

1 *Special Damage*

Her first feeling, as she smelled the air, was one of intense and helpless gratitude. I'm all right, she thought with a gasp. Time—it's starting again. She tried to blink away all the water in her eyes, but there was too much to deal with and she soon shut them tight.

Someone leaned over her and said with a voice so close that it might have come from within her own head, 'Are you all right now?'

She nodded. 'Yes,' she said.

'I'll leave you then. You're on your own now. Take care. Be good.'

'Thank you,' she said. 'I'm sorry.'

She opened her eyes and sat up. Whoever had spoken was no longer there, but other people were moving about near by, people who for some reason were all there just to help her through. How kind they must be, she thought, how kind they are, to do all this for me.

She was in a white room, lying on a spindly white trolley. She thought about this for a while. It seemed quite an appropriate place to be. She would be all right here, she thought.

Outside, a man in white walked quickly past. He hesitated, then poked his head round the door. His posture suddenly relaxed. 'Come on, get up,' he said wearily, his eyes closed.

'What?'

'*Get up*. It's time. You're all right, come on.' He walked forward, glancing sideways at a low table on which various items were scattered. 'These all your things?' he said.

She looked: a black bag, some scraps of green paper, a small golden cylinder. 'Yes,' she said secretively, 'these all my things.'

'You better be off then.'

'Yes all right,' she said. She swung herself over the trolley's side. She stared down at her legs and moaned. The poor flesh was all churned and torn. Reflexively she reached down to touch. Her flesh was whole. The shreds were part of some wispy material laid over her skin. She was all right.

The man snorted. 'Where *you* been,' he said, his voice moistening.

'Can't tell,' she muttered.

He came closer. 'The toilet?' he said loudly. 'You want to go to the *toilet*?'

'Yes please,' she said, without much hope.

He turned, walked towards the door, and turned again. She stood up and tried to follow him. She found that heavy curved extensions had been attached to her feet. The idea was obviously to make movement very difficult, if not actually impossible. With one leg wobbling she came towards him at an angle along the slipped floor.

'Get your *things* then.' He shook his head several times. 'You people ...'

He led her into the passage. Walking ahead of him now, and feeling his eyes on her back, she looked hastily this way and that. There seemed to be two kinds of people out there. Most of them were the ones in white. The other kind were smaller and bound in variegated robes; they were being carried or led about with expressions of defencelessness and apology. I must be one of them, she thought, as the man urged her down the passage and pointed to a door.

The first hours were the strangest. Where was her sense of things?

In the trickling narrow room, whose porcelain statuary she could not connect with herself, she placed her cheek

against the cold wall and looked for clues inside her head. What was in there? Her mind went on for ever but contained nothing, like a dead sky. She was pretty sure this wasn't the case with other people—a thought that produced a sudden spurt of foul-tasting liquid in the back of her throat. She steadied herself and turned to face the room, catching the eye of a shiny square of steel on the wall; through this bright window she briefly glimpsed a startled figure with thick black hair who looked at her and ducked quickly away. Is everyone frightened, she wondered, or is it just me?

She didn't know how long she was expected to stay where she was. Any minute now the man could come and get her again; alternatively, she might be allowed to hang around in here for as long as she liked, perhaps indefinitely. Then it occurred to her that the world was her idea. But in that case it couldn't be a very good idea, could it, if she sensed such unanimity of threat, such immanence of harm?

The door was a puzzle she speedily solved. The man had gone when the narrow room let her out. Without pausing she moved in the general direction of the white-clad keepers and their slower charges, towards the light which raced in playful eddies along the colourless walls. Abruptly the passage widened into a place where movement ceased and new kinds of people stood about in furtiveness and grief, or lay sweating warily on white-decked tables, or yelled out as the trotting keepers smuggled them away. Someone covered in blood stood hollering spectacularly in the centre of the floor, his hands raised to his eyes. Beyond him open double-doors admitted a cool wash of air and light. She moved forward, careful to skirt the thrashing pockets of confusion and distress. No one had time to prevent her.

She hurried from the indoors. When she tried to accelerate down the glass passage the devices on her feet abruptly checked her with their pain. She bent down to examine them and found, to her pleased surprise, that she could remove them without much difficulty. Two passing

men carrying an empty hammock shouted at her and frowned meaningly at the discarded machines on the floor. But she could smell the living air now, and she hurried from the indoors.

At first, outside seemed no more than a change of scale. Everyone was still required to keep on the move, loose herds in the tall spanned passages. Quite a few seemed damaged, but there weren't many to guide or carry them. Those in pressing need of velocity and noise used the trolleys, numberless and variegated, queueing and charging along the wide central lanes in vaporous, indocile packs. The streets were full of display, of symbols whose meaning was coolly denied to her. Through an absence of power or will—or perhaps simply of time—no one bothered to stop her joining the edgy human traffic, though many looked as though they would like to. They stared; they stared at her feet; they had all grown used to their own devices—and where were hers supposed to be? It was her first mistake, she knew: no one was intended to be without them, and she was sorry. But she moved, and kept on moving, because that's what everyone else was required to do.

There were six kinds of people outside. People of the first kind were men. Of all the six kinds they were the most fully represented and also the most varied within their kind. Some went where they had to go in an effaced and gingery shuffle, hoping no one would pick them out: not many of them looked at her, and then only with diffidence and haste. But others moved with a rangy challenge, an almost criminal freedom, their jaws held up to front the air: they certainly looked her way, and with enmity, several of them making sounds of cawing censure with their mouths. People of the second kind were less worrying; they were shrunken, compacted—mysteriously lessened in some vital respect. They limped in pairs, with such awkward caution that they hardly made any progress at all, or else whirled about with a fluttery, burst, directionless

verve. Some were so bad now that they had to be wheeled round in covered boxes, protesting piteously to their guides, who were people of the third kind. The third kind resembled the first kind quite closely except at the top and the bottom; their legs were often unprotected, and they skilfully tiptoed on the arched curves of their elaborate devices (I must be one of them, she thought, remembering the narrow room and lifting a hand to her hair). They looked at her for just a moment, then at her numb feet, then turned away in pain. People of the fourth kind were men who couldn't get their hair right, some using hardly any at all, others smothering themselves with the stuff, and still others who actually wore theirs upside down—the matted face climbing towards a great globed chin of naked scalp. *They* seemed to think that this was all right. People of the fifth kind stood apart on corners or edged their way sideways through the guiltily parting crowds; they didn't talk like other people talked; they either muttered darkly to themselves or spun away at an angle to wring their hands and admonish the air. She thought they must be mad. The people of the fifth kind included people of most other kinds. And they were never seen in pairs. People of the sixth kind, of course, were sorrily shod with tangled stockings, and weren't sure who they were supposed to be or where they were going. She thought she saw one or two of these, but on closer inspection they always turned out to be people of some other kind.

No one out there reminded her of anything much. She sensed that she was on the brink of the inscrutable, ecstatic human action, that all she saw was ulterior, having a great and desperate purpose which firmly excluded her. And she still couldn't tell to what extent things were alive.

No change yet, she thought.

Then something terrible started happening slowly.

Not too far above the steep canyons there had hung an imperial backdrop of calm blue distance, in which extravagantly lovely white creatures—fat, sleepy things—hovered,

cruised and basked. Carelessly and painlessly lanced by the slow-moving crucifixes of the sky, they moreover owed allegiance to a stormy yellow core of energy, so irresistible that it had the power to hurt your eyes if you dared to look its way. But then this changed. The tufted creatures lost their outlines, drifting upwards at first to form a white shawl over the dome of the air, before melting back into a slope of unbroken grey beneath their master, which lost its power and boiled red with rage—or was it just dying, she thought, as she started to see the terrible changes below. With humiliation, candour and relief, people of all kinds duly began to hasten in hardened fear. Variety grew weary, and its pigments gave up their spirits without struggle, some with stealth, others with hurtful suddenness. Soon the passages and their high glass walls appeared to be changing places—or at least they agreed to share what activity remained: the daredevil roadsters broke in two and raced their ghosts away. Above, the bruised distance seeped ever nearer. Baying in panic with their wheels out, showing their true colours now, the trolleys of the sky warped downwards towards the earth, as further below the people made haste to escape from beneath the falling air.

Where were they all going to hide? Soon there would be no people left and she would be here alone. Someone of the second kind hobbled past, paused and turned, and said shyly,

‘You’ll catch your death.’

‘Will I?’ she asked.

She moved on. People lingered in the well-lit places. Sometimes you walked in glazed bleak silence, measuring yourself to the yellow relays of light; then you turned into a buzzing gallery of action and purpose. Alone or in small groups they eventually ducked into the darkness, determined to get somewhere while they still could. They went on staring at her, some of them, but perfunctorily now—at her feet, at her face, and perhaps at her feet again, depending on the kind of people they were.

For a time breakdown arrived on the streets. They teemed with a last, released, galvanic hate. People experimented with their voices, counting the harsh sounds they could make; others dashed headlong into the deepest shadows, as if only they knew a good secret place to hide. It was then that her sense of danger started climbing sharply, in steep swerves. Each turning seemed more likely to deliver its possibilities of hurt and risk; soon, someone or something would feel the need to do her special damage.

Enough of this, she thought, deciding to get these things over with and out of the way.

Not until the world was moving past her at quite a speed did it occur to her that she was running ... Running pleased her, she realized. It was the first clear and urgent prompting that had come her way. The bricked passages reeled by. Such people that remained turned after her; a few shouted out. For a while one of them lolloped clumsily along in her wake, but she moved clear ahead. She seemed to be able to go just as fast as she liked. She thought that running would save time, that by speeding things up it would inevitably make the next thing happen sooner.

At last she made it to a place where there were no people left. The concrete floor spanned out into another kind of life. This was the end of whatever she was in. Beyond spiked rods green land rose in a calm swell. Overhead, she noticed, the fat creatures had crept back beneath their spangled roof—all heavy and red now, and their deity a sombre silver in the lake of darkness. Suddenly she saw a gap in the cage: a lane fed straight into the green land, with only a horizontal white bar to mark the point. She moved forward, bent herself beneath the bar, then ran as fast as she could up across the soft ground.

She soon found a good place to hide. There was a moist hollow at the foot of a leaning tree. With her breath lurching she lay down and folded herself up. Her body began to quiver: this is it, she thought, this is my death. The pain that she had harboured all day burst from the

tight crux of her body. Her face leaked too, and some convulsion within her was squeezing unwanted sounds through her lips. She told herself to be quiet. What was the point of hiding if you made all this noise? The shadows put on weight. The ground gave way to receive her. At the last moment the air seemed to hum with iron and flame as one by one, above the vampiric sky, the points of life went out.

2 *Everybody's Queer*

Statistical evidence shows fairly conclusively that all 'amnesiacs' are at least partially aware of what they're missing out on. They know that they do not know. They remember that they do not remember, which is a start. But that doesn't apply to *her*, *oh* no.

Of course, the initial stage is always the most difficult in a case like this. I'm pleased, actually. No, I am. We've got phase one over with, and she has survived quite creditably. Between ourselves, this isn't my style at all really. The choice wasn't truly mine, although I naturally exercise a degree of control. It had to be like this. As I said earlier, she *asked* for it.

... So what have we here?

A rising stretch of London parkland, a silver birch tree crooked over a shiny hollow, a girl in the recent dew. The time is 7.29 a.m., the temperature 51° Fahrenheit. Over her body the wind-dried leaves click their tongues—and no wonder. What in hell has happened to the girl? Her face is made of hair and mud, her clothes (they are hardly clothes any longer) have found out all the slopes of her body, her bare thighs clutch each other tight in the morning sun. Why, if I didn't know better, I'd say she was a tramp, or a ditched whore, or drunk, or dead (she looks very near to the state of nature: I've seen girls like that). But I know better, and, besides, people usually have good reason for ending up the way they do. Whatever happened to this one? Something did. Let's move in closer. Let's find out. It's time to wake up.

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