

Two

"The work filled his time but not his mind." Ursula K. Leguin

"I could arouse more emotion in others than they could arouse in me." Norman Mailer

The landlord of The Nether Row, or the complainant as he is about to be called in Howard's notes, has one of those purply-pink faces where the forehead and the top of the nose look to have been squashed together over the eyes, giving him a permanent frown. Conspiring with the frown to give him a look of aggressive misery is his small plump chin, jutting, which seems to have forced the centre of the bottom lip up and thus the mouth down. The mouth's downward curve is further emphasised by the grey moustache that ends at his jawline.

The landlord of The Nether Row is not a wholly miserable man, can't help his face. And the grey moustache is but a habit of his toilette, a fashion left over from his wrestling heyday, like the collar-length hair that emerges in thin strands from his purply-pink scalp and ends in mouse-tail grey ends.

The landlord of the Nether Row is stood this morning behind his bar, white beer towels laid over the keg handles; and, according to his face, he looks to be frowning belligerently at Howard, waiting for him to speak.

The Nether Row is an old pub. Net curtains over the windows, red vinyl benches round the walls, small wooden tables with stools tucked under, four ring-stained beer mats to each table. The embossed paper on the ceiling has been painted a deep gloss red.

Howard's father brought him here once. To meet someone? From the doorway the crowded Nether Row had seemed warm and welcoming. A woollen broad-backed cosy feel to the place.

Empty and quiet this morning it feels cold. A grey light penetrates the net curtains and, faced by the unwelcoming visage of the landlord, Howard suppresses a shiver. He flips open his black notebook, extracts pen from pocket.

"When did you first notice it was gone?"

"S'morning. Thursday morning's cleaning morning. She comes early."

Howard has narrowed his right eye as he tries to work out what the landlord has just said. Not only does the landlord have a stronger than usual local accent, his four front teeth are missing as well. Which could account for some of the mouth's upward puckering.

"The cleaner comes in just once a week?"

"For a full clean. Is when she gets up and does the tops."

"And it was her noticed it was missing?"

"She gives it a polish."

"So it could have been missing for close on a week?"

"Nah. I'd've seen it gone. Right there. Front of me. Had to move it from by dartboard afore it got punctured. Couldn't put it right here, 'cos of telly. So went there."

To the landlord a blank space on the wall beside the telly. To Howard a black nail sticking out of the cream embossed paper. The huge telly is balanced on a black angle bracket.

"But it still could have gone missing any time this week?"

"Nah. One of the lads touched it last night for luck. He's playing Saturday, training tonight."

"Name?"

"Gerry...." The landlord's frown deepens as he looks down inside the bar. "Gerry.... Nah. Gone."

"Could he have taken it?"

"Gerry? Nah, no point. What'd he do with it? Nah. Big crowd came in last night. Not locals. Got busy late. Which was how I didn't get to see it go."

"Young people?"

"Nah. Not student types. Mixed bunch. Not a team either. Could've been a work crowd. No-one I new. Not lively either. No-one I can think of to point finger at.... If I thought culprit a regular, local that is, I wouldn't have bothered you lot. Would've had a quiet word, got it back. But never seen this lot afore."

"What this Gerry training for?"

"Pool championship. Practises here in week. Won't be in tonight. Stays sober afore a big game. Bit of a lad. Had to stop him hustling incomers, give pub a bad name. He was OK 'bout it. Was doing it more for a lark than money."

"Could he have taken it for a lark?"

"Don't think so. Somebody asked me after why he'd touched it. One of the late crowd. Salesman type." The landlord drops his head to thinking pose again. "'Nah. Wasn't him. He asked, but just 'cos he was here at bar. Didn't seem that interested."

Under 'The Nether Row' Howard writes 'Gerry? - pool player' and 'salesman type?'

"Don't want to make a big deal of this," the landlord says. "Just like to have it back. Local legend like."

"What legend?"

"Brought Marraton luck. When they were in League."

"How?"

"Skipper said after that all he could hear from terrace was Buglehorn blowing 'em on to victory. Afore that too. Prior to it being adjusted."

"Adjusted?"

"Personally," the landlord leans slightly forward as if to share a confidence, "I reckon Buglehorn was always that way. Don't see how it could have been otherwise. Bent without creasing metal? Like when copper pipes get bent without a former ..."

"Can you describe the Buglehorn?"

"Reckon meself it's a flugel-horn. Know Dizzy Gillespie?"

"Ditzy...?"

"Dizzy. Dizzy Gillespie. Jazz trumpeter. Blows his cheeks out. Buglehorn's like his. Bell end sticks up in air. Chances remote you'll get another like it round here. So odds on if one turns up second-hand it'll be Buglehorn."

"Let me get this straight," Howard says: "it's like an ordinary bugle...."

"Trumpet. S'got valves."

"Like an ordinary trumpet, but with a bell end sticking up in the air?"

"Not straight up. More like a forty five degree angle."

Howard writes, 'Bell end 45⁰.'

"Had a jazz man here one lunchtime. Wasn't busy. Asked if he could have a blow on it. Was good. Said it made him sound like Chet Baker."

"Shit...?"

"Chet. Chet Baker."

Howard decides against writing that down.

"Put it back on the wall, did he? The jazz man?"

"Course he did. Years go. We don't have gimmicks here. No postcards from round globe. No foreign currencies. Just sell good ale. Buglehorn is the one talking point. For instance, had a mining engineer here one time. Fancied himself bit of an assayist. Said he couldn't, with any certainty, identify the metal. But said he was certain it weren't proper brass."

"What metal was it then?"

“He couldn’t say.”

Howard hesitates, decides not to write down, ‘metal unknown.’ Keep to what you do know, he was told.

“What’s it worth?”

“This is no insurance job. I’m not making a claim. Just want it back. Some reckon it could be the original Ant Horn?”

“Ant Horn?”

“Was played at some battle. Ampt Hill? Ant Horn?”

“Ant Hill?”

“Ampt Hill.”

“When was that?”

“Last war.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“Don’t mean it didn’t happen.”

Howard stands on the brow looking out over the glitter sea. Each wavelet that catches the sun is a brief triangle of white gold.

Stepping sideways Howard squints to bring a row of offshore turbines into line. He wants to see if today their blades, three each, will turn as one; rather than, as now, looking like child’s manybladed beach windmill.

The sea dazzle is making it hard to see.

Although the turbines’ turning speeds slightly differ even a brief synchronicity in this row doesn’t seem imminent. When it does ... When it does, when those gracefully rotating arms turn as one something momentous will happen. Might happen.

Howard looks out over the forest of out-of-line others. And there is this afternoon’s one stopped turbine. Always one turbine stopped, one of its three blades pointed to the sky.

This is the turbine that the Outworlders will be using today to monitor this portion of the planet. There will be another turbine stopped in the orchard of turbines down the coast. Another will be stopped among those towering over Moorcrest, likewise those in the Heathville gap. Three-bladed triangulation. And in every grouping always one turbine stopped, the one upright blade and aerial allowing communication with the Outworlders; and in receipt of instructions - to turn the other turbines only apparently to the wind. But in reality every squadron of turbines acting as propellers to guide the planet slowly, so slowly, to a new orbit.

The Outworlders, working within grander timescales, are a patient species.

The sea spangle is sticking to Howard’s retina. He tries to blink it away, peers down at his dark watch on his semi-transparent arm.

He hasn’t time now to wait for the row of blades to align. Turning away he squeezes his eyes shut, then flashes them open, squeezes them shut again as he wanders inland along the playpark path to the back steps.

The back steps, shallow and gravelled, will take him down to the brick and windows school, its flat playing fields now hemmed in by newbuilt housing estates.

The steps end at a tall iron gate on the opposite side of the road to the school. The vertically barred gate is set in a high stone wall, once part of a farm estate.

Standing here Howard cannot see the school, cannot be seen by the school.

Where the gate swings back is the usual agglomeration of crisp packets, soft drink cans and plastic sip bottles. Three lager cans too. Howard lifts out his notebook and,

sweeping his foot through the litter, starts to itemise the foil packets, sweet wrappers, plastic bottles, cans ... A few fresh dog-ends too.

He spent a week here once, every lunchtime, just standing here and shaking his head at every schoolchild who came to the gate. Some pretended that they hadn't been coming here to loiter away their lunch break, practise their swearing and spitting. Those children had made a face (schoolchildren make faces to communicate across classrooms, out of their earphones) and, as if that had been their intent, they had gone on up the steps. The cockier boys and girls, on arriving at the gate and seeing Howard, had simply laughed and turned back. Or they used the road instead to go into the bakers in town - the bakers do a trade in pizza slices, soft drinks and jumbo sausage rolls to the older children on lunchbreak.

Tomorrow morning Howard will phone the teacher acting as School Liaison and he will tell her of the litter again accumulating here. This is what he has been told to do. As he has been told to come at the end of the school day and walk among the schoolchildren from the school gates down towards the park. His uniform presence is supposed to have a deterrent effect. Which he supposes that it does, since nothing much has happened since he has been doing it.

When he had first started this end-of-school-day walk a group of the bigger estate boys had openly jeered at him.

"Not a proper copper. Tosser copper."

"Can still," Howard had marched across the wide pavement, "get you nicked. Can still make sure your name gets known."

Howard had acted without premeditation, wasn't sure if what he had said was within his remit. The other two Marraton PCSOs could have told him. Both women, they ask questions and take notes in every briefing. Howard had at first. Nowadays all that Howard acts on is what today's Sergeant tells him.

Both younger than Howard the other two PCSOs are more popular with the other officers, share jokes. And both seem to know what are the proper procedures for every situation. Leastwise they like to discuss it with the fully trained constables, telling of what they have seen, imagining scenarios, asking what they should do if ...

Howard didn't tell anyone what he had said to the boys; and since then those older boys - as in today's multi-sized crowd - have kept their distance. He has since heard, "Tosser copper," only once as a boy hurried by on the outside of the pavement, and once from within a group behind him. Even then neither time had the defamation been eagerly provocative, had been more an attempt at showing off to their friends, but an attempt that had met with no approbation, that hadn't gone anywhere.

Howard doesn't even try to chat to any of the children here. Like most children they are all of them more interested in each other than in him. Even today's scared one, a straw-haired boy with a blue rucksack staying close to the wall, is using Howard only to keep between himself and whoever he is afraid of.

Some boys on bikes swerve out around Howard and in around a group of twittering girls tripping over one another in their excited chatter. The last boy to pass shouts a jeering word at the straw-haired boy, who determinedly keeps on looking at the pavement ahead of him.

Beyond the heads and hairstyles of the children Howard watches the bike boys stop at the park traffic lights. When the lights change they cross the road. The straw-haired boy, seeing them all go into town, quickens his pace. Slows it again so as not to pass the girls, who are now all in a line in front of him.

At the crossroads the boy turns in around the park railings and goes running off under the trees, his blue rucksack bouncing and flapping about his back. Howard waits a pace behind the group of girls for the lights to change.

Waiting for the computer to close itself down and switch off, Howard slides in the keyboard shelf with its freebie blue mouse mat. Swivelling around in his black office chair he puts his bare white feet on the single bed, denting the brown and white diamond-patterned duvet.

Reaching right-handed to his bedside table he thumbs the remote control. The bedside table is ivory veneer with ornate black handles. The telly is on the dresser at the bottom of the bed. The dresser is ivory veneer with ornate black handles.

Howard had a double bed in here until three years after his wife left. It was only when he was looking for a new job that he bought the PC, desk and office chair, and he changed the double for a single bed. The telly was already here, on top the dresser. The double wardrobe, looming beside the dresser, is of the same ivory veneer and ornate black handles.

A large triangle of ivory veneer has gone from the chipboard on the bottom right hand corner of the wardrobe. Howard can't recall having knocked it. Maybe once when he hoovered. Although he would subsequently have noticed the knocked off piece on the carpet. He is sure it was there before his wife left. Had his father knocked it off and not told him? He sometimes hoovered the house through. Howard hasn't asked him.

This front bedroom used to be his father's room. When Howard got married they swapped rooms. Now Howard spends more time up here in the evenings than downstairs.

The single bed gives him more room. Aside from the telly, PC desk, black swivel chair, radio clock and lamp, ivory bedroom suite with ornate black handles, the room is bare of furnishings. When he was a boy in his other room - single wardrobe thin and plywood brown - there had been posters on the walls and a waist high bookshelf. Before he had left school Howard had spent more time reading science fiction than he had school books. Now he resists any work of fiction, telly dramas and films included.

No posters on these walls, just tiny changing shadows in the bobbled anaglypta.

The news comes on.

He listens for his father's voice. It rises on the second item. Howard changes channels, flicks to another. Another. Another.