



NICK HARKAWAY
AUTHOR OF THE GONE-AWAY WORLD

ANGELMAKER

A
NOVEL

ALSO BY NICK HARKAWAY

The Gone-Away World

NICK HARKAWAY

ANGELMAKER



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For Clare,
like everything else

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A Note About the Author

*The gangster is the man of the city,
with the city's language and knowledge,
with its queer and dishonest skills
and its terrible daring,
carrying his life in his hands like a placard,
like a club.*

—ROBERT WARSHO

**The socks of the fathers;
mammalian supremacy;
visiting an old lady.**

At seven fifteen a.m., his bedroom slightly colder than the vacuum of space, Joshua Joseph Spork wears a longish leather coat and a pair of his father's golfing socks. Papa Spork was not a natural golfer. Among other differences, natural golfers do not acquire their socks by hijacking a lorryload destined for St. Andrews. It isn't done. Golf is a religion of patience. Socks come and socks go, and the wise golfer waits, sees the pair he wants, and buys without fuss. The notion that he might put a Thompson sub-machine gun in the face of the burly Glaswegian driver, and tell him to quit the cab or adorn it ... well. A man who does that is never going to get his handicap down below the teens.

The upside is that Joe doesn't think of these socks as belonging to Papa Spork. They're just one of two thousand pairs he inherited when his father passed on to the great bunker in the sky, contents of a lock-up off Brick Lane. He returned as much of the swag as he could—was a weird, motley collection, very appropriate to Papa Spork's somewhat eccentric life of crime—and found himself left with several suitcases of personal effects, family Bibles and albums, some bits and bobs his father apparently stole from *his* father, and a few pairs of socks the chairman of St. Andrews suggested he keep as a memento.

"I appreciate it can't have been easy, doing this," the chairman said over the phone. "Old wounds and so on."

"Really, I'm just embarrassed."

"Good Lord, don't be. Bad enough that the sins of the fathers shall descend and all that without feeling embarrassed about it. *My* father was in Bomber Command. Helped plan the firebombing of Dresden. Can you imagine? Pinching socks is rather benign, eh?"

"I suppose so."

"Dresden was during the war, of course, so I suppose they thought it had to be done. Joe, heroic, no doubt. But I've seen photographs. Have you?"

"No."

"Try not to, I should. They'll stay with you. But if ever you do, for some godforsaken reason, it might make you feel better to be wearing a pair of lurid Argyles. I'm putting a few in a parcel. If it will salve your guilt, I shall choose the absolute nastiest ones."

"Oh, yes, all right. Thank you."

"I fly myself, you know. Civilian. I used to love it, but recently I can't help but see firebombs falling. So I've sort of given up. Rather a shame, really."

"Yes, it is."

There's a pause while the chairman considers the possibility that he may have revealed rather more of himself than he had intended.

"Right then. It'll be the chartreuse. I quite fancy a pair of those myself, to wear next time I visit the old bugger up at Hawley Churchyard. 'Look here, you frightful old sod,' I shall tell him, 'where you persuaded yourself it was absolutely vital that we immolate a city full of civilians, other men's fathers restricted themselves to stealing ugly socks.' That ought to show him, eh?"

"I suppose so."

So on his feet now are the fruits of this curious exchange, and very welcome between his unpedicured soles and the icy floor.

The leather coat, meanwhile, is a precaution against attack. He does own a dressing gown, or rather, a towelling bathrobe, but while it's more cosy to get into, it's also more vulnerable. Joe Spork inhabits a warehouse space above his workshop—his late grandfather's workshop—in a dingy, silent bit of London down by the river. The march of progress has passed it by because the views are grey and angular and the place smells strongly of riverbank, so the whole enormous building notionally belongs to him, though it is, alas, somewhat entailed on the banks and lenders. Mathew—this being the name of his lamentable dad—had a relaxed attitude to paper debt; money was something you could always steal more of.

Speaking of debts, he wonders sometimes—when he contemplates the high days and the dark days of his time as the heir of crime—whether Mathew ever killed anyone. Or, indeed, whether he killed a multitude. Mobsters, after all, are given to arguing with one another in rather bloody ways, and the outcomes of these discussions are often bodies draped like white cloth over bar stools and behind the wheels of cars. Is there a secret graveyard somewhere, or a pig farm, where the consequences of his father's breezy amorality are left to their final rest? And if there is, what liability does his son inherit on that score?

In reality, the ground floor is entirely given over to Joe's workshop and saleroom. It's high and mysterious, with things under dust sheets and—best of all—wrapped in thick black plastic and taped up in the far corner "to treat the woodworm." Of recent days these objects are mostly nothing more than a couple of trestles or benches arranged to look significant when buyers come by, but some are the copper-bottomed real thing—timepieces, music boxes and best of all: hand-made mechanical automata, painted and carved and cast when the computer was a fellow who could count without reference to his fingers.

It's impossible, from within, not to know where the warehouse is. The smell of old London whispers up through the damp boards of the saleroom, carrying with it traces of river, silt and mulch, but by some fillip of design and ageing wood it never becomes obnoxious. The light from the window slots, high above ground level and glazed with that cross-wired glass for security, falls at the moment on no fewer than five Edinburgh long-case clocks, two pianolas, and one remarkable object which is either a mechanised rocking horse or something more outré for which Joe will have to find a rather racy sort of buyer. These grand prizes are surrounded by lesser ephemera and common-or-garden stock: crank-handle telephones, gramophones and curiosities. And there, on a plinth, is the Death Clock.

It's just a piece of Victorian tat, really. A looming skeleton in a cowl drives a chariot from right to left, so that—to the Western European observer, used to reading from left to right—he is coming to meet us. He has his scythe slung conveniently across his back for ease

reaping, and a scrawny steed with an evil expression pulls the thing onward, ever onward. The facing wheel is a black clock with very slender bone hands. It has no chime; the message is perhaps that time passes without punctuation, but passes all the same. Joe's grandfather, by his will, commended it to his heir for "special consideration"—the mechanism is very clever, motivated by atmospheric fluctuation—but the infant Joe was petrified of it, and the adolescent resented its immutable, morbid promise. Even now—particularly now, when thirty years of age is visible in his rear-view mirror and forty glowers at him from down the road ahead, now that his skin heals a little more slowly than it used to from solder burns and nicks and pinks, and his stomach is less a washboard and more a comfy if solid bench—Joe avoids looking at it.

The Death Clock also guards his only shameful secret, a minor, practical concession to the past and the financial necessities. In the deepest shadows of the warehouse, next to the leaky part of the wall and covered in a grimy dust sheet, are six old slot machines—genuine ones from armed bandits—which he is refurbishing for an old acquaintance named Jorge. Jorge ("Yooorrr-geh! With passion like Pasternak!" he tells new acquaintances) runs a number of low dives which feature gambling and other vices as their main attractions, and Joe's job is to maintain these traditional machines—which now dispense tokens for high-value amounts and intimate services rather than mere pennies—and to bugger them systematically so that they pay out only on rare occasions or according to Jorge's personal instruction. The price of continuity in the clockworking business is minor compromise.

The floor above—the living area, where Joe has a bed and some old wooden wardrobes big enough to conceal a battleship—is a beautiful space. It has broad, arched windows and mellowed red-brick walls which look out onto the river on one side, and on the other a busy urban landscape of stores and markets, depots and back offices, lock-ups, car dealership, Customs pounds, and one vile square of green-grey grass which is protected by some indelible ordinance and thus must be allowed to fester where it lies.

All very fine, but the warehouse has recently acquired one serious irritant: a cat. At some time, one mooring two hundred yards up was allowed to go to a houseboat, on which lives a very sweet, very poor family called Watson. Griff and Abbie are a brace of mild, paranoid anarchists, deeply allergic to paperwork and employment on conscientious grounds. There's a curious courage to them both: they believe in a political reality which is utterly terrifying, and they're fighting it. Joe is never sure whether they're mad or just alarming and uncompromisingly incapable of self-delusion.

In any case, he gives any spare clockwork toys he has to the Watsons, and eats dinner with them once in a while to make sure they're still alive. They in their turn share with him some vegetables from their allotment and keep an eye on the warehouse if he goes away for the weekend. The cat (Joe thinks of it as "the Parasite") adopted them some months ago and now rules the houseboat by a combination of adept political and emotional pressure brought to bear through the delighted Watson children and a psychotic approach to the wider population, which earns the approval of Mr. and Mrs. W. Sadly, the Parasite has identified the warehouse as its next home, if once it can destroy or evict the present owner, of whom it does not approve.

Joe peers into the piece of burnished brass he uses as a shaving mirror. He found it here when he took possession, a riveted panel from something bigger, and he likes the warmth of

it. Glass mirrors are green, and make your image look sick and sad. He doesn't want to be the person he sees reflected in a glass mirror. Instead, here's this warm, genial bloke, a little unkempt, but—if not wealthy—at least healthy and fairly wise.

Joe is a big man, with wide shoulders and hips. His bones are heavy. He has a strong face and his skull is proud beneath the skin. Passably handsome, perhaps, but not delicate. Unlike Papa Spork, who had *his* father's genes, and looked like a flamenco dancer, Joe is more unfairly designed by nature to resemble a guy who works the door at the roughest kind of bar. He gets it from his mother's side: Harriet Spork is a narrow creature, but that owes more to religion and meals high in fibre than it does to genetics. Her bones are the bones of a Cumbrian meat-packer and his Dorset yeoman wife. Nature intended in her design a hearty life of toil, open fires and plump old age attended by a brood of sun-touched brats. That she chose instead to be a singer and more latterly a nun is evidence of a certain submerged cussedness, or possibly a consequence of the strange upheavals of the twentieth century, which made rural motherhood look, at least for a while, like an admission of defeat.

From somewhere in the warehouse, there's a curiously suffused silence. A hunting silence. The Parasite, having declared war almost immediately upon making his acquaintance, enters each morning via the window that Joe props open to stop the place getting stuffy when the central heating comes on, and ascends to balance on the white moulded frame around the kitchen door. When Joe passes underneath, it drops onto his shoulders, extends its claws, and slides down his back in an attempt to peel him like an apple. The leather coat and, alas, the skin beneath—because the first time this happened he was wearing only a pyjama shirt—carry the scars.

Today, tiring of a.m. guerrilla war—and sensitive to the possibility that while he is presently single, he may one day bring an actual woman to this place, and she may wish not to be scalped by an irate feline when she sashays off to make tea, perhaps with one of his shirts thrown around her shoulders and the hem brushing the tops of her elegant legs and revealing the narrowest sliver of buttock—Joe has chosen to escalate the situation. Late last night, he applied a thin layer of Vaseline to the coping. He tries not to reflect on the nature of a life whose high point is an adversarial relationship with an entity possessing the same approximate reasoning and emotional alertness as a milk bottle.

Ah. That whisper is a silken tail brushing the mug tree with its friendly, mismatched chin. That creak means the floorboard by the wall, that pitter-patter is the animal jumping from the dresser ... and that remarkable, outraged sound must be the noise it makes bouncing off the far wall after sliding all along the coping, followed by ... yes. An undignified thump as it hits the floor. Joe wanders into his kitchen. The Parasite stares at him from the corner, eyes spilling over with mutiny and hate.

“Primate,” Joe tells it, wagging his hands. “Tool user. Opposable thumbs.”

The Parasite glowers, and stalks out.

Having thus inaugurated Victory Over The Cat Day, it is in the nature of his world that he should immediately be overtaken on the ladder of mammalian supremacy by a dog.



To get to his first appointment, Joe Spork elects to take a shortcut through the Tosher's Bea

This is in general very much against his personal policy. He resolutely travels by bus or train or even occasionally drives, because taking the Tosher's Beat is an admission of parts of his life for which he no longer has any use. However, the discovery of another garden full of Vaughn Parry's victims has brought a great deal of discussion in broadsheets and free papers regarding the nature of human criminality, and this is a conversation he devoutly wishes to ignore.

At the same time, certain recent events have given Joe a mild but undeniable case of the willies, and the Tosher's Beat has a feeling of security and familiarity which the streets above never really achieve. Blame his childhood, but shady alleys and smoke-filled rooms are more reassuring than shopping centres and sunlit streets. Although, even if Joe himself were now determined to be someone new, those days are over. Most of the Old Campaigners died early. The roly-poly court of crooks he grew up with is just a memory. There are a few still around, retired or changed and hardened, but the genial knees of crime on which the young Joe Spork sat, and from whose vantage he was initiated into the secrets of a hundred scandalous deeds, are all withered and gone.

Meanwhile, Vaughn Parry is England's present nightmare. Above and beyond Islam and extremists with rucksacks and policemen who shoot plumbers nine times in the head for being diffusely non-white, the great fear of every right-thinking person these days is that Parry was not unique, that there lurk amid the wide wheat fields and bowling greens of the Home Counties yet more bloody-handed killers who can unlock your window catches and sneak into your room at night, the better to tear you apart. Parry is in custody for the moment, held in some high-security hospital under the scrutiny of doctors, but something about him has cut the nation deep.

The upshot of this has been a scurrying of the middle classes for shelter, and a less-than-learned discussion of historical villains and in particular of Joe Spork's safe-cracking, train robbing, art-thieving father, the Dandy of the Hoosegow, Mathew "Tommy Gun" Spork. Joe has a greater horror of this chatter than he does of the Tosher's Beat. Under normal circumstances he shies away from the idea that he is what a certain class of crime novel calls an *habitué of the demi-monde*, by which it is implied that he knows gamblers and crooks and the men and women who love them. For the moment, he is prepared to acknowledge that he still lives somewhat on the fringes of the *demi-monde* in exchange for not having to talk about it.

Inevitably, in crafting a thumbnail sketch of himself, he finds that it has turned into an obituary, to be held in readiness. *Joshua Joseph Spork, son of Harriet Peters and Mathew "Tommy Gun" Spork the noted gangster, died childless before the age of 40. He is survived by his mother, now a nun, and by a small number of respectable ex-girlfriends. It must be acknowledged that his greatest achievement in life lay in avoiding becoming his father, though some might asse that in doing so he went too far towards his grandfather's more sedentary mode of being. There will be a memorial service on Friday; guests are requested to bring no firearms or stolen goods.*

He shakes his head to clear it, and hurries over the railway bridge.

Between Clighton Street and Blackfriars there is a cul-de-sac which actually isn't a cul-de-sac. At the very end is a narrow gap and a pathway which leads to the railway line, and immediately on the left as you face the tracks there's a doorway into the underworld. Through this little door goes Joseph Spork like the White Rabbit, and down a spiral stair into

the narrow red-brick tunnels of the Tosher's Beat. The corridor is absolutely black, and he scrabbles in his pocket for his working keyfob, from which depends a small selection of keys and passcards, and a torch roughly the shape and size of a pen lid.

The blue-white light shows him walls covered in grime, occasionally scarred with someone's only immortality: *Dave luvs Lisa* and always will, at least down here. Joe breathes a sort of blessing and passes by, stepping carefully around knots of slime. One more door and for this he wraps a handkerchief around his mouth and smears some wintergreen ointment under his nose ("Addam's Traditional Warming Balsam!", and who knows why that balsam is exciting enough to merit that exclamation mark, but it is to Mr. Addam). This one requires a key; the toshers have installed a simple lock, not as a serious barrier to entry, but as a polite statement of territoriality. They're quite content that people should use the roads but want you to know you do so by their grace. The Tosher's Beat is a webwork, but you can't just go where you will. You need permissions and goodwills, and sometimes a subscription. Joe's keyfob will grant him passage through perhaps twenty per cent of the safe tunnels; the others are held aggressively by official and unofficial groupings with a desire for privacy—including the toshers themselves, who guard the heart of their strange kingdom with polite but effective sentries.

Ten minutes later he meets a group of them, bent double over the noxious ooze and combing through it in their rubberised suits.

Back in the day—when London was pocked with workhouses and smothered in a green smog which could choke you dead on a bad night, or before that, even, when open sewers ran down the middle of the streets—the toshers were the outcasts and opportunists who picked over the ghastly mix and retrieved the coins and jewels lost by chance. Even now, it's amazing what people throw away: grandma's diamonds, fallen down inside their box, and Auntie Brenda taken for a thief; rings of all descriptions, cast off in a passion or slipped from icy fingers on a cold day; money, of course; gold teeth; and on one occasion, Queen Tosh took the infant Joe at one of Mathew's parties, a bundle of bearer bonds with a combined value of nearly ten million pounds.

These days, toshers wear gear made for deep-sea divers—well, the filth itself is bad enough, but there's worse: hypodermics and other gruesomenesses, not to mention the chemicals which are changing the world's male fish into females and killing all the toads. The average corpse lasts a fortnight longer than it used to, pickled in supermarket preservative. The work gang look like astronauts from another world, landed badly and picking through what they take to be primordial muck.

Joe waves to them as he hurries by on the raised pavement, and they wave back. Don't get many visitors, and still fewer give them a thumbs-up in the approved Night Market style. He raps his knuckles to the roof and thumb-up pointed at forty-five degrees. The leader returns the gesture, hesitantly.

"Hi," Joe Spork says loudly, because the helmets don't make for easy comprehension. "How's the Cathedral?"

"Clear," the man says. "Tide gate's shut. Hang on, I know you, don't I?"

Yes, he does: they played together as children in the velvet-hung torchlit corridors of the Night Market. The Tosher Family and the Market are cautious allies, tiny states existing within and beneath the greater one that is Britain. Gangster nations, however much

diminished now from what they were when Joe was young. The Night Market, in particular, has suffered, its regents unable to inspire the kind of rambunctious, cheeky criminality which was the hallmark of Mathew Spork and his friends: a court without a king. *But let's don't talk about those days, I'm in disguise as someone with a real life.*

"I've just got one of those faces," Joe mutters, and hurries on.



He slips through a door into the old Post Office pneumatic railway (at one stage, Mathew Spork owned a string of Post Office concessions around the United Kingdom, and used them to distribute and conceal all manner of unconventional wares), then down a side tunnel and a flight of stairs and into Cathedral Cave. Dug as the foundation of a medieval palace which was never finished, subsided now into the mud of London's basin, it's wet and very dark. The arched stone has been washed in mineral rain over so many hundreds of years that it is covered now in a glutinous alabaster, as if this place were a natural cavern. When London's Victorian sewers overflow, as they do more and more in these climate-change days, the whole thing is under water. Joe suppresses a shudder of claustrophobia at the thought.

A rickety metal gantry leads through the room and through into the lower reaches of the pneumatic railway, and then abruptly to an ancient goods lift which comes up near the riverbank: a secret highway for smugglers, ancient and modern.

The whole journey takes less than half an hour. You could barely do it faster in a car with a driver on an open road.



The dog's name is Bastion, and it is without shame or mercy. Any dog worth the name will sniff your crotch on arrival, but Bastion has buried his carbuncled nose in the angle of Joe's trousers and shows no inclination to retreat. Joe shifts slightly, and the dog rewards him with a warning mutter, deep in the chest: *I have my mouth in close proximity to your genitals, oh thou man who talks to my mistress over coffee. Do not irk or trifle with me! I possess but one tooth, and yes, for the rest were buried long ago in the flesh of sinners. Behold my jaws, upper and lower, righteous, symmetrical poverty. Move not, man of clocks, and heed my mistress, for she cherishes me, even in my foul old age.*

It's a tiny animal, the shrunken remains of a pug, and as if poor dentition is not enough, it has absolutely no natural eyeballs. Both have been replaced with substitutes made in pale pink glass which appear to refract and reflect the interior view of Bastion's empty socket. This ghastly decision lends considerable sincerity to the growling, and Joe elects to allow the animal to continue drooling on his groin.

Bastion's owner is called Edie Banister, and she is very small, and very wiry, and apparently goes back slightly further than the British Museum. She has a tight cap of silver hair through which, in places, the freckled skin of her scalp is visible. Her face—proud eyes and strong mouth suggesting powerful good looks in her day—is so pale that Joe imagines her

can actually see the bone through her cheeks, and the wrinkles on her arms are folded around one another like melted plastic, all scrunched up in unpredictable directions. Edie Banister *old*.

And yet she is profoundly alive. Over the past few months, she has found reason to call upon the services of Spork & Co. on several occasions. Joe has come to know her a little, and in this respect she reminds him of his grandfather, Daniel: she is almost vibrating with rich, distilled energy, as if the process of living all those decades has made a reduction of her spirit which is thick and slow in her chest, but sweeter and stronger for it.

Bastion wears his age less well. He is uglier than anything Joe has seen outside a deep-sea aquarium. He seems an unlikely companion for a woman like Edie Banister, but the world Daniel once observed, is a great honeycombed thing composed of separated mysteries.

Joe has cause to know this for the truth. When a child, he inhabited a variety of secret places, courtesy of his bad dad, and though he has very firmly left those places behind, with their daring characters and picturesque names—the Old Campaigners, the Sinkhole, King, Forget—he has discovered that every aspect of life is a strange gravitational system of people-planets, all orbiting unlikely suns such as golf clubs, theatres, and basket-weaving classes, falling prey to black holes like infidelity and penury. Or just fading away into space alone.

And now they come to him in their droves. Dotty, aged, and absent-minded, they file through his doors clutching little pieces of broken memory: music boxes, clocks, fob watches and mechanical toys they once played with or inherited from their mothers, uncles and spouses, now gone to dust and ash.

Edie Banister offers him some more coffee. Joe declines. They smile at one another nervously. They're flirting; the elephant in the room—apart from Bastion's unremarked grin on Joe's nether parts—is a laburnum-wood box about the size of a portable record player inlaid with paler wood around the edges. It is the reason for this latest visit to Edie Banister's home, the reason he has locked up early and come out to Hendon, with its endless rows of almost-pretty, boring houses decorated in little-old-lady chic. Coquettish, she has drawn him here repeatedly and disappointed him, with bits of spavined gramophone and an unlikely steampunkish Teasmade. They have played out a species of seduction, in which she has offered her secrets day by day and he has responded with quick, strong hands and elegant solutions to the intractable problems of broken machinery. All the while, he has known she was testing him for something, weighing him up. Somewhere in this tiny set of rooms there is something much more interesting, something which sweet, ancient Edie clearly believes is going to knock his socks off, but which she is not quite ready to reveal.

He trusts devoutly that what she has in mind is clockwork rather than flesh.

She wets her lips, not with her tongue, but by turning them briefly inward and rubbing them together. Edie Banister comes from a time when ladies were not really supposed to admit to having tongues at all; mouths and saliva and the oral cavity proposed the possibility of other damp, fleshy places which were absolutely not to be thought of, most particularly by anybody who had one.

Joe reaches down to the box. Touches the wood. Lifts it, weighs the burden in his hand. He can feel ... *moment*. A thing of importance. This sweet, dotty old bird has something stupendous, and she knows it. She's been leading up to showing it to him. He wonders

today's the day.

He opens the box. A Golgotha of armatures and sprockets. In his mind, he assembles them quickly: that's the spine, yes, the main spring goes here, that's part of the housing and so that ... dearie me. Much of this is just so much dross, extra gears and the like. Very untidy. But all together, the useful parts ... Oh! Yes, good: early twentieth century by the style and materials, but quite refined in its making. An artisan piece, a one-off, and they always go for more, especially if you can link them to a known craftsman. All the same, it's not ... well. Not what he was expecting, though he has no idea what that was.

Joe laughs, but quietly, so as not to waken the canine volcano burbling between his thighs.

"This is very fine. You realise it could be worth quite a bit of money?"

"Oh, dear," Edie Banister says. "Do I need to insure it?"

"Well, perhaps. These automata can go for a few thousand on a good day." He nods decisively. On a bad day, they can sit like a dead fish on the auctioneer's pallet, but never mind that for now.

"Can you fix it?" Edie Banister says, and Joe brushes aside his disappointment and tells her that of course, yes, he can.

"Now?" she asks, and yes, again, because he has his kit, never leaves home without it. So he uses an arm clamp to hold the housing. Another as a third hand. Tensioners. There's no damage actually, it looks as if someone took it apart on purpose. Quite carefully. *Snickersnack*, as they were, the thing is assembled, except ... hmph. There's a bit missing—ain't it always so? He would crosslink the legs ... hah! With a piece like that, this would have a veritable walking motion, almost human. Very impressive, very much ahead of its time. He's seen a robot on the television which works the same way, and is considered a brilliant advance. This could almost be a prototype. No doubt somewhere the ghost of a dead artisan is fuming.

He glances at Edie for permission, ignites a tiny blowtorch, heats a strip of metal and twists, crimps, folds. *Snickersnack* again. He blows on it. Crimps once more. Yes. Like that around there, and ... so. *Consumatum est*, as his mother would have it.

Joe looks up, and Edie Banister is watching him, or perhaps she is watching her own life from a great distance. Her face is still, and for one ghastly moment he imagines she has expired right there. Then she shudders and smiles a little fey smile, and says thank you, and he winds the toy and sets it marching, a wee soldier trump-trump-trumping around the table and rucking up the cloth with miniature hobnail boots.

The dog peers back at him: eerie blind hound, stubby ears alert, straining to look through glass eyes. *Not perfect, horologist. It drags one foot. But it will suffice. Behold: my mistress is much moved. This, for your pains. And now—begone.*

Joe Spork hurries away, suddenly quite certain she wanted something else from him; she has some other secret, a grander one which requires this endless testing of J.J. Spork before it can be unveiled. He wonders a bit wistfully how he failed, considers going back. But perhaps she's just lonely, and recognises in him a fellow isolate.

Not that he's alone the way she is.

And not that he's alone now, not entirely. In the corner of his eye something flickers, a dark shape reflected in the windows of a passing bus. A shadow in a doorway. He turns and looks both ways before crossing the road, very alert as he sweeps the street to his left. Almost, he misses it completely. It's so still, it's hard to make out; his eyes are seeking joint

and movements where there are none. But there, in the shadowed porch of a boarded-up bakery, it seems that someone watches: a bundled figure in a dress or a heavy overcoat, with a veil like a mourner's. A beekeeper or a widow, or a tall, thin child playing at being a ghost. Or most likely an old burlap sack hanging on a rack, deceiving the eye.

A moment later a long green estate car nearly runs him over. The angry maternal face behind the wheel glowers at him resentfully for being in the world, and the watcher—if there really was one—goes right out of his head.



Moody and unsettled, Joe stops in at the corner shop to see whether Ari will sell him some cat poison.

When Ari arrived in London, he called the shop *Bhred nba'a*. He had come to the conclusion from watching English television that the people of London were fond of both puns and corner shops, and he reasoned that a combination must inevitably be a big success. Bread and butter became *Bhred nba'a*, and it emerged almost immediately that although Londoners do indeed admire both puns and convenience, they're not keen on shop owners who appear to be taking the piss out of them while looking foreign. Correct use of the apostrophe to denote a glottal stop was not a defence.

Ari learned fast, and shortly painted over the offending sign. It's not clear to Joe whether his name actually is anything like Ari, or whether he has just selected a comfortably foreign yet-English noise which doesn't startle the natives with complexity or suggestions of undue education.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ari is reticent on the poison issue. Ari regards cats as lessons in the journey through life. Cats, he explains, are divine messengers of patience. Joe, one should still sore from a near miss two weeks ago, says they are Satanic messengers of discord and pruritus. Ari says this is possible, but by the workings of the ineffable divinity, even if they are Satanic messengers of discord and pruritus, they are *also* tutors sent by the Cosmic All.

"They are of themselves," Ari says, clutching this morning's consignment of organic milk, some of which is leaking through the plastic, "an opportunity for self-education."

"In first aid and disease," mutters Joe Spork.

"And in more spiritual things. The universe teaches us about God, Joseph."

"Not cats. Or, not that cat."

"All things are lessons."

And this is so close to something Grandpa Spork once said that Joe Spork, even after a sleepless night and a bad cat morning, finds himself nodding.

"Thanks, Ari."

"You are welcome."

"I still want cat poison."

"Good! Then we have much to teach one another!"

"Goodbye, Ari."

"*Au revoir*, Joseph."

Two Gentlemen of Edinburgh; the Book of the Hakote; Friend in need.

He is nearly at his front door when he hears the shout. It is a breathy, asthmatic shout—more a gasp, but it is penetrating all the same in the stillness of Quoyle Street. Pigeons scuttled nervously in the alley round the side.

“Hello? Mr. Spork?”

Joe turns, and beholds a rare and curious thing: a fat man running.

“Mr. Spork?”

He really is running. He’s not quick—although he’s light on his feet, as so many fat men are—but he has considerable momentum and powerful thighs, and he is not trotting, cantering or jogging, but actually running. He reminds Joe at this remove of his mother’s father, the meat-packer, shaven-headed and layered with gammon and eggs. This specimen has his bulk but not his heft, and is somewhere between thirty and fifty.

“Hello? I wonder if we could have a word?”

Yes, “we,” for indeed there are two of them, one fat and the other thin, the little one concealed behind his enormous companion, walking fastidiously along in the wake of the whale.

It is the fat one who is calling him, between breaths, as he hurtles up Quoyle Street. Joe stops and waits, hoping to avoid any kind of cardiac drama or collision, and by some curious trick, the two men arrive at much the same time. The thin one takes over the talking. He is older, greyer, more measured and more unctuous.

“My dear Mr. Spork. I wonder if we might go inside? We represent—among other people you understand—we represent the Loganfield Museum of Mechanical History in Edinburgh and Chicago.” But he has no Scots lilt, just a pure English diction with a hint of apology. His sentences do not turn upward at the end, in the modern American style, but conclude on firm downward full stops. “It’s a matter of some delicacy, I’m afraid.”

Delicacy. Joe does not like delicacy. Oh, he likes it fine in clocks and mechanisms, but in real life it means courts and money and complication. It sometimes also means that another of his father’s debts or wickednesses has found its way home, and he will hear about how Mathew robbed a fellow of his life savings or stole a priceless jewel, and have to explain that no, the treasure of Mathew Spork is not his to disburse, that patrimony is nothing but an empty leather suitcase and a parcel of newspaper clippings detailing Mathew’s most unconvicted outrages. Mathew’s money is gone, and no one knows where to, not even his wife, not his son, and not his creditors. On this occasion, however, the matter appears to be

related to Joe personally.

There is one person in Joe Spork's small circle of friends whose life is occasionally complicated by issues of law.

Billy, you bald git, what have you got me into? Soot and sorrow, I know it.

Soot and sorrow: the Night Market's invocation of desperate seriousness, of doom and disaster. He feels a powerful urge to run.

Instead he says "Please come in," because it is his conviction that England is a just place and his experience that even where the law has been bent or broken, a little cooperation and courtesy can smooth over some remarkably large potholes.

The fat one goes first and the thin one second, with Joe bringing up the rear to emphasize that he is not running, that indeed, they are entering his lair at his urging. He offers them tea and comfortable chairs, which they regretfully decline. So he makes tea for himself, and the thin one says that perhaps he will, after all, and helps himself to a macaroon into the bargain. The fat one drinks water, a lot of it. And when everyone is refreshed and Joe has shown them around the more interesting bits of his workshop (the half-assembled chess-playing robot he is making on commission in the style of the notorious Turk, the wind-up racehorses, the Edinburgh case clocks) the thin gentleman steeples his hands, as if to say it is time to begin.

"I am Mr. Titwhistle," the thin gentleman says, "and this is Mr. Cumberbund. Those are our actual names, I'm afraid. Life is capricious. If you should feel the urge at any time to chuckle, we're both quite big enough to share the joke." He gives a demonstrative little smile just to show he can. Mr. Cumberbund pats his stomach, as if to say that he, personally, is big enough for that one and a number of other jokes besides.

Joe Spork takes this for a species of test. He smiles politely, even contritely, a man who knows what it is to have an odd name and feels no need to laugh. Instead, he extends his hand to them both. Mr. Cumberbund takes it lightly. He has very soft skin, and he shakes hands gently but enthusiastically. After a moment, Joe unplugs himself, and turns to Mr. Titwhistle.

Mr. Titwhistle does not lean forward for the greeting. He keeps himself perfectly balanced perfectly inside his own circle. He shakes hands as if mindful that Joe might at any moment slip and fall, that he might therefore need the solidity of his size eight feet on the carpet and the strength in his lawyerly thighs to lend support. He has very little hair; a mere hair embracing his head like the fuzz on a petrified peach. This makes his age impossible to judge. Forty-five? Sixty?

He looks directly into Joe's face, quite calmly and without embarrassment. In his eyes—which are grey, and kindly—there is no flicker of dislike or disapproval. Indeed, they are more like eyes that proffer condolences, or mediation. Mr. Titwhistle understands that these little disagreements come along, and that persons of intelligence and determination can always get around them in one way or another. If Joe did slip, Mr. Titwhistle would not hesitate to bear him up. Mr. Titwhistle sees no reason for unpleasantness between those who are presently on opposite sides of the legal tennis net. He is before everything a pleasant man.

Joe finds all his old, unused and unwelcome instincts rushing to the surface. *Alarm! Alarm! Sound the dive klaxon and blow the tanks! Run silent, run deep!* He wonders why. He glances at the hand still gripping his own, and sees no watch. Gentlemen of this vintage rarely operate without watches, and watches communicate something of one's identity. Of course, if one

wished to avoid such communication ... His gaze flicks to Mr. Titwhistle's waistcoat, and finds what he's looking for: a fob watch on an unornamented chain. No charms, no Masonic badges, no club marks. No private signs or colophon. No military insignia. A blank, empty space on an item for display. He looks back at the wrist. Cufflinks. Plain studs. The tie is generic, too. This man is a cypher. He hides himself.

Joe glances back at Mr. Titwhistle's face. Gazing into those clear, benevolent eyes, he finds he is sure of exactly one thing: that Mr. Titwhistle, congenial sherry drinker and alderman of the city of Bath, would have precisely the same damp, avuncular expression on his face if he were strangling you with piano wire.

Unwillingly, he grants the Night Market self a brief leave to remain.

The formalities dispensed with, Mr. Cumberbund sits and lays out his notepad on his lap. From this angle, he is even more bizarre than when Joe first saw him galloping along Quoy Street. He has a head shaped almost exactly like a pear. His brain must be squeezed into that narrow place at the top. His cheeks are wide and fatty, so that, if Mr. Cumberbund were a deer or a halibut, they would excite pleasurable anticipation in those fond of rich foods and delicacies. He smells strongly of a thin, high-scented cologne. It is a cologne advertised by young men who surf and then trip lightly into tropical casinos with curvy, dark-eyed women. It comes in a bottle made to look like a crystal glass pineapple. It is too young for him, and does not conceal the stinky *eau de Cumberbund* which is the natural product of his body.

"A matter of some delicacy?" Joe says.

"I'm afraid so," Mr. Titwhistle agrees.

"Regarding?"

"Regarding some of your late grandfather's effects."

"My grandfather?" It is an innocuous word, and Daniel Spork was not a firebrand or a re-toothed crook—unlike his son—but it puts Joe a little more on edge.

"Yes, indeed. Mr. Daniel, I believe."

"What about him?"

"Ah. Well ... I am tasked to acquire your grandfather's journals, and any correspondence you might be willing to part with. Along with any examples of his work or his tools which you might still possess. And any curiosities."

"I see." He doesn't, or rather, he sees something, but cannot identify it.

"I'm authorised to negotiate the sale so that it can be done quickly, and to arrange for a collection. The new exhibitions usually start in January, and they take a while to prepare, so time is of the essence. Have you been to the Museum?"

"No, I'm not familiar with it."

"So few people are. A great shame. But the curators really do an amazing job. They build up the exhibits in a way which sets them off quite splendidly. You should visit."

"It sounds fascinating."

"Once I've seen the items, of course, I can give you a better idea of what we'd be willing to pay—but I have a considerable budget. American money, you see, not British. Additional zeroes, you understand."

"And are there any specific items you might be looking for? I have a small number of rather ordinary tools which belonged to him. Although I think I do have a table clamp he designed for engraving work. The best stuff I'm afraid my father disposed of rather

informally, while my grandfather was still alive.” Did he ever. Daniel Spork, measured and frail, shouting fit to raise the roof and shake the foundations. His son was a serpent, a buffoon, a deceiver. He was a crawling bug with no concept of honour, no understanding of humanity’s better urges. He was vile. And Joe’s mother, weeping and holding Mathew’s arm, clutching at the old man. *Don’t say that, Daniel, please! Please. He didn’t know!*

But Daniel Spork was a pillar of flame. A great trust had been shattered. The world was poorer for it—and Mathew, flesh of his flesh, lying and unforgivable clot, was the weak link in a chain of such incredible importance that it could not be fully expressed. Daniel turned his back and shook and shuddered, and batted away their hands. And then he went down to his workroom to leaf through the remains of Mathew’s “fire sale” and see what was still there and what could be reasonably brought back. It was only after a half-day spent leafing through his books and piling up bits and bobs upon his table, mouth still a bitter line of hurt and the Death Clock set appallingly in front of him ticking away these black moments of his life, that he looked over the remaining clutter and began to calm. His diary, yes, was here. His sketchbooks had gone to a friend in the trade, and could be had back, no doubt. His toolbox was gone—a magical thing of levers and cogs which extended and unfolded into a miniature bench—but the tools themselves remained.

Having lined up the survivors of the auction, Daniel paced and fluttered, opened ledgers and fussed with boxes, and finally gave a shout of satisfaction as he held up a collection of jazz records, old 78s, in a purpose-made satchel.

“Frankie,” he murmured. And then, with a snarl to his son, “Your mother!”

Only the sight of Joe—knee-high and cowering amid all this splashy and appalling adult confusion—broke through his rage, and even then it merely unleashed his grief, which was infinitely worse.

“No,” Mr. Titwhistle says, “nothing in particular. Unusual items always fetch a premium, of course. Anything idiosyncratic. Impractical, even. Or intricate.”

But his hands—which he has raised, palms up, to convey his sincerity—have betrayed him. He is tracing the outline of something, absently sketching it in the air as he speaks. Something which Joe has recently seen. Something strange, of which gentlemen from Scottish museums might in theory be aware, but whose connection with Joe himself should be quite beyond their ken. In any case, what manner of museum sends two fellows with anonymous ties and empty eyes all the way to London on the off chance? Do they not have the electric telegraph in Edinburgh?

Mr. Cumberbund has been silent so far, listening and watching with great acuity, and every so often he has made notes in an impenetrable shorthand. The top leaves of the pad he is using have wrinkled, because his hands are moist and because he presses very hard with his cheap supermarket-brand ballpoint—a thin plastic thing which has already cracked along one edge, and which he occasionally puts between his lips to chew. Now, he removes it, and the smell of Mr. Cumberbund’s mouth is briefly added to the smell of tropical-fruit cologne, tantalisingly disgusting flavour of old mint, tooth decay, and kidneys.

“Rodney,” he says tightly, and Mr. Titwhistle glances at him, then follows the line of Mr. Cumberbund’s gaze back to his own fingers. Joe sees the sequence of events unfolding, and realises a moment too late what will happen next: Mr. Titwhistle and Mr. Cumberbund look guiltily from the shape in the air to Joe to see whether he has made anything of it, and catch

him staring guiltily at them. Between the three men, there is a moment of comprehension. *Oh, yes. All out in the open, now, isn't it?* Or, not all, but enough. The rusty machinery of his father's world wakes within him again, unfolding from an old corner of his mind that he barely knew was there; the forgotten instinct which prompts him to lie, promise, misdirect, all in one.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," Joe says confidently, "you place me in a rather awkward position. I had a similar offer not two days ago from another interested party, and this morning my phone has barely stopped ringing. I've made some enquiries and not all my suitors are in fact entirely reputable"—you two, in particular, but we don't say that because we want everyone to feel nice and safe and not disposed to rash action—"so I'd rather prefer to deal with you. If the price is right, of course."

He cringes a bit, inwardly. Joe Spork—new and improved and all grown-up—doesn't think that way. Not any more. There was a boy once, who did—a kid who picked pockets and stood lookout; who tumbled through the tunnels of the Tosher's Beat in search of pirate treasure, in the certain knowledge that there actually was some; whose nefarious uncle snipped up a drainpipe in the blinding dusk to relieve a duchess of her jewels, while Mathe Spork charmed and smiled and kept her on the hook and his one begotten son leaned against a wall and yoyo'd and kept an eye out for the Lily, as in Lily Law, as in Her Majesty's Metropolitan Police—but Joe had imagined that person no longer existed. He had no idea he could summon the pattern so easily.

Mr. Cumberbund closes his book, and glances at his partner.

"I'm quite sure," Mr. Titwhistle murmurs, "that some accommodation could be reached for the full collection."

"I'm so glad. Your good fortune, of course, is that I've begun to assemble it all. Mine is thin now I have someone suitable to sell it to."

"We should greatly prefer to avoid anything like an auction."

You don't care in the slightest. This is another test. Why is everyone testing me? I don't have anything you want. Except, somehow, I clearly do.

Mathew is bubbling in Joe's brain, commenting and advising:

Don't sell. Not yet. If you make it easy, they'll see through you.

To what?

To whatever you're actually going to do.

Am I not selling, then?

Apparently not.

Cover. Conceal. Hide. Deceive.

A day of ghosts, most unwelcome and unawaited.

"Then I shall expect your pre-emptive offer to be quite striking. I'm sure it would have been anyway! And if you'll be so kind as to excuse me, gentlemen, I have another client appointment—on an unrelated matter, I assure you—at ten-thirty, and I really need to go. Shall we say, same time on Monday?"

There is a long pause. Jesus, Joe thinks, are they actually going to jump me? And then:

"Ideal," Mr. Titwhistle says. He reaches into his jacket and produces, between two meagre fingers, a crisp white business card. "Do call if you have any trouble—the Museum has a good many friends. We can help in all sorts of ways."

Yes. I'm sure you can.

Joe watches them walk away down the road. Neither one looks back. No car stops to pick them up. They seem entirely rapt in conversation, and yet somehow he feels observed, spied upon.

Fine. Then I'm very boring, aren't I? I do boring things. I live a boring life and no one can say I don't. I deal in antiques and curiosities, and I don't do surprises. I'm recently single and I'm about to leave the 25–34 demographic for evermore. I like Chelsea buns the way they don't make them these days and I fall in love with waifish, angry women who don't think I'm funny.

I wind clocks like Daniel.

And I won't turn into Mathew.



“Billy, it's Joe. Call me, please. We've got something to discuss.”

He sighs, feeling the need for some consolation and knowing that he has no one from whom he can easily require a hug, and goes back to work.

Joe winds the clocks every day after lunch. He does not, as is the practice of many in his trade, set them all to different times so that there is always one about to chime. He gets his clients by appointment, by referral. Spork & Co. is what is known in these days where everything is studied and taxonomised as a “destination business.” His customers, for the most part, already know what they want when they come, and they are unlikely to be soothed or cozened into buying something else just because it goes *bong* while they're having a quiet cup of tea and a jam tart with the owner. What they want is splendour and authenticity and a sense of craft. They are buying perhaps most of all a handshake with the past.

And the past is here, caught by the crook of the Thames and the endless whispering of ratchets and pendulums, the busy susurrus of oiled mechanical technology. If he is lucky, when he can schedule an appointment with reference to the tide chart and the radio set he keeps against the waterside wall, the fog will come in and waves will lap against the bricks and some mournful barge will creak down the river or even hoot into the mist, and as the whole place slips loose in time, his client will tumble nose-first into the magic of it and buy that item they came for even though, inevitably, they came expecting to get it at half the asking price. He sometimes has to turn down considerable offers on the building itself. He jokes on such occasions that if one of them owns the other, it is almost certainly the warehouse, with his grandfather's patient ghost and his father's restless, relentless magnanimity, which holds the freehold to the man.

Joe winds the clocks. The winders are on a small trolley—a keychain would rattle and scratch against the casements, a bag would mean rummaging through each time for the right key. He pushes it around and tries not to feel like the nurse who wheels the gurney of the dead. *Clink, clank, I'm so sorry, it was his time.*

In the last year or so he has taken to playing BBC Radio 4 while he winds. The gentle burble of news and artistic wrangling makes a pleasant backdrop, and every so often there

the forecast for shipping, with its soothing litany of places he need never go. Flemish Ca seven, gusting nine. Recently, Radio 4 has betrayed him somewhat, because current affairs are a bit tense. Alongside assorted climatic woes, the world is even now passing what apparently called “peak oil”—the moment after which oil will only ever be harder to get hold of and hence more expensive and ultimately unavailable—and in consequence the late meeting of the G-whatever-it-is has become tense. Joe hopes this does not mean the sort of tense which prefigures bombing someone. He does not find angry South American diplomats, resentful Irish aviation bosses and fatuously confident Canadian oilmen very restful, so today the radio is silent on its shelf.

And really, that’s the most important thing he does with his days. It’s a small, measurable success, in the face of diminishing sales and an empty double bed and a set of skills which were marketable one hundred years ago, but now look quaint and even sad. Every afternoon for the last six months he has been fighting an uneven battle with himself not to overturn the trolley with its many keys, and scatter them across the room. His better nature has won out because the image of himself on his knees, remorsefully gathering them again, repairing scratched case clocks and whispering apologies to the ghost of his grandfather—and for strange and different reasons also his father—is more than he can bear.

The chimes clink over the door, and he glances up.

The figure in the doorway is tall. It must be, because the top of its head is not so far short of the frame. It is silhouetted by the day outside, but even allowing for that, it must be wearing black. It has long arms and long legs, and wears a strange, cumbersome garment like a dress or robe. *Miss Havisham*. He wonders if the wearer is unpleasantly scarred. He cannot tell. Over its head, the visitor wears a piece of black gauze or linen, so that the face is quite invisible. The cloth is not cinched; it hangs down over the wearer’s head, so that the top is a smooth curve. There’s just the barest bulge of a nose. Other than that, the head is as blank and featureless as an egg. *Vampire. Alien*. And then, more shamefully, *suicide bomber*.

The last makes him feel guilty, and ridiculous, and the feeling propels him to his feet. Clearly, if suicide bomber is unlikely, it has to be conceded that the others are more so.

“Hello,” Joe says. “What can I do for you?”

“Nothing for the moment, thank you.” The voice is deep and scratched, but muffled. It sounds like a recording played through one of the old wood-horn gramophones Joe has in the back. The metal-horns are powerful, they make everything sound like old-time radio. The wood-horns are rounder, but lack belt. Joe automatically leans in to hear, and then awakes again when the blank linen face follows him, ducks down as if to kiss his cheek, coming too close too quickly. “May I look around?”

“Oh, well, please. Browse away. Let me know if you want anything in particular. I have some very fine gramophones with quite special horns. And a really good fob watch. I’m quite proud of the clean-up. It’s a lovely thing.” Joe lets his tone suggest that anyone who is just browsing should almost certainly conclude their visit with a tour of the smaller items which might have failed to attract attention.

The shrouded head dips in assent, once, and then deeper a second time, like a swan’s.

“Forgive me for asking,” Joe says, when his visitor does not move away, “but I’ve never seen anyone dressed like that before.”

“I am on a journey of the soul,” the other replies, without rancour. “My clothing reminds

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