

Paradise

by

Glenn Myers

Note

The publisher's lawyers forced me to put a thing in the front of the book saying, 'this is a work of fiction.'

It isn't.

I did disguise things a little: you won't find a *No.1 Cambridge Gentleman's Web Design and Copywriting Agency* in the phone book. You could, however, check the reports of road accidents in the newspaper. Or, wait around in the magistrates' courts alongside the no-hopers, the lost, the mad and the criminally criminal: you'll soon bump into the person I call Keziah. She got back to work quicker than I.

I would like to apologize to the Australian cricket team, my sister Lizzie, my ex-girlfriend Caroline and the people of Scotland for some of the things that are said in this book.

I would also like to assure the entire legal fraternity that nothing in this book is any way the responsibility of the author, particularly the remarks about lawyers.

Thank you for your understanding.

Jamie Valentine Smith

All Slumber had to do was steal quietly across the room and turn out my lights: it wasn't difficult.

I'd arranged everything to make it extra easy. Outside the lighthouse, waves heaved back and forth in narcotic rhythm. Above me, the great light turned hypnotically, lighting the dark coast and the (so far) totally empty sea. The fire crumbled low. The picked bones of dinner sagged on the table.

I was carefully nursing twilight thoughts that I hoped would take wing, with a rustle, into fully fledged dreams. I was gently loosening the reins on my mind and patting its flanks and telling it to go graze quietly in a field—

The daydreams congealed into a black Mini. A pale girl was at the wheel, lit by the sun. In all fresh horror, our headlamps met across the crowded carriageway.

Slumber stubbed his toe, cursed, and vanished from the room.

1 Keziah

It started with a bonbon, just out of reach.

I admit it wasn't the *most* sensible thing I've ever done, stretching for this sugar-coated toffee while gunning the car at its whining maximum.

On the opposite carriageway a stream of cars and lorries flowed to Cambridge. A lone black Mini was steering towards me, flitting in and out of this line of traffic, angry as a bluebottle.

I don't borrow my sister Lizzie's car often. Partly for the environment. Mostly because it's an eggshell, powered by a lawnmower engine, with sunflowers painted on the side. Not good for the corporate image of the *Cambridge Gentleman's Website and Copywriting Agency*.

Lizzie had snaffled all but one of the bonbons. Fingers scrabbling, I tried to manoeuvre the bag.

The oncoming Mini tucked itself safely behind a Polish container truck, *Zlotwicvic Enngerrgrunden Transportowicz, Krakow*, I didn't catch the spelling.

The sun came out, low and directly behind me, lighting up the January slush.

I looked down. The car clock, I noticed, just flipped over to 9:46.

Lizzie's flower-painted car whined.

Just ... reach ... in here.

I glanced up— to see the white-faced girl, in the black Mini, filling all the windscreen.

My fingers touched icing sugar.

*

By the time 9:46 ended, the bang from the collision had travelled nearly thirteen miles. Our two cars had spun to a halt, horribly splayed across the carriageway. The Mini was upside down. My car was a twisted bale of metal in a muddy field, soon to start dripping with my blood. *Zlotcwicvic Enngerrgrunden Transportowicz, Krakow* was a mile away, rushing for the container port at Felixstowe and anonymity.

*

My spirit, calm as a balloon, was rising quietly above the crash site. Below and to the right of me I could glimpse the straight black hair and the scrawny figure of the Mini driver, her spirit also rising. Far below us, cars had stopped, traffic was backed up, people had emerged and were circling the wreckage.

Minutes passed. As I watched, the traffic started tentatively to rearrange itself. An ambulance arrived. A cloud rolled over, blocking my view.

Above me in the greyness I glimpsed godlike beings in white Arran pullovers. Behind them in the sky was a tunnel. They grabbed me—they had many arms, as well as sucky things like sink plungers—and threw me up the tunnel.

*

Things happened in that tunnel that I don't have words for. I was bumped about. I thought I heard some arguing, possibly a punch thrown. I was left on my own in the dark, for what seemed like hours. Then some more bumping and cursing, and finally, a soft blue light.

It didn't stay that way for more than a second, because that was how long it took to start thinking.

My first thought must have been *bacon sandwich* (I had entered the afterlife without breakfast) because one appeared in front of me.

It was made of freshly sliced white bread, still moist and warm from the oven. The bacon had been grilled until it was not quite crisp. The bread had been swabbed in the fat and blood that had dripped out of the bacon. Fried onions had been loaded in, and a wedge of cheese.

It looked perfect.

I examined this wondrous sandwich from all angles, and then sniffed it. Still perfect. I took a bite, and it was exactly as I expected, every note of taste perfectly in place.

I thought I'd try imagining some coffee—Costa Rican, freshly ground, steaming.

Then perhaps another bacon sandwich — since, with a bit of mental exercise, I could imagine myself perfectly hungry — then more coffee, some tropical fruit (lychee and rambutan, why bother with apples).

This isn't too bad, I thought.

Next I created a quarter-pound of toffee bonbons in a white paper bag. These were, like the ones left far behind in Lizzie's mashed car, not those hideous, hard, lemon-flavoured things that supermarkets sell wrapped in polythene, but toffees boiled just enough to be soft, then dragged through a dust-bath of icing sugar. You can still buy bonbons like that in internet sweetshops—sometimes I included fun links in my client websites.

You need to put four bonbons in your mouth to get the full blessing, and I did, and after that I thought I might like another coffee.

*

OK, I thought as the sugar-high faded, *I am in a faintly blue world with incredible access to my memories.*

Perhaps this is what you do when you are dead. I could, if I wished, presumably go back through my whole life. I could create each scene, pause it, rewind it, analyse it all again like a Media Studies student watching a film. I could figure out what I did right, what I did wrong, whom I hurt, whom I loved. I could arrange the entire story into a coherence it never had when I was living it and come to a fair and sober assessment of who I was. The complete account of Jamie Smith. A worthy and proper thing to do in the face of something so dismally serious as your own death.

On the other hand ...

*

I was the last hope when Michael Vaughan tossed me the ball. The World All Time All Stars needed two runs to win. I merely had to bowl six deliveries at the world's best batsmen without them scoring anything. Vaughany had saved me for the end, because of my fantastic temperament and skill level. Sir Viv Richards of the West Indies was batting, to be followed by Sachin Tendulkar of India and Adam Gilchrist of Australia.

My first three balls were simply unplayable, and our wicketkeeper Godfrey Evans, whom I could only imagine in black and white because I had never seen him in colour, caught them with difficulty while Sir Viv swished helplessly, dazed at the sheer impossibility of playing me.

Next to Godfrey at first slip, Sir Jack Hobbs, also in black and white, clapped encouragement.

My fourth ball defeated Viv Richards completely in flight, pitched on the off stump, and fizzed into his middle stump, half way up. Got him. Oh Yes. Two balls to go.

Next ball I ended Sachin's career with a delivery that was a perfect combination of flight, pace, spin and bounce. He actually shook my hand before leaving the pitch, shaking his head and muttering about his future life as a commentator.

One ball to go. Adam Gilchrist to face. Lord's Cricket ground packed. Various former Prime Ministers in the crowd were calling out encouragement, unable to contain themselves.

I took my casual four steps up the wicket, got into my delivery stride. Just as I was releasing the ball, I was aware of a commotion on the boundary.

The Mini was driving onto the pitch.

What came from my hand was possibly the worst single delivery in the whole history of international cricket. Slow and lolloping, stupidly sitting up in the air, a natural victim, it begged, 'hit me, hit me'.

The Mini stopped with a little lurch.

Adam Gilchrist is one of nature's cleanest strikers of the ball. So when he whacks a ball for the winning runs, he does it with a godlike might, a loose-limbed swoop of power and grace that you know, however long you live, will scar your mind forever.

I cried, 'Nooooo.'

The scrawny girl climbed out of the Mini and walked over to the centre of the field. Adam Gilchrist ran off, triumphantly waving a cricket stump.

She was just below my height. I recognized the white face and the dark hair. She was wearing too much eyeliner.

'Nooo!' I continued. 'You can't drop it short to Adam Gilchrist! Not when they only need two runs to win.'

'Is this cricket or something?' asked the girl.

'Yes,' I replied.

'Stupid,' said the girl.

'Totally stupid. You've got to give the ball some *dip*.'

'Can't you reset and play again?'

'I've been resetting it all morning.'

'Well then.' She stretched out her hand. 'I'm Keziah.'

'Hello Keziah.'

'I'm real.'

'Hmph,'

I took her to Osama's, which I had created the day before on a tropical beach at the foot of a white cliff, just outside Lord's Cricket Ground, not far from the lighthouse where I made my home. I decided to have Male Film Stars from the Golden Age of Movies as the hospitality team. (I thought I'd give the Brazilian Ladies' Olympic Beach Volleyball Squad the afternoon off.)

Gregory Peck took the order and Jimmy Stewart served it. I only wanted a snack so I had my usual two lamb murtabaks, washed down with coffee made with sweetened condensed milk. She had date and banana muffin, fresh fruit and coffee.

(Osama's of course don't do date and banana muffin. Imagine asking the Giant Surly Bread Chef for date and banana muffin. But this was my dream-world and Osama smoothed things over. Perhaps he sent Jimmy Stewart out to a bakery.)

Louis Armstrong and his Hot Fives were the band.

Keziah was dressed in black jeans, a black top and a canvas jacket — and I wondered how, where anything was possible, she managed to choose what to wear. I have sisters and I know.

We ate in silence. Sneaking a glance from my murtabak I couldn't decide whether she was sad or angry. She had full lips and a mouth that naturally curved slightly downward. Dolphins seem to be smiling all the time: Keziah's normal expression, I decided, was sulky disapproval. She looked worn down. Nothing sparkled.

'Why didn't you swerve?' she asked abruptly.

'What?'

'You could've swerved into the field. I can't believe you didn't take evasive action.'

'Funnily enough I wasn't expecting somebody to jump out suicidally from behind a truck.'

'You should be ready for anything on the road.'

'Gosh, yes, how stupid of me.'

'You could have thought, *the sun's just come out, that driver can't see me.*'

'And *you* could've thought, perhaps I shouldn't drive like a suicidal maniac.'

'It takes two to crash.'

'Well thank you for the driving tips. That's absolutely tremendous and most helpful.'

'It was so stupid.'

I put the murtabak down. 'Do you know, funnily enough, when we were sitting here, not talking, I thought to myself, *she might be wanting to say sorry.*'

'I just can't believe you were so *lax.*'

'She might be wanting to apologize. Just when my life was getting nicely warmed up. She might have the decency to put her hand up and say, *oops.*'

‘That’s what I *am* trying to do.’

‘You’re not doing it very well.’

‘I didn’t expect you to be so difficult.’

I tore off a large piece of murtabak, swabbed it around in the curry sauce, and folded it into my mouth.

‘I am sorry you find me difficult,’ I said pointedly.

‘And I am sorry for the crash.’

‘So am I.’

We ate in silence for some time.

‘So this is what you’ve been doing since we died?’ Keziah asked, looking round at the beloved formica tables and red-tiled floor, with Osama himself smiling in the background and, behind the stainless steel counter, the Giant Surly Bread Chef cracking eggs with one hand and slopping and twirling the flat Afghan bread with the other.

‘Any fool can be uncomfortable,’ I replied. ‘We might be here a long time. It’s amazing what you can build out of your memories’.

‘These are your memories?’

‘Mashed up,’ I said. ‘Obviously. There isn’t really an Osama’s Afghan restaurant at the foot of a white cliff near Lord’s Cricket Ground. There was an Osama’s on Mill Road near where I live, but it’s being taken over by ayurvedic Vegans. Very bad Korma. This is a mixture of all the great Afghan restaurants I’ve ever eaten in.’

‘You haven’t ... thought about what’s happened to us? Or where we are?’

‘No.’

Green eyes surveyed my face like a building inspector weighing up a condemned bus-shelter.

‘Pathetic.’

‘Essential for mental survival, I think you’ll find. What do you do by the way?’

‘Before I was dead, I was a lawyer.’

‘So things are on the up, then.’

She sighed. We then had that little interchange that’s like two computers finding a shared comms protocol or perhaps like two dogs sniffing bottoms in the park. Your basic once-over. We both had a home in Cambridge. I’m a web designer, running my own business, clearly a more bohemian character than a *lawyer*.

As lawyers went she was interesting, however. She defended people in magistrates’ courts, specializing in the hopeless.

We explored all that and then the conversation fell away.

‘Do you want to see my beach gadgets?’ I asked.

‘What?’

‘Now you’re here, you might as well see some of the stuff I’ve built.’

‘No, I don’t want to see your beach gadgets.’

I picked up the murtabak and then put it down again. ‘My sister Lizzie says, and my ex-girlfriend Caroline confirms, that when guys want to talk they go and play with their toys. If they ever do talk, they find it easier in a garage somewhere when there’s an engine spread all over the floor. For example. So that they always have something to change the subject to.’

‘I see.’

‘The quad bikes are out here.’ We nodded to Osama and walked out onto the beach.

I’d spent half an hour engineering fine detail on this bike. I copied it with a moment’s thought so we both had one, and we set off across the beach. I quietened the engines.

'So do you like it here?' I asked.

'No.'

'I mean, in your bit of the world.'

'Still no.'

'I figured I had to make the best of it until whatever happens next happens.'

'Have you tried the HELP system yet?' Keziah asked.

'There's a HELP system? How does that work?'

'It's a set of questions and answers that you can personalize however you like.'

'I gotta try this.' I stopped the bike and copied a palm-roofed bar from one I'd built ten miles further down the beach. I considered. 'I think I'll have my HELP system as a bartender.' With a few deft thoughts I fashioned a small, bald, Spanish-looking barman with a white apron and a stunning moustache, put him behind the bar, and went up to him.

'Red wine OK?' I asked Keziah.

'I've stopped.'

'Hm,' I said. 'Don't you think because you're dead and a million miles from home you might start again? I mean it's not going to kill you, is it?'

'I'll have water with a hint of something. *Sin gaz.*'

'One glass of red wine, please Pablo, and one glass of non-fizzy water with a hint of ... I dunno, lime, passionfruit and mango. Easy on the passionfruit.'

I passed her the glass.

Thank you,' I said to Pablo. 'So you know everything?'

'You are too kind, *Señor.*'

'OK. Let me start with a few simple ones: Where am I, Why am I here, and when will I leave?'

'OK Jamie.' (He pronounced it, *Hymie*, doing the Spanish throat-clearing thing in a naff attempt at a Spanish accent.) 'After the crash your spirits ejected from your bodies. You were seized by collectors, haggled over, bought, packaged up again and transported to where you are now—'

'Which is?'

'You and the *Señorita* are in a kind of —'

'Cage,' said Keziah.

'Paradise.' Pablo sighed theatrically, with the mournful air of one who wished he could take Keziah by the hand for a moonlit walk across the beach, and there unfold the depths of his heart and show her that she was missing the point which was many times more subtle and rich. 'The truth is, in here you have complete access to every thought or memory you have experienced. All the universe you ever knew is yours. You're freer than you ever were on earth, free to roam through a universe built from your memories.'

'But we can't leave,' Keziah pressed on.

Pablo the HELP system shrugged. 'What is leave? Where would you go? Outside this habitat the universe is hostile, sleeted with dangerous radiation. It burns. You would not last. In here is the whole world of your minds—which was your whole universe before you left the earth—and you can go anywhere.'

'One thing,' I said. 'Why are our memories so much more vivid than they were on earth?'

'Because here is where they are stored,' said Pablo. 'Here, in the heavenlies.'

'They weren't in my head, then?'

'Of course not, *Señor*. There was no room. No room! Your brain was just the machinery for translating true memories into chemical and electrical signals. Your memories built up here, in the heavenlies. Now that you have left your body, your spirit can experience them directly.'

‘Without having to port them onto a different platform,’ I said, understanding it now I could use a computing metaphor. ‘So where are they then, these memories?’

‘They float through the heavenlies, *Señor*,’ said Pablo, ‘like clumps of seaweed, pulled and pushed by many influences. It doesn’t matter where they are. Your spirit has perfect access to them because they are your memories, bound to you by Life.’

‘Wild,’ I said.

‘And what do these spirit beings get out of this?’ asked Keziah.

Pablo put the glass down on the bar and raised himself to his full height, which wasn’t very high.

‘There are still parts of the universe, *Señorita*, where some beings find fulfilment from caring for other beings. You should be glad that you have arrived in such a place.’

‘Right.’

‘Why can’t we see them?’ I asked. ‘These spirits?’

‘All in good time, *Señor*. They are busy and important spirits. They want you to make yourselves comfortable first. Before the training starts.’

‘The training?’

‘It’s mild and pleasurable.’

‘So how long do we stay here?’ I asked. ‘In all?’

‘How long?’ asked Pablo. ‘Given the alternative, *Señor*, I would stay as long as possible.’

I digested this. ‘So correct me if I’m wrong. Keziah and I are trapped in this bottle forever, with only our memories and each other for the rest of time?’

‘That’s an unfortunate way of putting it, *Señor*. All you need for happiness is here.’

'In that case I'd like a large bowl of salted cashew nuts.'

'Why cashew nuts?' asked Keziah.

'Because I like cashew nuts. Would you like one?'

'Nuts from a bar? Are you kidding?'

'Come on, let's go.'

I snatched the glass bowl of nuts.

'In the last few days,' I asked, placing a cashew on my tongue and sucking off the salt, 'have you ever stopped and thought about what's happened to you, and then felt a great blanket of gloom descending on you?'

'Durr, Jamie.'

'Well I don't do blankets of gloom.' We walked away, back to our quads.

'Goodbye, Pablo!' I called. Then I whistled to the sky, and called, 'Come on then!'

'I built this yesterday,' I told Keziah.

Seconds later, a B-2 Stealth Bomber appeared low over the horizon, slow and deadly, like a manta ray. Its shadow flicked over our heads. The bomber released a precision-guided weapon which dropped deep into the thatched roof of Pablo's bar.

It exploded with a blast that warmed our faces and bent some distant palm trees.

We watched the rubble and palm-thatch fall.

'That kind of thing cheers you up, I find,' I said.

'I'll see you around, then,' replied Keziah, revving up the quad.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'Home.'

'How do you do that?'

'I drive to the edge of the world you've created, fly across the intervening ether, and park on my world.' She twisted the throttle and buzzed away.

*

I reclined in my male-ish white leather armchair, the one with the foot-rest, the inbuilt magazine rack and the drinks holder. The log fire, spitting and crackling, lit up the white-painted walls of my lighthouse.

Tucked onto the nearby sofa, reading a novel, was Caroline. It had only been a matter of time.

'That armchair is totally gross,' she said.

'You don't think it goes with the lighthouse?'

'It doesn't go with anything.'

It's true, at the time of the crash I was not Caroline's current official boyfriend due to some inexplicable girl thing she had been going through. I hadn't seen much of her for some weeks before the accident. But in memory of eighteen happy months of dating, I'd created her from my memories, along with the armchair that both she and my sister Lizzie had prohibited me from buying, my 1970s-retro lava lamp, and my collection of Laptops I Have Loved.

Next to the door was a nacho-and-dips dispenser that I'd lashed together from recollections of vending machines.

'Caroline,' I said. 'Could you help me make some notes?' She was taller than me (which doesn't say a lot), thin, glasses, curly yellow hair. Earnest, clumsy and entirely lovely.

'I'm not your personal slave you know,' she sniffed.

'I know, I know. I just thought, *possibly*, here am I, dead ... all alone ... needing a helping hand ... and I thought, who better—'

Caroline sighed. 'Just get on with it.'

'Is that enough grovelling?'

'For the time being.'

‘OK. Stardate 03 01 01—no, don't tut, Caroline, tutting is a bad habit—I need some way of keeping track of the passing days, and the Star Trek system is out there. I think I've been here about three days. Which makes it Stardate 03 01 01. Who knows how long I've been here really or what time it is on Earth.

‘Positive things:

‘1. Despite being killed in a crash, I am well.

‘2. It has been fun creating a new world—including you Caroline—and I can look forward to more of this.

‘Negative things:

‘1. I am sharing a pet basket with just one other living soul, and she has serious issues.

‘2. I haven't met our mystery owners and I have absolutely no idea what they plan to do with us.

‘3. Gloom and depression that threatens to fall on me at any moment.’

‘Do you want a view on that?’ Caroline looked up from her notebook. She had a cool self-possession, Caroline, prim, like a lettuce. Didn't stop her walking into cupboard doors on occasion, but it did mean I always thought she needed to be unprimmed or de-primmed. I had, however, never quite managed the needful ravishing.

‘No I do not,’ I said.

‘You should go see Keziah again.’

‘Why?’

‘Because there's only two of you and you need each other.’

‘But I've got you, Caroline.’

‘For one thing, you haven't *got* me, and for another, the *me* that you've cut-and-pasted together is an anemic hotch-potch of your memories and fantasies.’

‘You are?’

'Believe me.'

'You can still be pretty withering.'

'Nothing like the real thing.'

I considered this.

'You couldn't by any chance wash up the mugs?'

'Jamie, even if I'm a figment of your imagination, I'm not putting up with you being chauvinistic, self-absorbed and bone idle.'

Perhaps I've recreated you too well, I thought.

'I heard that,' said Caroline.

'All right, I'll do the mugs,' I said. 'Perhaps you could add a note to the log.'

"Even in the privacy of my own private head, figments of my imagination are getting at me." That's another one under negatives.'

'The point is—' said Caroline.

'Sorry.' I said. 'Sorry sorry sorry.'

*

You could, I found, hold yourself together pretty well through the days. But my spirit was somehow still locked in a sleep-and-wake cycle, and the evenings were tricky. At any moment a recreated Mini might appear from the depths of my memory, heading for my head.

Even when Slumber finally did his stuff, sleep was tricky too. I wasn't in control. My unconscious spirit seemed to kick around among mental debris like a bored teenager.

Sometimes, in my dreams, I'd hit a kind of jackpot and find myself surrounded by memories of old friends.

More often, I had no idea what dark thought I was going to stumble over, except that I was fairly sure that at some point a black Mini and a Polish truck would be bearing down on me with familiar horror.

*

The following day—I'd spent the morning gliding the Space Shuttle into Edwards Airforce Base, one-handed, while eating a Thai Red Curry—I thought I'd visit Keziah. The Space Shuttle seemed overkill for crossing the small gap between our worlds, so I built a small biplane and buzzed off from Edwards, heading the direction Keziah had gone when she'd left the previous day.

Soon after leaving my landscape, Keziah's cloud-covered world came into view against the soft blue. I cut the engines and glided in, enjoying the cloud-surfing.

When I emerged below the clouds, I found myself only a couple of hundred feet above a muddy field in which a scattering of stoned-looking people were wandering about like it was the end of music festival. My noisy plane clattered slowly over and I was able to improvise a runway and land.

Smoke was rising from bonfires. The Mini was buzzing up and down, as was, I noticed to my surprise, Lizzie's ancient flower-painted deathtrap of a car.

I ambled across the field towards the only building in the whole landscape. Like those multiplayer games you can wander into sometimes, the people I passed were involved in their own jerky little routines. A younger, pink-haired, punkier version of Keziah — she looked about 16 — walked right in front of me hand in hand with another punk, both with lip- and tongue-studs. Neither stopped.

I stepped past Goths, greasy fat girls in short leather skirts, transvestites, women with close-cropped hair, men in leather trousers and pink shirts; and pale, thin junkies of both sexes. Fortunately none of them looked at me. Mingled among them were old, unshaven men with shaky hands and, incongruously, elegant African women, in riotous African gear.

I ambled over towards a bonfire, which was surrounded by a crowd, then stopped.

An old guy was being burnt alive. He just stood there, absolutely furious, not being consumed. The crowd watched, chewing and spitting and scratching.

I backpedalled fast and reversed straight into somebody.

‘Sorry,’ I said, expecting to see someone with rather a lot of metal on his body and chains in his hand.

‘No, no, my fault.’

The man I’d collided with looked to be in his mid-thirties and was carrying a small girl on his shoulders. He had a pleasant-looking face, open and quizzical under a feathery moustache. ‘I was running up and down the field. Like a horse. Bit of a hazard to shipping.’

‘You must be a figment of Keziah’s imagination.’

‘So I am,’ said the man.

‘I see ... You don’t look like you quite belong here.’

The man looked thoughtful.

‘Oh, I belong all right.’

‘Excuse me,’ said the small girl on his shoulders. ‘*I’m* Keziah, thank you very much. And I did not say *Whoa*.’ The small girl looked at me. ‘My sister and I are rounding up a goat,’ she said with some seriousness. She pointed to a small African girl who was holding a goat by a piece a string attached to its neck. ‘But this horse is very lazy horse.’

‘You have a point there’ the man said to her, then, to me. ‘I think I need to put in a bit of a canter.’

I must have walked half a kilometre, skirting round the bonfires as much as I could. The same old guy was being burnt on a dozen of them. Other characters being immolated included a stumpy, middle-aged woman in a doctor’s coat —

several of those — and the grown-up Keziah herself, several of those too, standing sullen and blank-faced, as if impatient for the flames to do their stuff.

The ground was covered in dog mess and litter.

I reached the building which looked like a temporary classroom. One of the stumpy, grey-haired, doctor women was hammering at the door.

‘Keziah!’ she was screaming, ‘Come out here now!’

I thought for a moment. This woman was terrifying, but she was only a figment, and she too kept repeating her actions robotically. I conjured a few thoughts.

‘Scuse me,’ I said, pushing past the woman quickly. ‘Pizza!’

I opened the door.

‘Hi Keziah,’ I said breezily. ‘Brought you a pizza.’

Keziah was working on some files at a desk. It took her a second to recognize me.

‘What?’

‘Pizza.’

‘*What?*’

‘Pepperoni. With sweetcorn. Er, and a side of garlic bread.’

‘Out.’

‘Right.’

Get the—’

‘OK’

‘—*out of my head!*’

I pushed through the door and gave the stumpy woman the pizza box.

‘Wrong address,’ I said, and fled.

*

Some hours later, I was part way through writing Keziah a letter—going through many drafts, because I didn't know what to say—when I heard a banging on the door. Since my lighthouse is a few hundred metres offshore, built on rocks, accessible only by rowing boat in calm seas, this was a surprise.

'Who is it?'

'Funny.'

I turned the wrought iron latch in the wooden door, got a brief glimpse of rocks, tossing foam, and seagulls pitching and yawing in a fierce gale, and ushered Keziah in. She was windswept and wearing an oilskin.

We looked at each other for a moment.

'You look like you need some chocolate.' I magicked her a large blue-and-white striped mug of hot cocoa. 'Marshmallows and whipped cream?' She accepted this silently. 'I'll just leave a bar of chocolate here as well, if you need it,' I said, placing a 400g bar of the darkest stuff on the wooden table.

Rain was dripping off Keziah and her sulky expression had not moved. 'My sisters always liked chocolate,' I said lamely.

'House rules,' she said icily, sitting down. 'Never ever come to my place uninvited.'

'OK'

'It's private.'

'Absolutely.'

'And personal.'

'Fine.'

'And I haven't got round to sorting—'

'Fine. Sorry. *Sorry*. But *you* of course come to my place—'

'Yours is clearly a fantasy playground. And anyway we needed to make contact.' She snapped off one row of chocolate, broke it into three, and put one piece in. Not that it seemed to be lightening her mood.

Neither did the next two. Keziah, I thought parenthetically, must be one of those skinny people who can mainline on sugar and fat and never change shape. Me, I only have to look at three onion bhajis, a meat biriani, a chicken dhansak, a portion of rice and some naan bread and I put on weight. 'My thoughts are still a bit ... jumbled,' she went on.

'It's interesting the way you were in an office,' I said.

'I had some paperwork to finish.'

'I see. And the people burning to death outside—'

Keziah snapped off another row of chocolate and looked at me, green eyes defiant.

'The paperwork was the cases I was working on before I died. I just wanted to put my mind to rest about them.'

'Fine,' I said, hastily. 'Good idea. Look, all I wanted was maybe set up some system so that we could communicate without intruding on each other.'

'That's what I came over to say,' said Keziah.

'I had this idea,' I said, 'I made some mobile phones. I'm not sure how they work, but they do work.' I passed one over to her across the table. 'I don't think they need charging. We can fix up times and places to talk.'

'All right,' said Keziah, picking up the phone.

'Also, I've been recreating a library of all my books and CDs. I've created my friend Caroline, who's a librarian. She's putting them in order. If you want to borrow any of them.'

'Thank you,' rising to go.

'I'll contact you. We'll have a meal or something. Take the chocolate. How are you going to get home?'

'I'll walk.'

'Across the water?'

'And across the ether. If you want, you can hover a few inches off the ground.'

'Hmm.' I thought for a moment, then checked my ship's brass chronometer.

'I've booked a force 19 hurricane in fifteen minutes.'

'Can't you delay it?'

'Not without reprogramming. Anyway I've got a better idea.' I went over and opened the door, a world of tossing sea and screaming wuffs of wind. 'Oh Dumbo...'

A giant wave crashed against the rocks at the base of the lighthouse, spotting the air with salt and dampness.

Dumbo the elephant flapped into view, wafting his big ear wings, steady as a rock despite the growing gale. He stretched down his trunk, hugged her with it, and lifted her gently onto his back.

'Bit more fun,' I said.

Keziah appeared to be bearing this patiently.

'Oh by the way,' she called down as Dumbo rose into the sky and wind gusted. 'Have you consulted the HELP recently?'

'Isn't he a bit damaged?' I called up.

'Mine isn't,' she called down.

'No, I haven't,' I called up.

'Tomorrow.' Keziah's voice was now indistinct across the moan and splash of the oncoming storm.

'What about tomorrow?'

'Induction Day.'