependant on whatever drives him from his office at this exact time almost every single day. I know he is in Real Estate; I've seen his office and even took one of his business cards which is how I came to know his name – no slight of hand, no wizardry, no spells, no trickery – just for a change. His steps are closer and though I see him, he has never set eyes upon me before until he walks around that corner ... now!

‘What, what the hell! Hullo? Are you alright?’

I had awashed myself with bright light as he rounded the corner so that when I materialised, it was during a brief period of blindness. For Evan, it would have appeared that I had always been there but the wash of light, he would explain to himself, was caused by the lights of a car in the adjacent car park. I felt positive about this otherwise I would not have risked such an overt exposure.

It was imperative that he think that way or it could mean my demise. My insight did not fail me and his words of concern soothe me. I reach up with one hand like a leper or some street beggar (which was indeed how I was portraying myself), and though my appearance would be shocking to some, Evan was homely enough not to ignore a fellow man in such poor circumstances as I appeared to be. I had always known I would have to do something to attract his attention, and his attention alone, but I also had to be certain that he was a suitable subject as my alms are not delegated lightly. My hand hung limply but he didn't step forward to take it, his face struggling with revulsion of my slovenly appearance.

‘Help me Mister’ I said as pathetically as I could, ‘help me?’

He paused for such a length of time that I thought he might turn and run, his loathing at my sight like a neon sign on his cringing face. Then resolve and charity perhaps took ahold, and he stepped toward me and grasped my hand, and as they met then so did a certain immediate understanding, for I passed that on to him to assist in the commission of my duty and his favour. Instead of helping me rise he squatted down in front of me, his hand still in mine and the care that shone from his face was like a trophy for me.

‘Hey, it's all right fella,’ his comment eliciting such sweet sorrow that tears spilled over my ancient cheeks. ‘Whoa, it's okay, let me help you up?’

The exhilaration at hearing these words made me cry even more and with fabricated effort and his assistance, I gained my feet. He quickly released my hand and stepped back in surprise, for sitting against the wall I had appeared childlike, a waif, but on uncoiling my frame I towered like a colossus over his own six foot tall and overweight mass. Fear replaced his surprise, fear and revulsion but

just for a moment – then my disheveled and desperate appearance reasserted itself and he tentatively slipped his hand into the crook of my elbow.

‘Come my man’. He spoke loudly with false bravado, given away by the slightest tremor and the fact that he was looking around desperately for other sources of possible assistance ... for himself or for me, I could not be certain.

‘Where ... where are you taking me?’ I stooped slightly so he could more naturally and comfortably lead me.

‘Well, I’d say we’d best get you cleaned up first,’ he pinched his nose for effect, ‘then maybe some food? You hungry?’ He peered into my face waiting for an answer but then went on, ‘I hope you’re not fussy, I, I don’t have much. Hey, I’ll just get pizza, order it while you’re showering! What d’ya reckon?’

I nodded at him, my tear streaked face appearing sad, my exhilaration well camouflaged, ‘thank you.’

His modest home was close by and he ushered me around and fussed like an old woman. Ensnared in the bathroom with the shower beckoning, he smiled at me and closed the door, the apparel he had provided draped across the edge of the bath. I completed my ablutions in short order (just a thought away) and left the shower running for some minutes. My powers are more useful than merely materialising wealth for others! Not that I had done so for a goodly length of time, provided for a Master – but that is my purpose here and I had selected Evan to be that Master, if he should so choose. Did he rub a bottle or a lamp? No, he had not. He had earned it.

He knocked at the door and announced the pizza, I donned his ill fitting garments and retired my now sweet smelling *soma* to his living area. Evan was opening two pink pizza boxes and he stopped as I approached the table, looking me up and down, then his face broke into a cheery grin which he initially tried to swallow before his laughter burst forth in an unstoppable delight. I looked down at myself and apart from the trouser hems only reaching halfway between my knees and ankles, and the sleeves of the indian cotton sweatshirt coiling loosely about my elbows, I felt my appearance was not too unkempt. His continued guffawing and the tears now rolling down his face forced my own mirth to surface and I bellowed away with him, deep and resonant chortling roiling over the top of his laughter. Light fittings jingled and crystal ware in an adjacent display case chinked away with us, until I realised he had ceased and was staring at me intently.

My laughter died. ‘There is a problem?’

‘You’re bloody tall, you’re bloody skinny, but that’s one hell of a voice you have’ he smiled. ‘God, I haven’t laughed like that for ages – come on, hook into the pizza,’ and he sat down at the head of the table. ‘Sit, um, what’s your name anyway?’

I pulled out a chair and as my knees would not fit under, I sat back away from the table. He briefly laughed again at that and I was becoming happier by the minute with my choice.

‘Zoltan’ I informed him, then even though I already knew, there was a certain pretence to maintain so I asked, ‘and you?’

He reached out a hand which I grasped, careful to be gentle and not crush his delicate human fingers.

‘Evan. Welcome to my home.’

He picked up a pizza box. I had never eaten pizza so presented and was concerned that it might taste similarly to the box. Taking his lead I delved in and selected a piece and after a tentative taste was pleasantly surprised with my first mouthful.

‘Mmm, good, excellent’ I nodded at him as a streak of molten cheese dangled from my hairy chin.

No other words were exchanged as we ate ravenously and it was painfully evident how Evan got so portly! He eyed off the last piece in my box but when I offered it to him, he shook his head. His charity was never ending so I insisted and rubbed my stomach to show him I was sated. In truth, I could have consumed another three or four whole pizzas.

‘Thank you Evan.’

‘Wuffor?’

‘Your hospitality. Your kindness. Your concern. Everything.’

‘S ‘right’, he swallowed his final mouthful looking a little sheepish.

‘I’d be even more grateful if you would let me reward, repay you.’

‘Of course, when you’re back on your feet again. It’s fine really.’

‘What do you desire more than anything else in the world?’

‘Hey? Oh, I dunno, you shout me a couple of pizzas and we’ll call it even ... that okay?’

‘But are there no riches, wealth your heart may desire?’

He shook his head with a shy smile and swept his arm around at the room. ‘I have all I need, a comfortable home, a new car every couple of years and a successful business. What more do I need?’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Why? you some prince in pauper’s clothing that’s going to shower me with riches?’ His laughter shook the air but this time I did not join him – my seriousness stifled his giggling. ‘Are you?’

I shook my head but before I could make reply, he jumped to his feet. ‘So, Prince Zoltan, how ‘bout a beer then? I’ve only got light, that okay? Sorry, I should have got them when the pizza arrived,’ and he was gone before I answered, his laughter following.

He returned with two small glass bottles of amber fluid and placed one in front of me before resuming his seat. He took a deep swig from his and I followed – the taste was like sugar water, but a pleasant warmth spread throughout my body all the same. It had been many decades since I had

consumed alcohol. ‘That okay?’ he asked, and I was pleasantly surprised to see he was even concerned that I enjoyed his beer.

‘It is wonderful, thank you once more.’ He looked down at the table, becoming uncomfortable with my continuing gratitude. ‘Evan?’

‘Yes?’ He didn’t look up.

‘There is no need of shyness or modesty. You have done more than most.’

He sat up straight and stared defiantly. ‘Nonsense. I couldn’t do anymore under the circumstances. Besides, I know how I would want to be treated’ and his eyes fell again.

And from that I knew even more about him ... he was lonely. There were no signs of feminine accoutrements in his household, even in the bathroom, and he was enjoying the company, my company, even though barely an hour had passed since our meeting. My recall from the months of surveillance confirmed that he had not attended one social engagement in all that time. A few after hours business meetings had been the extent of his extra-curricular activities. I leaned forward and placed my long fingers on his arm and he looked up at me again.

‘My friend, would you bear with me? No, I am not a prince as you suggest but I have partaken of your hospitality, so then am I obligated to repay you for that is the way it is written.’

‘Nonsense’ he snorted. ‘You were, are in need ... you don’t owe me anything. If you must repay me because that’s your way, then do it when you can but all you owe me is a couple of pizzas. I haven’t done anything’

‘Yes I do Evan and yes you have. And I will. Of that I promise and I always repay my debts, so no more talk of this for now, let us enjoy each other’s company shall we for it has been many years since I have done so and for that I also owe you thanks.’

Evan appeared to accept my final speech and we relaxed for the remainder of the night, he chatting incessantly. He got pleasantly drunk while he talked and though the first beer imbibed a certain

warmth, the remainder were somewhat wasted on me. I ended up draping him on his bed to sleep while I retired to the comfortable floor in his living room to mull over the tasks that lay ahead. While I rested I also passed my mind to many of the cities and nations of the world that I had not seen for considerable time, some of them so altered that they were unrecognisable to me both in name and appearance.

Evan rolled onto his side and opened his eyes. He was painfully aware the beer had left their morning-after calling card, both in his head and his bladder and he groaned at the thought of rising. A voice beside him made him jump, and for a second he believed his heart had ceased such was the shock.

‘You are all right my Master?’

The speaker lay beside him half-hidden under the bedclothes but when she sat up, the doona fell and revealed her nakedness. His eyes opened wide at her raven haired beauty and pert exposed breasts but oblivious to the concern shining from her vivid green eyes, and Evan did the only thing he could think of under the circumstances – he blushed and looked away. It was then he discovered his own nakedness and his embarrassment multiplied. Ignoring his pounding head he plunged down under the bedclothes and rolled onto his side.

‘Who, who are you?’

He felt as she spooned up behind him, her arms wrapping around his chest and the feeling of her naked breasts pressed against his back forced an immediate reaction in spite of the pressure from his bladder.

Her lilting voice softly crooned into his ear. ‘I am Melissa, my Master’ she spoke as a mother would to a child.

‘Where, what, where did you come from?’

Her hair brushed the side of his face and brought an even firmer response than he ever thought was possible, but it was the soft tickle of breathe that made him react.

‘Because you wanted me.’

Evan didn’t even realise that she hadn’t answered his question, his desire too strong to ignore; he rolled over and they made furious love for all of sixty seconds, her moans and cries allayed any embarrassment he felt. He lay gasping on top of her, her arms wrapped around him though he was attempting to support his not inconsiderable bulk off her petite body. He huffed and puffed as he raised his head to gaze into the wanton desire expressed across her whole face and surprisingly, he felt the amazing sensation of his erection returning. Not as surprising as this and far less noticeable was his headache – it was gone! He felt clear headed as if he’d just slept for twelve hours. This time their lovemaking was even more urgent, if that was possible. With no pretense other than to satisfy himself, and encouraged by Melissa’s enthusiastic urgings, Evan finally collapsed onto her totally sated for the first time in his life and drifted off into a blissful sleep.

His eyes opened, in focus immediately, and the red beaming figures of the clock radio announced that it was nine o’clock. He blinked once then turned rapidly on the bed.

‘Melissa?’

The bed was empty but the small indentation on the pillow and the turned back covers displayed her presence, as did a few wisps of her hair starkly contrasted against the white bed linen. Evan looked around the room noticing the ensuite door was open and the mirror over the vanity

echoed it’s emptiness. The dim light made it harder see around the remainder of the room and Evan reached over to turn the lamp on. She was not there.

‘Goddam, a dream?’ he muttered.

He padded into the ensuite, relieved himself and checked his nakedness in the mirror, noticing that he did not avert his eyes as he usually did. He didn’t look as portly as usual and he frowned at the visage before shrugging and turning on the shower. As he bathed he recalled Zoltan, then hurriedly shut off the shower as concern for his household took over. *Zoltan must have found Melissa – he did strongly suggest that he wanted to repay me. But what if he’s also ripped me off while I was asleep?* He dressed rapidly.

‘Dammit’ he muttered as he slammed open his bedroom door, the darkness surprising and initially disorientating even though he had lived here for over ten years. He flicked on the hallway light and stopped dead. From the hall he looked across his once sparse lounge room to the dining area where he and Zoltan had shared pizzas the night before. Where his comfy but tattered old settee had been was a deep red leather chesterfield and matching recliner, both facing a large screen plasma television mounted on the wall complete with a full sound system, VCR and DVD players mounted on beech coloured shelves beneath. The carpet had gone, his old but still serviceable carpet replaced by gleaming dark floorboards. A huge persian rug matching both the leather and the beech, framed a large glass top fossil stone coffee table. Luxurious drapes surrounded timber venetians on all windows and the dining room now had a dining setting that matched the coffee table. His china cabinet had also gone, replaced by a mahogany bar, a match of the floorboards. Overhead shelves and racks staggered with exquisite glassware and bottles of alcohol. Every surface in both rooms had been painted and the blank walls adorned with designer paintings and sculptures.

Evan realised he was standing with his mouth wide open and he closed it with a loud ‘plop’, briefly shut his eyes then shook his head as it dawned on him that he wasn’t dreaming. The door from the kitchen opened and Melissa appeared carrying two plates. She did not look at or acknowledge Evan, placing the two dishes onto the table, one at the head and the other beside. She walked back into the kitchen and returned almost immediately with a large covered stainless tray, setting it down between the two plates. Evan stood transfixed ... she was still beautiful fully dressed. Melissa fished into the pocket of her dress and produced cutlery for both settings, then serving implements. She stood beside the head of the table and looked directly at Evan, no surprise at all evident on her face.

‘Dinner is served My Master’ she beamed.

‘Who, what ... where, where is Zoltan?’

‘Master Zoltan is here My Master.’

‘Where, what, you?’ For a brief horrifying moment, Evan thought that Zoltan had somehow transformed himself into Melissa and that he had made love to her/him. Twice! Zoltan’s booming voice welcomed and relieved him from the kitchen doorway.

‘I am here Evan, My Master.’

Evan turned his head to where Zoltan stood framed, his face impassive as he stood slightly bowed to miss the architrave. As Evan watched, he stepped forward and straightened – gone were the cast offs, the humorous attire that had so tickled Evan’s fancy the previous evening, gone was the unkempt figure of the beggar and gone was the long faced look of resignation and sadness,

replaced by one of smiling self-satisfaction. Rich robes hung from shoulders to ankles where the points of highly polished boots jutted from the hem and competed with the halation from the timber floor. Gaily coloured sashes rode across one shoulder and sparkling jewels bedecked his fingers and exposed wrists and Evan thought the ornate butt of some sort of weapon protruded from the lowest portion of the sash. Zoltan's long hair was beaded back like Evan had seen was the fashion with young girls but it did not look silly or inappropriate, it appeared almost regal. Evan's thoughts flashed again to the night before and his comment about the prince.

'Who are you?' Zoltan swept into the room and with a flourish of his robes assumed the chair held for him by Melissa. He looked at Evan as Melissa offered the chair at the head of the table. Evan walked slowly forward but stopped halfway. 'I said who are you, and she, Melissa, and all this,' he allowed his eyes to leave them and glance around the room.

'Sit please, my friend. I told you that I always repay my debts. Sit down please and I shall explain. Melissa is quite the wonderful hostess so do not let her culinary skills be wasted,' he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Evan walked slowly to the chair, Melissa squeezed his hand and kissed him on the cheek as he sat. He pulled away warily, surprised. She patted him on the shoulder for reassurance and didn't look offended at his slight rejection, then he smiled as he recognised the irony that he, the overweight, middle aged and not too attractive Evan having rejected the young and beautiful Melissa. He relaxed, slightly, and looked back at Zoltan.

'Alright. Tell me what's going on? Is this some kind of joke, Changing Rooms, or Just Kidding or some other show ...'

'Easy my friend' Zoltan interrupted, 'no. It is no joke as you call it. Melissa?'

She uncovered the silver tray and the wafting aroma of roast lamb immediately assaulted Evan's senses. His stomach rumbled loudly as the perfectly baked vegetables gleamed at him from the tray. Evan shrugged. 'Why not? All this,' he waved his arm around the room, 'and a roast dinner for breakfast!'

'But it is evening now my friend. You have slept all day' and Zoltan's smile was not a little mischievous as he snuck a peek at Melissa.

'I ... I didn't think I'd drunk that much' was all he could mutter.

'Do you like it?'

'I do, yes, I do, but you have to understand, it's such a dramatic and surprising change that I wasn't, I'm not prepared for it, I don't know ...'

'It is alright my friend' Zoltan interrupted again. 'As long as it is to your approval? Is there anything you would like me to change, something else your heart desires?'

Evan shook his head, looking bewildered. 'I don't understand how I slept all day, um, I haven't missed a day at work for three years, and how, how did you do this, all this without waking me?'

Melissa finished serving them and retired out of sight to the kitchen, nodding once to Zoltan and smiling at Evan. Zoltan returned Evan's baleful glare with one of amusement. 'You have heard of magicians, shamans, wizards, warlocks, sorcerers and the like? I have variously been described as one or all of those at one time or another, but in your vernacular you probably know me as a genie.' He held up his hand as Evan prepared to interrupt and nodded to his plate. 'Let me complete my explanation and that should satisfy most of your questions. Please, eat your dinner as I speak then it shall be your turn. I cannot solve the mystery of how I became a genie for you as it occurred too long ago for my recall. What I can tell you is that I am over two and a half thousand years old,' his mischievous grin appeared again, 'and yes, I lived through the time of your Jesus Christ, though I know of him only from your own history. You see, I am only conscious when I am serving a Master, the remainder of time does not exist for me. Each and every time I return to your world I see the amazing changes that have occurred, and on some occasions that has been as short as a year or two, up to hundreds of years. This time, I have returned for over a year to a Master who was a wealthy, wise and patient man. His first wish for me, yes, that part is true, three wishes for the finder of the genie – his first wish was that my next Master would be a worthy recipient of my powers as he believed that he already had everything in the world that he could ever want or need. We spent many, many nights conversing over his remaining two wishes until tragically, he was killed in an automobile accident. I had never enjoyed anybody's company before, satisfied with both my position and my own solitary life, but my Master showed me something that nobody before him had done, and that was true companionship is indeed a worthy life. If this secret could be shared amongst the world's many natives, then peace would be all encompassing.'

He paused as Melissa returned with two crystal glasses of red wine. 'Will there be anything else my Master?'

Evan was surprised to see she was addressing himself and not Zoltan. He merely shook his head – even Melissa's beauty could not take his mind from this incredible, this unbelievable, story.

'Go on Zoltan, please.'

'There is little more to tell, except the death of my Master occurred some forty years ago, but now I believe that in accordance with his one and only wish, I have found a worthy recipient – you.'

The silence between them lay for long seconds, Evan studying Zoltan's face as if seeking further clarification and Zoltan staring back impassively, knowingly. Finally, Evan cleared his throat, his meal so mouth wateringly tempting yet so insignificant.

'You expect me to believe something so unbelievable? Genie? Genies only exist in stories and fairy tales and you could have done all this while I slept, it's possible.' He concluded sounding as if he was talking to himself rather than addressing Zoltan.

'You want some proof, of course. As I believed it would be. I am not a charlatan Evan, and I am most definitely not a liar. Behold!'

With a gesture of one hand, the entire room returned to its former antiquity, there was no noise or billowing of smoke or any other theatrics that Evan could see. It was like blinking and seeing two totally separate scenes after the blink. Even his dinner was now congealed eggs sitting with coldly rigid bacon on his own old plates. He peered again at Zoltan dressed once more in the

clothes he'd supplied last night, hair disheveled, his face worn and long. Zoltan gestured again and the room, and himself, reclaimed their new appearance. Evan shook his head and uttered one word.

'Melissa?'

'She is very real my friend, one of many wards, and she agrees with my decision as well as telling me that you are a lovely man!' He spoke the last with a broad smile.

'And so, I get three wishes when?'

'Just two my friend, the two remaining from my previous master.'

'My God! Zoltan, I'm just having a little trouble digesting all this, if you understand what I mean. Um, does that include any spurious wishes I may make, you know, like in jest.'

'It does, so you must be careful.'

'What about you, what happens to you after I've made my two wishes.'

'Not for you to concern yourself with. You could say I go back into hibernation, like a bear in winter, yet mine is normally a very long winter.'

'And I can wish for anything?'

'Yes, anything as long as it does not involve hurt to others but I warn you again my friend, be careful, as your wishes will literally come true. I cannot say more than that.'

'I think I understand, thank you. Don't wish for my long dead mother or something like that because I will get her back exactly as she is today, ashes to ashes if you get my drift.'

'I do, and I see you also 'get my drift' as you put it. That is how it is my friend.'

'Well then, I think I know what I want already, if I may?'

'Anytime, but make sure ...'

'I am sure – *my* friend.'

Zoltan looked at Evan quizzically – it was the first time he had seen him so positive.

'Then let it be – let us do it.'

Evan took a deep breath. 'I'm likely to mistakenly send someone to hell or something if I wait and think about it too much, so I have to do it now.' Another deep breath. 'Zoltan, my first wish is nothing atypical, it is selfish but my intentions are good. I wish to be always financially wealthy so that I can assist the poor and underprivileged of the world.'

'It is done,' Zoltan nodded, smiling.

‘Secondly, I have only known you a short time but in you I see the same loneliness I feel, the need for a friend, a companion as you found with your previous master. I truly believe that, so,’ he paused and took a deep breath but failed to see the look of resignation on Zoltan’s face, ‘it is my wish that you be free and should you so choose, you can remain here for as long as you like. You will always be welcome.’

Zoltan stared at him, no surprise evident. Melissa came out from the kitchen and stood at the end of the table, looking expectantly at each of them. Evan continued to look at Zoltan and finally nodded at him in assurance.

‘That is my wish, those are my wishes. Now, genie, tell me they are done – both of them.’

‘I should have foreseen this, your charity, your philanthropy is unfathomable. But I warned you also of consequences and you have wished me to be something that I am not. If not a genie, then I am nothing, I do not exist. I cannot forestall any longer my friend, I see you did have all good intentions however ... uumph.’

Melissa had taken on a ghostly pallour as Evan glanced at her, the look of horror on his face surpassed only by her sadness. She became more transparent as he watched, until disappearing from his view within a few short seconds. He was sure her last act was to blow him a kiss. The horror did not leave him as he looked back to Zoltan, now also fading quickly.

‘Noooo ... ’ he yelled.

The voice came to him muffled, the booming qualities gone, the crystal rattling volume seemed to be lost somewhere in the short distance between them.

‘Goodbye my friend. Good luck. It is done.’

THE END

“THAT’S THE WAY IT IS”

I am my Master’s right hand man and he calls me Ivan, though I know not if that is my real title. I obediently respond to my Master by addressing him as Sir – or Cur if he is feeling somewhat frisky, which he can and does do after Friday evening cocktails. He does not normally allow me a sense of humour and I’m afraid that’s as good as it gets. You didn’t get it? I am sorry, please – I shall tell you a little more of my Master and perhaps you then may understand.

His real name is Sir Hubert Jaxworthy and he is married to the Bitch, Sasha Jaxworthy. My Master is a Rottweiler and as the head of the largest financial institution in Australia, he is a very powerful dog in both the business and political world. For most of the year he, we that is, reside in the Worlds’ most influential financial district in downtown Durban, South Africa. I much prefer living in Sydney than Durban but being human, I have no say in my Master’s business affairs, or any other affairs for that matter.

My job is simply to present him with his food twice a day, ensure that he has a constant supply of fresh water, wash him at least twice per week, trim his nails monthly, and cart around his favourite tree stump in a kiln fired terracotta pot. I am also his private assistant for all, almost all, his personal and professional affairs.

I digress though from the true purpose of this missive. This introduction was to establish the credentials of my Master, credentials which I believe are impeccable and therefore the import of what follows is vital to all who read this, especially if you, like me, are human.

The following was dictated to me by my Master on the nights’ of the 17th and 18th of June in the year 1984. It took two laborious nights as Sir did over imbibe on the first and his pertinent palaver became somewhat lost amongst his furtive ramblings of things irrelevant. As heart wrenching and frightening as they were, and probably indicative of the mood such revelations engender, I took the safe liberty of only recording the salient points, simply hitting my keyboard as if I was typing everything so that he would not hesitate or take his mind from his painful and terrible task (Sir is not violent when drunk but rather licentious when there are bitches around).

For my own credibility, I should add that I am a servant of my Master willingly and that I believe it is the true place of we humans in this world – to serve. I have been using these portable battery operated keyboards for almost a decade, I know not its correct title either, and I have been spiriting my Master and his entourage around the world in his own supersonic business jet (Sir did on more than one occasion ‘strongly suggest’ we break through the earth’s atmosphere and it was truly a sight to behold, though space travel is common, indeed, they have just begun construction of the moon’s eleventh city and a third on Mars) and I truly believe that if we humans had been the ruling species, we would still be wasting our lives and time building self destructive machines designed to maim and kill humans and other living things instead of pooling our efforts for the good of the planet and all species therein.

I know my mind is capable of vastly more independent thought than even my Master but it is also clouded by issues that wreak havoc and simply waste time. My Master himself has actually admitted this very thing to me, usually accompanied by a drool laden grin from one side of his muzzle, but we have known each other all of his short life and he is acutely aware of my true beliefs and subservience to his greater overall abilities. He rose not from power inherited and therefore ill

prepared to wield such sovereignty, but by the virtue of his own skill and intelligence which in the canine world, is instantly recognised and lauded.

However, back to my Master's epistle. If the first part be somewhat disjointed, as I have previously noted this was due to Sir's inebriation and my own shortcomings to decipher the salient points. The overall message remains clear for all.

17th June, 1984 —

From the Office of Sir Hubert Jaxworthy – General Manager and President of the Earth Bank, 7192 Mains Road, Sydney Central City, County Australia.

I dictate this message of galactic import to my faithful manservant Ivan who I also empower, in actual fact order, to use all means possible to disseminate the information therein to all relevant species. (*Hereinafter, the italics are my own comment – Ivan*)

During my years as inarguably the most powerful Dog within the south sphere of this our planet Earth, certain information has come my way that disturbs me in a way that I almost think with humanoid morality, although this is of course not possible as we all know (*I disagree – Sir is worldly and wise and understands the human psyche. He uses this uncanny ability to draw upon assets that the canine species cannot possess. These assets have made him what he is today and for better or worse, lead him to the conclusions that he now troubles over so miserably.*). The first revelation is this.

Many hundreds of years ago, the dominant species of the world and only this world as far as we are aware, were Felines. Humanoids, humans, served these Felines similarly to what they now do for Canines. Felines were not as future dependant as we, and apparently there exists records which purport to demonstrate that as a species, they lived only for recreation. I do not know how it would be possible to survive and progress if that was truthfully their main vocation however, I have it under inscrutable authority that it is fact. Perhaps that it is why we evolved to be the next dominant species. I have never seen a Feline or even have any remote idea of what one looked like, but I do not doubt that they existed at some time. It was only from human records that we determined these creatures existed at all. As we of the Canine species are also known as Dogs, so were the Felines spoken of as Cats by prehistoric humans but I have never met a human that knows what a Cat is or was. I would have liked to have seen these human records that supposedly exist. (*I have never heard of the existence of any human transcripts, or indeed of a Cat. I was most surprised at my Master's words but my concern was more at his demeanour and what other news was making him act in this most peculiar way.*)

Canines are peaceful and we encourage the growth of all other species both here on earth and at our other outlying habitations (*the Moon and Mars he refers to, though as with the Cats, I have no idea of what other creatures they have discovered on those satellite nations.*) However, according to these human records, it is we, Dogs, who were responsible for the extinction of the Felines and taking over the progression of this planet toward what it is today. Most horribly, that extinction of Cats was manipulated, directed using the very nature of the Cats against them.

Their laziness, or what may have only been a peaceful servitude perpetuated by the lack of any apparent threat, was used by mobs of semi-trained professionals to carry out what were, in essence, mass assassinations. There were no weapons in existence other than tooth and claw and as gruesome as it may sound, that is how the cats were disposed of, and by no means was that the worst of what is to come. The controlled elimination occurred over a period of some eight Dog years until complete eradication was achieved, and I shudder that some of my very own ancestors could have been involved in such a blood thirsty action. I feel sick to my stomach whenever I think of it. Sasha does not know

and I do not want her to know (*it was here that Sir began to ramble more and more, relative to his continued consumption of alcoholic beverage. I maintained my composure and make believe for my Master's sake by pretending to be punching keys. I do not believe that he said anything more this night that required public record. I am in great pain myself that he is suffering in this way and eventually I was able to transfer him in a semi comatose state to his residence. Madame Sasha, a lovely bitch, takes over the worry from me and I am, thankfully, finally dismissed for the evening.*)

18th June, 1984 —

My Master appears in better spirits tonight though he has attended Friday cocktails, but I do not believe that he consumed any alcohol. If that be true then it would be a first since he has been attending these functions, but I am glad nonetheless. Perhaps we can finish this story of his as it would be false of me to say I was not curious – and extremely concerned.

Let us continue Ivan my faithful friend (*Many nomenclatures he has adorned on me whilst intoxicated, but not of such a personable nature and never once has he referred to me as a friend – it worries me greatly knowing that he does so with all sobriety*) and get this distasteful task over and done with so that Fate can then muster its defences against impending evil. Ah, Ivan, I see you glance at me from the corner of your eyes at that. Dear Ivan, if I may, you ARE my friend and there IS evil on the way. There, I know that does not ease your burdon but should you be carrying even a thousandth of my own then your shoulderrs would have been bburied into the sidewalks bby now. So take some of the weight by rrecording these wordds, and quickly, for I feell that all is accelerrating to a ppoint where it willl bbe too late. (*I am now so frightened that I uncharacteristically have made many spelling errors. His huge paw on my shoulder now steadies me.*)

I have told you of the demise of the Felines. That should have prepared you for what was to come. My information is that the Felines were not terribly useful and immediate past thinking of the Earth Government, and current thinking of more than a few powerful Senators within, is that humans are now considered superfluous as well. Steady Ivan, steady. My contacts assure me that secret agendas have been agreed to so that other species will evolve to replace humans and the tasks they currently do for us. You have seen the Crystal Programs no doubt, where monkeys, chimpanzees and orangutans can already accomplish many human functions, ironically taught to them by their human handlers. These will be the human replacements and over the next ten years, yes, that is my information, over the next decade the human race is to be systematically eradicated.

I believe that it may already have started, the so called Cultural Revolution in Asia East and the uprising by the Doberman master race in Europe Central. There are many other like disturbances all over the globe but they are the grandest in scale at this time.

It behoves me that I will appear a traitor to my own Species for this, but I cannot and will not standby and do nothing. Advise as many of your kind as you can Ivan and prepare to fight for your very existence (*A silent alarm has just activated – the Master and I are the only ones that know of it, and now also of what it could herald.*) Go now Dearest Ivan, we may already be too late but you must try. Quick, the private exit, take the chopter then the jet My Friend. You will be safe as we Dogs cannot fly or activate the necessary equipment to disable the machinery ... yet. But hurry My Friend. Go. Spread the word. Defend yourself. Ivan, stop typing and go

(I did not immediately go to the roof, but I did retreat to the private exit as ordered. From the relative safety there I watched as my Master was firstly surrounded by all manner of thugs, Wolves, Dobermans, and multiples of barstard mixed breeds which by their very size and viciousness qualified

them for these horrid duties. I thought all Canines were as for my Master, caring, gentle, thoughtful, but now I see with my own eyes the credence my Master's final statement did not for me require. But it is a credibility that will be recognised elsewhere. He is lead away in leashes, his proud head is held high. With heavy sadness I understand that so many questions remain unanswered, not the least being 'why'? So it's you and me now my friends. To arms. To arms.)

+ + + + +

“THE MARRIAGE GAME”

There was a time when it had been too easy. Looking back over his scribbled diary entries from the last five years he could see where it had started to slide. No – he could see where the slide had got steeper and accelerated – *that* had been the past five years. The start, well, the start was something that began at the beginning. Start at the beginning, begin at the start, ‘start at the knees please’ had been the burgeoning insistence from the day you are born, even in the ads for caramel filled chocolate bears for God’s sake.

Excerpt from the Diary of Charles Stuart Daniels (Charlie)

January 20th, 1995. She said she loves me!! She loves me! Oh my God, oh my God, she loves me! What am I going to do now? What you told her you would do you stupid barstard – love her back. And her front. And the left side, the right side and that gorgeous backside; especially that delicious backside!! She loves ME!!!!!!

‘These same words, their phrasing and their meaning reverberate throughout every journal, their very repetitiveness in such a multitude of individual insertions were perhaps indicative, or at the very least suspiciously numerous, to warrant wonder at the ulterior motive of the author,’ thought the author himself.

‘Whoa, suspicion of what?’ Charlie wondered aloud. ‘Am I not in love with her? Did I not believe in the power of love and what it instilled within my very being each time I wrote those missives? Of course I did, with no shadow of a doubt.’ Wonderingly. ‘No doubt at all. I think?’

Excerpt from Charlies' Diary

September 11th 1989. She forgot my birthday. How could anybody forget the birthday of their partner, their lover, their closest confidante? How could she forget MY birthday? It wasn't an important birthday per se, as far as birthdays go anyway, I mean it was my 29th so it wasn't a biggy or anything, but still, to forget? I hated her, oh I hated her, it hurt so much and her lack of excuses made it hurt more. I could have killed her when she got home from work at 8.30 (pm!), because she acted as if it had been a normal day. Like every other day. No phone call at all, so it hadn't been normal because we usually called each other at least once every single day that we aren't together. And this had been my birthday, but she didn't call and my anticipation levels had grown with the day, with each passing minute I waited for that call, and when that didn't come, I waited for the greeting. Instead she's home two hours late and she doesn't even say why. And she doesn't say Happy Birthday either. I hate her, God oh I hated her for that day – today. She sleeps now, oblivious to what she has done, and not done, but my mood is too dark – I cannot go to her like this. Lying beside her warm body, feeling the smoothness of her skin, seeing her beautiful face, feeling her body acknowledge my own proximity by snuggling back into me, her fingers curling into mine and her vibrant blonde strands tickling my arm that now stretches under her pillow to encase her and raising goosebumps where they rest, reminding me of how much I love her. I don't want to love her at the moment for I am emotionally drained, but maybe I will go and share our bed for she wakes and searches for me if I am not there soon after her. Goodnight my love. Happy Birthday to me.

Charlie flicked back more pages and then through earlier journals. He marvelled at how similar his handwriting had remained over the years. He returned to the very first entry in the very first book.

Excerpt from Charlies' Diary

September 11th 1985. Got given this diary for my birthday today. Never written a diary before. Don't know what she was thinking by getting me this. I thought only women and girls kept diaries? Oh well, at least I've written in it once and she did give me some other cool presents, especially the lingerie which she looked absolutely ravishing in – and ravish her I did!! Great sex, if not a little chilly out on the balcony on this early spring eve. I love her. Yeah, I do. Maybe I'll should tell her that?

Excerpt from Charlies' Diary

November 24th 1985. Bitch. I wish she would just go away. Her and that friend of hers. Maybe I should warn him that she's a bitch? She'll hurt him too. The bitch. If I was psychotic I'd know the right thing to do in this situation. Rid the world of one disease (the bitch) and save tens, hundreds, thousands, millions from the pain she is putting me through. Nobody deserves what's happening to me right now.

Charlie slapped the book closed and lowered his head onto his crossed arms as if to stop the contents escaping. 'I loved you. Why did you do that to me? Why, instead of committing to the folly of pain didn't you commit to us instead? Why?'

Such a question he could not answer, he was like the perpetual mother with toddlers that always ask the same question, that very same question. 'Why?'

Addendum to Charlies' Diary

Dear Diary, I haven't written to you in over a week because I've been away on my honeymoon! Yippee, yeeha, yay! Me, married! Who'd have believed it? Oh yeah, it's the 21st of October 1987 today, and we got married on the 10th. Great day. Expensive day! Lots of people at the wedding that I (partly) paid to be there and I didn't even know who they were, and neither did *she*. Must have been friends or family on her mothers' side. Oh no, I have a mother in law now! I can put up with having any number of mother in laws after that day. Brilliant honeymoon too and you are not going to hear the details, but let me just say that the sand of those Fijian beaches sure found its way into the most unlikeliest places! I've only known her for a couple of years but in my heart, I know I will love her forever. She wrote me this poem in the sand:

**Our history may not span to far
But it's the memories that we are
creating now
And the future that we live for ...**

I am in love. Forever in Love!!!

Charlie flicked forward over the numerous blank pages which immediately followed that addition he recalled so vividly pasting in on the very first day they had arrived back from Fiji – from their honeymoon. On reaching the count of sixty two he finally located his penmanship once more. Over two months of blank. Two months of the best part of his life, of their marriage, and he had not recorded it. Maybe that was why he was so diligent about doing so now. Good, bad or otherwise, his thoughts were entered without fail and whenever he had departed his home, this study, for holidays or business, any overnight sojourn, the current Diary accompanied him as natural a part of his luggage as his toothbrush. He flicked forward through more pages and then onto the next book, and looked uneasily at where the pages stopped. He held his head low in his hands as he read, both elbows on the desk as if he were still in primary school and somebody was trying to copy the answers from his exam paper.

Extract from Charlies' Diary

23rd of January 1995. We had her 31st birthday party last night. It was not fun. She drank too much and she flirted a lot. But not with me. It was only days ago that we were so much in love, but it feels like years. Tonight she looked like she was ready to love anybody except me. Even her parents watched her with a slightly funny look in their eyes. I sat with them a lot so I saw. They left about 1030 pm and she finally noticed that I was sitting by myself. I thought everything would be alright then but it wasn't. It got worse. She said she, they, wanted to go on to a night club, did I want to come, I had work tomorrow and she would understand if I didn't want go with them. She was actually telling me to stay home and I was devastated, but as always the loyal and loving husband that's exactly what I did do. She hasn't come home.

24th January 1995. She still wasn't back when I went to work this morning but she was here in our bed asleep when I got home. She said she felt very ill and just wanted to sleep, she couldn't talk. I'm still devastated. I hate her. I hate her lying there so beautiful. I hate knowing I love her as much as I do. She can't remember what she did last night. I hate her. I hate her. I want her dead. The bitch. The bitch.

The ocean lapped gently onto the wide expanse of beach. There were no swells for the board riders – the brilliant blue was as flat as the proverbial mill pond. It was a rare day and Charlie sat on the balcony wearing only shorts, the sun even on this mid-winters' day warming him through. The Diary lay in his lap and as the sun approached the ten o'clock position in the morning hue, he slipped his finger under the next to last page – yesterday.

Excerpt from Charlies' Diary

29th June 2001. Her face was radiant as she slept. It always is when she is asleep – the face of an angel. We've been here for a week and I haven't missed the city, she hasn't missed her social crowd even though she painfully reminded me on a number of occasions before we left of all the parties and events that she would miss by coming here with me. Still, we had a beautiful dinner last night – romantic and exotic, simplistic and erotic, as she so eloquently put it. She is much better with words than I. Maybe she should have written this diary for me? It would be so much more exciting to read and perhaps things would have turned out differently? Tomorrow. Tomorrow is the big day. Tomorrow I will end it all. Finished. End. Finito. No more mulling over the fate of whether we are in love anymore or not. The climax will be catastrophic.

Charlie turned the page slowly and squinted at the brightness of the page. He lowered his pen to the blankness of today.

30th June 2001. Okay, I'm ready to do it, end it once and forever. Here she comes now, she's up early as she knew this was going to happen. Goodbye.

She flowed out onto the balcony, the mid-morning light retaining and even highlighting her angelic features. She lifted the Diary from Charlies' hands and promptly sat in his lap. 'Good morning Mr. Daniels' and kissed him full on the lips. Charlie wrapped his arms around her and returned the kiss and when she pulled away he looked into her gorgeous grey eyes.

'Good morning Mrs. Daniels' he responded lightly.

'You ready?' she asked.

She looked at him steadily and even if she had not voiced the question he knew what she wanted to know.

'Yes. Let's do it,' he nodded to her.

They both rose and walked hand in hand off the end of the balcony where a small bonfire had been prepared in the dunes, and after a quick glance at her husband, she placed the current, and last Diary on top of the other fifteen volumes already strategically arranged. Fire lighters were in place beneath them and Charlie lifted his Planet Hollywood Zippo and flicked it into life. They both watched the spluttering flame.

'I should never have bought you that diary' she told him, without reproach but with a hint of sadness, sympathy perhaps, in her voice. Charlie looked at her and back to the blue and yellow flames that were beginning to consume over fifteen years of his life; a solitary tear slipped down his cheek. 'Good bye,' he whispered.

* * * *

THE STORY TELLER

Some of them pointed unkindly, selfishly. As children they were taught that it was rude to point yet now they do so as poor examples to their own children. The subject of their rudeness appears oblivious to their behaviour and he trudges past even though most of the children call his name. His eyes are hooded and look straight down at his feet as he painfully and laboriously places one foot in front of the other, slowly and inexorably aiming for his target destination like a giant Galapagos tortoise. The children revert to the silence exhibited by their gathered mothers.

He disappears into the Library front door and it is a signal for the waiting mothers to gossip about him in excited babbling voices. The children are eager to go and the crescendo increases with their pleas to unhearing parental auditory circuits – if mothers were men they could be accused of domestic deafness. Finally, as if some magic volume switch has been triggered, a solitary mother responds to her child.

‘Just sit down and wait Rebecca. You know they won’t let us, you in until he, he is ready.’

‘It’s Mr Cole Mommy, his name is Mr Cole.’

‘Yes, yes dear’ her child is dismissed. ‘Where do you think he comes from?’ she asks another of the Mothers who by some miracle is not already engaged in conversation.

‘Don’t know. Nobody seems to know.’ The rest of the mothers have also stopped talking, just in case there has been a breakthrough about the mysterious Mr Cole – there was no way any of them wanted to miss the smallest tit bit of information. ‘Even Mrs Stevens the Librarian doesn’t know.’

‘So how long has he been coming here?’ a third mother asks, one who has only recently moved into the area but whose child had been attending this library session with a friends’ daughter for over four years.

‘The Library opened in 1996, September I think it was, and it was only a matter of weeks after that,’ Rebeccas’ Mom replied.

‘A man, that man Mr Cole, has been coming here every Saturday for nearly six years and nobody knows anything about him?’ the third mother asks with a mix of absolute wonder and total disbelief plain as day on her face.

Instead of a reply almost all of the women look at each other and simply shake their heads.

‘He’s good lookin’, I know that!’ squeals Rebeccas’ Mom, and they all break into excited laughter and babble now about how he is probably great in bed, but he does what he does because he used to be married and his own wife and kids were tragically killed. ‘Bec Honey’ her Mom asks, ‘has he ever said anything about himself at all, you know, where he comes from or anything like that?’

The women are immediately quiet again. They all wait as if their next breathe is dependent upon little eight year old Rebeccas’ response to her Mother.

‘No Mom’ the babble begins again at once, but almost supernaturally ceases as Bec speaks again. ‘There was this one time when Billy Smithers cried.’

Rebecca stopped talking because she realised that there was over twenty pairs of adult eyes peering at her, searching her face, hanging on once again for life’s breath. She was only eight and her little lips pursed – the attention was scary. A tear scabbled down her cheek from one eye and her lips began to tremble.

‘It’s alright Honey’ her Mom squatted down and wrapped her arms around Bec. ‘Go on, it’s okay.’

‘Billy Smithers he cried and ... sniffle ... and Mr, Mr ... sniffle ... Cole just said to him that it was okay to cry ... sniffle ... to go ahead, cry and that we would all cry too so that Billy wouldn’t feel so bad. He, he ... sniffle ... said that he, Mr Cole ... sniffle ... had seen too many tears already, but we should all still go ahead and he would try too, for Billy.... sniff.’

After a moment’s hesitation the verbal analysis began again. This time they stopped only because the horrible realisation dawned upon them all at once. Billy Smithers had been going to the library on these special days for only a month. He only went for a month because he had died – his whole family had died. The entire Smithers family perished in a house fire which only their Burmilla cat, Bungendore, had survived. Soft murmuring reminded those in the crowd who had forgotten, as if it were possible that such a horrendous event could be forgotten.

‘What did Mr Cole do to Billy to make him cry Bec?’

‘Nothing Mom’, Bec’s confidence was mostly restored now. ‘He just did what he always does – tells stories.’

Before any more patter could eventuate, Mrs Stevens herself opened the front door.

“Good morning ladies, morning kids’ she chirped, and began counting infant heads as they excitedly filed past her. ‘No running’ she warned, though none of them had shown any sign of doing so.

Mrs Stevens had been the Head Librarian for almost three years and a Council Librarian within the local municipality for a total of 34 years. She had never seen so many kids regularly attending any Library service. As she had told many mothers over the years, she knew as little as they did about the mysterious Mr Cole and she couldn’t even tell them about the stories he told the kids because neither she nor any of her staff were allowed to be present either. Sure, some parents had been uncomfortable with this and withdrawn their children, forbid them to attend, but those children kicked up so much of a continual fuss about missing out that within a week or two, the parents usually relented and allowed them to return, if there were any vacancies still available that is.

And the results spoke for themselves. Every single child who attended became remarkably well mannered, improved at school in some cases to the extent that the local Primary School Assistant Headmaster showed up and wanted to attend a session ‘for the information of the Education Department’, he had pompously announced. That session did not proceed – Mr Cole was adamant that NO adult, in fact nobody over the age of twelve could attend. He displayed no anger, only futility, he was not argumentative, simply obstinate. His only answer to the question of ‘why’ was that it was

not possible for him to tell his stories in the same way if there was an older child or an adult present. For the children, it just would not be the same. And his results were indisputable.

The only other session that had been delayed was when Mr Cole ‘discovered’ a video camera secreted in ten year old Jamie Sinclair’s bright yellow Digimon back pack. Mr Cole stated the discovery resulted from the low battery warning bleeper activating itself on the camera as the children had gathered and sat down excitedly awaiting that weeks’ story. Mr Sinclair told a disbelieving Mrs Sinclair later that night that he *had* fully charged the battery pack as she had asked.

Apart from the occasional mother making surreptitious flirtatious suggestions to Mr Cole (he was indeed a handsome man and he did not wear a wedding ring), it was his results with the children that remained the prime motive behind the continuing sessions.

When they first started it had only been with five children, so Mrs Stevens’ predecessor had informed her. Within a month that figure had grown to 25, and in the second month, they had to cap the number of attendees to 60 as no more could comfortably fit into the annexure where Mr Cole told his stories, and there was no other suitable venue within the Library and Mr Cole himself refused to go elsewhere. The library was the only venue that he could ‘do what he did’ he advised them. Consequently, there was a waiting list of more than a thousand children waiting to get into the sessions but as almost all the children currently attending had been going since the first year, and only ceased to attend when they either moved away or became too old (there was usually a huge farewell celebration whenever one of the kids reached the age of thirteen and could no longer attend the sessions. Remarkably, but not surprising to their parents, the kids themselves accepted that they could no longer attend with all the aplomb of an university student on graduation day, and each and every one of them went on to be in huge demand by big business and political parties alike, even before they had finished school), or as in the sad case of the death of Billy Smithers. The vast majority of that thousand names on the waiting list would never get to see or hear Mr Cole tell one of his stories.

Mothers and Librarians, the long, long waiting list and even Billy Smithers was forgotten now, inside, the annexure secured. The children sat in a semi-circle facing him, their faces quietly and eerily intent as they knew he would not begin until there was absolute silence.

The annexure itself was designed to be a relatively noise free environment so that 20th century technology of videos, satellite and pay television showing documentaries and wildlife programs and even audio books could be enjoyed by patrons without being interrupted by the obstreperous behaviour of normal library life. Anybody who still believes that libraries remain a haven of peaceful solitude has not recently attended a public library, so the annexure was included as a popular addition to the original plans.

Strangely, there were no documents, no minutes of committee meetings, no council records or even a single solitary person that could recall *who* had actually first muted the idea of the annexure. The population did not warrant it and the council budget had not extended to its inclusion, but somehow, somewhere during the planning stages, it had miraculously appeared and been unanimously accepted without query or derision, the additional funds scraped up so that it was constructed and opened at the very same time as the rest of the Library.

The children knew none of this. They were here for one reason and one reason only. The Storyteller. Mr Cole was The Storyteller. In the outrageous silence surrounding them all they saw him lift his head, and a rapid sweep of his eyes showed that all was in order and he could begin.

His eyes were a piercing blue, the mature age lines across his forehead and the mirrored crows feet at the corner of his eyes the only signs, beside his ponderous walk, that he was older than he looked. Much, much older. His handsome face and head full of thick jet black hair aged him somewhere in his mid-thirties and it was no wonder that some of the mothers' swooned over him, indeed fantasised sometimes late at night when the beer and cigarette stench of their overweight husbands engaged them in their wifely sexual duties. Mr Cole was more than just The Storyteller – to some he was their marriage saviour. The man himself smiled now and all the children smiled back.

'Shall we start with a prayer?' His voice was deep and mellow, and though he had not spoken loud, the attentiveness of his subjects ensured they all heard him clearly. 'Rebecca, please, if you would begin' he nodded to the eight year old.

Bec stood up immediately. There was no apparent hesitation, no nervousness portrayed on her young face, and her parents would have been gob smacked if they had seen their shy and timid Rebecca react so confidently. They would have been more gob smacked at the words she now expelled with full conviction. She started and led from her standing position and all the children followed. They remained seated and smiling as they chanted.

Mr Cole himself did not join them but his eyes quavered. As they progressed his whole body trembled, as if the words were pinching him in some insidious way. Their voices did not waver.

*'Oh almighty Diablo, cast off from Heaven
Come to us now and preach of the Dark Light.
Show us the enlightenment, Show us the pain,
Show us the way of Evil,
For we are your servants Diablo.
Let not the purgatory good inhabit our spheres
After your return Diablo.
We are your servants
and We await your return in the perfect form.
The evil and mighty Diablo
Our precious Dark Lord.*

'Again' voiced The Storyteller, except his voice was deeper now, very deep, and the blue of his eyes had made way for a crimson hue like a blood moon and as the words caressed him once more, the crimson darkened further to a black red, pearlescent black that shone red highlights which ricochet across the room so that every single child also reflect that evil glow.

Coles' skin was pulsing
'Show us the enlightenment, Show us the pain,'
...huge blisters appeared to be pulsing and bursting across his skin but instead of ...

'Let not the purgatory good inhabit our spheres'

...an aqueous putrid eruption, a dark scaly armour was growing to replace ...

'We are your servants and We await'

...the human form. From the crown of his head two large eruptions resulted in ...

'The evil and might Diablo'

.. two short moss stained ivory horns that steam arose from as if they'd just been ...

'Our precious Dark Lord'

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