

Ray Crowther was born in London and now lives in Hatfield Peverel, Essex. He read Cybernetics and Mathematics at Reading University and worked in a variety of systems development positions in England and Germany before starting his own company, which specializes in human resources software. The company continues to thrive although Ray has reduced his involvement to concentrate on his writing.

The Nearest FarAway Place is his first novel and the second, *Panglossian*, will be published at the end of 2001.

He connects the achievements in his life to running - running a successful company; running around after his two daughters; and running the London Marathon.

He lists his interests as armchair support of most sports, rallying, jogging (when most of his fiction ideas evolve), personal computing, the Internet and intellectual games.

The Nearest FarAway Place

Ray Crowther

Published by Panglossian Books

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For the original Sarah

Part One

New Beginning

Chapter 1

Friday, March 5, 1999 – 4:45 p.m.

Carl Denham did not like travelling on the underground during the rush hour. The proximity of sweaty bodies pinned his arms to his sides, which bothered his back and untaxed brain. At that moment, having over two million pounds in his pocket was little compensation.

He tried to focus on his future wealth and plans, but his mind was swamped by thoughts of his current physical and mental distress.

Two million pounds ...

It was a mystery why standing for more than five minutes gave him so much lower back pain. Fast walking and running were fine, but being upright and stationary, or shuffling along in a pedestrian queue, promoted the suffering. There was nothing physically wrong with his back according to the three osteopaths he had consulted. They all agreed as if in collusion that age – hell, he was only thirty-three - and being predominantly deskbound was the source of his trouble. Back stretching exercises were the suggested cure, and heavy or awkward lifting was to be avoided. This advice he had heeded. But the dissuasion against the spinal stress of his beloved jogging he had ignored. Jogging provided the buzz to unwind from his mental exertions.

...The huge sum meant little to him; freedom from his workaholic life was the attraction ...

His sedentary and envious friends often asked him why he started jogging. It was a story he could relate with vigour and pride. He had always liked sport at school - in small doses. Gifted with strong legs, he had acquired a reputation for sprinting and kicking a ball very hard. Anything that required stamina, like cross-country running, he avoided. So, football initially became his favoured sport. His nomination as a centre forward came from bursts of pace and shooting power rather than his work rate or ball skill. At his school, Wednesday afternoon sport was regarded as curricular rather than particular, overseen rather than coached, thus his football abilities never developed

beyond running faster and kicking harder. It was running that he enjoyed most, and after proving his speed by sprinting at County level, he had drifted into an athletic vacuum for about ten years. Yet, despite the lack of exercise, he had not vegetated. The calorie-burning effort of directing a company and a careful diet had ensured that his 1.82 metres height and stable 76 kilos weight – or six feet and twelve stone in old money – had kept him acceptably proportioned.

...Freedom to discover the reason for his underlying sadness that had prevailed for the last ten years ...

In a cavalier moment about five years ago, he had been invited to join his business partner Mike Stanford and wife Lisa at a family fun day organized by Lisa's employer. When it came to the male guests' hundred-metre dash, Carl could not resist the temptation to revive the former glories of his sprinting past. He was leading at fifty metres when his unpractised hamstring gave up and brought about a spectacular head over heels accident. After four weeks of limping during the healing process, he vowed that he would never succumb to such embarrassment again, and a course of regular (leg) exercise was self-imposed. He had played squash occasionally in recent years, but long working hours, a shortage of playing partners and an even greater shortage of cash (thanks mostly to his ex-wife) had led him to embark on a more economic and less fastidious form of sport - jogging. He well remembered the early days of distance progression. A quarter of a mile and he was shattered. Then a half a mile, and one month after his jogging debut he broke through the mile barrier. From then on, it became easier, enjoyable and ultimately addictive. Two London Marathons and a handful of other long distance events had been his peak. Now, a gap of more than a few days without pounding the local roads and parks would make him tetchy and dejected, and that was how he felt now.

...A distant event that had eventually driven him to a preoccupation with work to the exclusion of other things ...

The extraordinary work pressure of recent weeks – even by his standards - had played havoc with his physical fix schedule. Jogging tonight was going to be a problem too if the back pain persisted and the developing headache took hold. The latter was almost certainly a delayed reaction to the champagne and red wine he had recently drunk at the celebration lunch at the solicitor's offices of Grant, Hernaman & Morris in Kensington. He doubted that Mike would suffer the same alcohol induced distress – he never did. Mike was still there, and might be for a while yet, despite Carl's subtle efforts to drag him away to the surprise party that Lisa had organized for him this evening. Once Mike was in a celebratory mood, it would take more than hints from his co-director to abandon his enthusiasm.

...Why, after all this time, had his thoughts returned to the source of his melancholy? ...

Marble Arch station - he could tolerate the physical pains for the remaining eight stops to Liverpool Street if he could concentrate his mind on something instead of standing there imitating a vertical sardine. In the briefcase precariously balanced between his black shoes he had an Internet commerce tome, which he was eager to read. He made a habit of always carrying absorbing reading material in case there was ever the danger of being caught, like now, in a noetic limbo. Since he started MicaCom Software he had always been forearmed with technical literature for those situations that stifled the mind: a dentist's waiting room; the queue to a supermarket checkout; being stuck in a traffic jam; waiting for a train to arrive – all these periods of potential dead time had to be exploited to the full.

...Of course, the takeover of his company had been the catalyst to unearth the images of the past ...

Attempting to extricate his book now would undoubtedly be a hazardous exercise. The inkling of a smile touched his face as he imagined bending down to his briefcase and causing a passenger domino effect of flailing arms and legs through the railway carriage. Even if he could gain his prize without inflicting injuries on his fellow passengers, his restricted movement would never have allowed him to turn the pages. He smiled again as he thought of inventing a page-turner that could be nose-operated. Anyway, he rapidly dismissed any thoughts of implementing his reading plan in such a confined, noisy environment. He preferred solitude, quiet and avoidance of prying eyes when ingesting technical information.

...Without the preoccupation of work to distract him, it was inevitable that Sarah would consume his thoughts again ...

His eyes moved through the carriage looking for something else to occupy his mind. Physiognomy was not satisfying and he knew every station on the Central line from West Ruislip to Epping without having to study the eye-level map. Usually he avoided the adverts, although he spotted something that could occupy a few moments - *If you can solve this puzzle within 30 seconds, you could become a member of Mensa*. The problem held an attraction, but there was a déjà vu feeling about it that seemed connected to his plans for the future. He had done this puzzle before and without studying the question fully, he immediately knew the answer. So much for keeping his mind active.

...Where was she? What was she doing? Why had she rejected him? ...

With a minor bodily reorganisation and some evil glances from his immediate co-travellers, he reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and fingered the (reward) culmination of his focused efforts of the last ten years. A slim plain white envelope containing a few legally phrased pages and a banker's cheque for a seven-figure sum dated next Friday. He had an urge to

examine the small paper rectangle that could confirm his sudden and unexpected wealth. Instead, with now seven stations to his destination, and so many inquisitive travellers close by, he chose to reflect on the defining events of the previous eight weeks.