

FIVE MILLION YEARS TO EARTH

A Journal of Cthuloid Oddity - Issue One

Welcome to the first issue of *Five Million Years To Earth*, which is a sub-zine of *The Black Seal*. Printed copies of *Five Million Years To Earth* are free with the 100 copies of *The Black Seal* purchased. After that the sub-zine is available as a free download from the *The Black Seal's* website.

Five Million Years To Earth was created to fill a need. Despite our submissions saying that we were only interested in *Call of Cthulhu* submissions, the fiction submissions were still made. Obviously there was a need for some sort of Mythos fiction vehicle - hence *Five Million Years To Earth*.

Enjoy!

Adam Crossingham, Editor

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Admission

By Laurel Halbany

The high-backed wooden chair had equally high, hard wooden arms, to which Michael Cavigliane's wrists were cuffed. The seat and back had some kind of old-fashioned, overstuffed cushions that at one time perhaps had been comfortable. His ankles, too, had been cuffed; to the chair or the floor itself, he wasn't sure. Behind him, probably near the doorway, someone had clipped an electric torch to a bracket, partly lighting the cramped concrete room with a dim, dirty yellow glow. In front of Michael, flush with the wall, was a flat grey rectangle, far taller and narrower than a door, its corners angled out of true. It seemed to lean out of the wall toward him. Then Stephen Alzis stepped into Michael's line of vision, and he forgot all about the door.

The redheaded girl in the bartender's uniform stepped forward to light the slender, brown cigarette in Alzis's hand. He nodded and she retreated. Whether she even glanced at

Michael, he couldn't guess. The air became thick with the cardamom smell of Alzis's cigarette. The little Arab tapped the ashes onto the concrete floor. His associate, a tall Nordic blonde in an immaculate white linen suit, pursed his lips but said nothing.

Alzis smiled at Michael. "Robert does not approve of my using the floor as an ashtray," he explained. "Here there is little risk of fire, so I allow myself to become careless." He puffed at the cigarette thoughtfully. "As you allowed yourself to become careless, although in a more serious way, yes?"

Michael wasn't sure if this was meant to be a rhetorical question, but he was afraid of angering Alzis if it weren't. "Uh...yes, Mr. Alzis, I—"

"No. Not careless, stupid. You should have come to me right away, when they first threatened you. That would have been, hmm, almost a year ago?"

Robert stirred. "Seven months and nine days, actually."

"Ah, thank you, Robert. Yes, seven months and nine days. Of course you did the right thing, when you finally brought this information to me, but I am hurt that you waited so long." He seemed genuinely disappointed.

"I'm, I'm sorry, Mr. Alzis, I know I should have, but they threatened me, I was afraid—"

"Afraid?" All the gentle humour dropped from Alzis's voice. "You see, this is why I am so upset with you. You are telling me that a handful of *organizatsya* thugs were so frightening? You were more afraid of them than of *me*?"

Michael stared at the glowing end of the cigarette, not really daring to turn his face away, but unwilling to look into the other man's eyes.

"They offered him money," said Robert, "or some other vice, I would guess. He doesn't smell of a drug habit. Gambling?"

The redheaded girl spoke for the first time. "Mr. Alzis? Mr. Hubert? I'm sorry to interrupt. It's eleven forty-eight." Her voice was so neutral, so precise, that she might have been an automated reminder service: "*Mr. Cavigliane, the time is now eleven fort-eight. To pretend this is all a horrible nightmare, press one.*"

"Thank you, my dear. No, not money. These Russian boys prefer force to bribery, and in any case, our Michael has no real vices. Something else, something truly frightening?" The tone of Alzis' voice made it plain that he already knew the answer; he wanted Michael to say it himself, to confess it. Alzis shifted his position, just a bit to Michael's right. He had deliberately moved so that he was no longer blocking the bound man's view of the plain grey rectangle in the wall, a shape that Michael was now positive was some kind of door.

They were not just trying to scare him, Michael realised, they were not going to beat him up and let him off with a warning, they were going to kill him. He was going to die here, soon,

in this ugly, cold concrete room that smelled of Lysol and Alzis's cigarettes.

"Joey," he sobbed.

Hubert raised an eyebrow, puzzled. "His son," Alzis explained. "He has a twelve-year-old son. A shame, really. The boy was born with terrible brain damage. He needs twenty-four-hour care; he is blind; he can't speak, he can only make a sort of...what is the English...cawing. The boy's mother committed suicide when he was two. He is in a fine institution in Montauk, and Michael visits him every Sunday. But it would not be difficult for enemies to make something happen to the boy, if Michael refused to help them."

"Mr. Alzis, it's eleven fifty-three."

"We have to leave you now, Michael." Alzis glanced toward the grey door. "You will die, of course; I cannot run a business

where people betray my secrets. But you came to me, however late, with this information, and so I will give you this gift: Joey will be safe. I will watch over him for you."

Behind his chair, someone hastily unlocked the heavy, windowless metal door that they had used to enter the small room. Alzis dropped his cigarette to the floor, grinding it out with one of his expensive Italian shoes.

"Mr. Alzis, it's eleven fifty—"

"Shh, we're leaving now." He heard a soft clink as the electric torch was removed from its hook. "Goodbye, Michael." The light went out, leaving the room utterly dark as the metal door sighed shut and locked.

The room stayed dark, but it was silent for only a moment longer.

Ten ways to tell if you are living in a Call of Cthulhu scenario

By Graeme Price

At some point it happens to us all. We wake up and have a day so filled with preternatural weirdness that we begin to question our own sanity, and, more importantly, that of the Universe. So where do we draw the line? Just how can you tell when you have slipped across the boundary and are at risk from unspeakable Mythos horrors? Here at *'Five Million Years To Earth'* we know these things, and have compiled a handy quick reference guide to help our loyal readers discover if they are actually characters in a real-life *Call of Cthulhu* investigation...

1. You regularly receive telephone calls from your cousin's brother's aunt's half-sister's nephew's college roommate asking for assistance in a "confidential matter requiring discretion, the ability to read Aramaic, and a service revolver".
2. On receiving such a telephone call, rather than hanging up immediately and calling the authorities, you actually agree to help.
3. You speak Latin and ancient Greek more fluently than your native tongue.
4. Latin or ancient Greek *are* your native tongue.
5. You have any ancestors who have lived over 110 years, or have ancestors who married after the age of 70 (especially to 16 year old foreign brides) before having a single male child who was privately tutored overseas until his 21st birthday when he returns, claims his inheritance and picks up the family concern from his recently deceased parent (to whom he bears an uncanny likeness) without pausing for breath.
Be especially concerned if the family portrait gallery has only one picture in it and the Christian name of the subject has been repeatedly crossed out and new names scribbled over the top of it.
Be doubly concerned if the family tomb has a large number of empty coffins in it.
6. You inherit property from a long-lost branch of your family. You are probably in trouble if any of the following apply:
 - a. It has more levels below ground than above it.
 - b. The estate agent points out its unique architectural features using adjectives such as 'non-Euclidean' or 'eldritch'.
 - c. The master bedroom contains a fully functional set of manacles designed to restrain the occupant of the bed (note that this may not be such a bad thing unless there is also a clock showing the phases of the moon with annotations on the face saying things like "danger" or if the room can only be unlocked from the outside).
 - d. Any area of the estate glows at night even when you pull all the fuses in the house.
7. You routinely use words such as 'squamous', 'blasphemous', 'pseudopod', 'foetid' and 'Lovecraft' in normal conversation (Unless you are an amoeba collecting Presbyterian dermatologist with halitosis who lives in a red light district... in which case you have worse problems than the Mythos to deal with!)
8. Your great aunt Effie has a severe skin condition; bleeds cod liver oil and smells distinctly of haddock.
9. In your day-to-day life as a reference librarian you repeatedly have to deal with blood soiled books being returned late by cloaked gentlemen who reek of sulphur.
10. On going to bed one evening you wake up three years later with no memory, a really bad hangover, £50,000 worth of credit card debt, a bizarre aversion to eating lobster, and the uncanny feeling that you have more feet than normal (although this may merely indicate that you have just returned from one of the infamous Black Seal pub crawls: a good way to tell is to examine yourself for curry stains, scars from major surgery, or broken bones - all telltale signs of having been around the TBS editorial team).

Recognition By Nick Brownlow

Henry Crabbe left the Legion at a little after eleven.

It was a bitterly cold December evening just before Christmas, but the moon was out and it was only a short stroll to the bus stop. The others had begged him not to make his way home alone – their tiny northern town had seen a spate of pensioner muggings recently – but Crabbe wasn't afraid of a few young ruffians.

At the age of nineteen he'd slid a knife between a man's ribs at Dieppe; he'd jumped from aeroplanes; exploded bridges; charged down machine gun nests. Then, after the war, forty years spent as a policeman in the West Riding Constabulary. Crabbe had done fantastic, terrifying things; he'd walked in the shadow of the great beast of the world and seen the evidence of its awful, insatiable hunger up close.

In truth, there was precious little Crabbe was afraid of at all anymore.

The town he'd lived in almost all his life seemed empty, deserted. To reach the bus stop on the main road he had to cut through a quiet, residential street that lacked any street lighting. The moon provided sufficient illumination for him to find his way however, and gave ghostly definition to the town's chimned rooftops and the black outline of the Pennines beyond.

Once, Crabbe had spent the month of October searching those same hills for the graves of dead children.

A thin, icy mist began to settle. As he progressed down the street, Crabbe felt unusually relaxed. Full of beer and good cheer, the dark moods that had plagued him habitually since the war felt refreshingly distant. He was looking forward to Christmas; buoyed by the thought of joining his granddaughter Sally's family at their home in Harrogate for dinner on Christmas day.

Presently however, through no sense he cared to know the name of, he became aware he was being watched.

Crabbe turned round quickly and surveyed the street, which appeared to be quite empty. Eventually though, his gaze settled on the entrance to a ginnel between the houses about a hundred yards behind him, where he thought he could see a tall, thin figure standing completely still, apparently watching him from the shadows. He strained his eyes to try and discern more detail, but the outline remained annoyingly vague. The face seemed impossibly long and pale, and the stick like body seemed to bleed into the darkness at the edges.

He considered calling out a challenge, but then thought better of it. He frowned, having sensed something significant but maddeningly indefinable in the figure's menacing stance, and then continued on his way.

Almost immediately, he realised he was being followed.

His pursuer's footsteps were soft, indeterminate, and yet unmistakably matching his own. Crabbe adjusted his grip on his walking stick, ready to use it as a weapon against an attacker. He remembered to himself the look on the face of a German soldier he'd killed as the life went out of his eyes and his soul sank into the dark, and for once, took strength from it. Oh yes, he'd give them what for, all right. The footsteps, however, never varied or quickened their pace.

Reaching the bus stop, Crabbe glanced back into the gloom of the street he'd just left. He thought he could see that same, unnatural figure, just beyond the soft orange glow of the streetlights on the main road, but couldn't be sure. He thought the thing's hands were outstretched, as if reaching, grasping for him.

A bus arrived.

Crabbe flashed his pass at the driver and clambered aboard, taking a seat at the back. Upstairs on the top deck it sounded just like a pub; a group of drunken young men making their way home after last orders; but aside from a lone male nurse, asleep on the front seat after a long and (clearly) fatiguing shift at St Jude's, he was alone on the bottom deck. With a hiss the doors shut and the bus pulled away. Out of the corner of his eye Crabbe thought he could make out his monstrous pursuer again, keeping pace with the bus by taking huge, impossible strides. When he turned his head to get a better look, the bus entered a tunnel and the figure disappeared.

The bus deposited Crabbe at the end of his street. He was only minutes from his front door now, and felt some of his earlier confidence returning. Nevertheless he kept a close eye on the hedges and walls that lined the pavement, in case some horribly emaciated figure should suddenly emerge from behind one of his neighbour's houses.

The mist, he noticed, was getting thicker now.

Reaching his house, Crabbe was suddenly struck by how empty and cold it looked from the outside. Maureen, of course, had been dead for nearly ten years now. The Christmas garland Sally had bought him and hung on his front door appeared to writhe in the dim glow of the security light; for some reason, he found he was reluctant to reach out and touch it. Angry with himself for feeling so fearful and vulnerable, he decided he must be suffering from a touch of the nerves – nothing a few glasses of brandy and some late night radio wouldn't cure. Hurriedly, he opened his front door, and stepped into the hall.

He hung his coat and scarf on the stand and rested his stick against the banister. Carefully avoiding the bag containing the children's presents that waited by the door, he switched on the hall light and made his way through to the kitchen, taking the brandy bottle from the cupboard beneath the sink. He poured himself a glass, drank it, and then poured himself another.

In the living room the artificial tree Sally had insisted he put up looked tired and old. He hadn't bothered to dust the ornaments before hanging them, and had eventually given up on decorating it when his back began to give him trouble.

He thought of how Maureen would have chided him for letting things go in such a manner; and then he remembered her lying there in the Huddersfield Royal Infirmary – sallow, weak, cadaverous; invisible hands tugging her downwards and away from him into a cold, dank darkness. He went to pour himself another drink.

In the kitchen, he noticed he could see his breath. It hung about him like a fog.

Yes, the house *was* cold – very cold. The pilot light on the boiler must have gone out. He began opening drawers, searching for a torch.

He checked the boiler beneath the stairs, but the pilot was still lit. Somewhere, a window must be open, he decided. He was about to go and check upstairs, when from behind him came the sound of a floorboard, creaking beneath the weight of a soft, indeterminate footstep. Slowly, Crabbe turned to face its source.

His pursuer stood framed in the doorway, leering at him hungrily. Its grotesque, irrational physiognomy was now terrifyingly apparent in the light of his home.

"Oh," said Crabbe, taking one last sip of his brandy. "It's you."

The Mythos Diary of Artemis Mule

(San 13³/₄)

[As dictated to Graeme Price]

September 5th 2003: Today, a Mr. Judas Weisel from the family solicitors (Lye, Weisel, and Scruam) contacted me with "some rather bad news". Apparently, my great uncle Reginald had died and named me as the sole beneficiary of his estate. Whilst I have never actually met Uncle Reg (as father used to call him), I have heard a little about him. Apparently he is (or to be more accurate, "was") the proverbial "black sheep" - or as father described him "a right barking loony". On the other hand, Uncle Reg was reputed to be very wealthy, so things might finally be looking up for me. And about time too, the bay window of my bedsit is leaking again. Oh, how I dream of fleeing tedious Putney for the warmer climes of Tahiti or Benidorm!

September 8th 2003: Mr. Weisel and I had a meeting today which proved a little disappointing. It appears that Uncle Reg died under what can only be described as "unusual" circumstances. It seems that his expansive Park Lane penthouse burned to a crisp, with poor Uncle Reg still inside. The cause of the fire is still uncertain, but the authorities believe that the industrial deep fat fryer that Reg had installed may have been part of the problem. Reg had apparently gone a little bit cranky, covered himself in fish batter and decided to... well, you get the picture. The current theory is that some of the hot oil spilled and set fire to the carpet, which lit off the rest of the flat. Consequently, the only items to survive were enclosed in Reg's old floor safe that was found perfectly intact in the flat three floors below his penthouse (it had fallen through the ceilings of the apartments in the fire). Gone are Reg's collection of irreplaceable 16th century Venetian office furniture and all chances of my escaping to foreign shores, for it seems that he had emptied his bank accounts shortly before his self-immolation. The only surviving elements of his estate are the content of the safe, which are, *in tota*.

One Bottle of Tabasco sauce, the 1947 edition of Wisden (the cricketer's almanac), a CD of Bonnie Tyler's Greatest Hits, half a pound of Black Pudding, and a manuscript of some sort. Mr. Wiesel said that the contents of the safe will be turned over to me following the reading of the Will (a formality, he said) and pending the coroner's report.

September 15th 2003: Today was a busy day! First, I attended the inquest into the demise of Uncle Reg. This was a fairly dry affair, with the coroner outlining the facts of my uncle's last days. It seems that Reg was (to quote the coroner) "becoming increasing more erratic and eccentric before finally spiralling down the plughole of insanity". Needless to say, this eccentricity was manifested by spending my inheritance on trivial little trinkets (such as five hundred Cabbage Patch dolls!) that were all consumed by the fire. Interestingly, the post mortem revealed some more worrying little details, including the fact that Uncle Reg had consumed a large quantity (in the vicinity of 6 pounds worth) of uncooked Paxo before his death. The neighbours also reported that just before the fire Reg could be heard yelling "Frying tonight" at the top of his voice. Ultimately, the coroner returned a verdict of suicide (although he did suggest that the word "misadventure" could have been made for the manner of death). This paved the way for the reading of the Will - lots of "henceforths" and "heretofores" in there, but legalese has never been a strong suit of mine - but the bottom line is that the contents of the safe are now mine. Mr. Wiesel gave me them in a parcel wrapped in brown paper and string and bade me farewell. I should mention that the Will had been drawn up about 20 years ago (when I was aged about 16), and so the question of "sound mind and body" was really not an issue as

this was before Uncle Reg had gone irrevocably bonkers. Now, I didn't realize it at the time, but the reading had taken over 6 hours and it was quite late before I returned home. Of course, much of this time was consumed with listing items that were destroyed in the fire, a pointless and rather depressing exercise for me as I shall never get my hands on them! I just about had time for beans on toast and a nice cup of Horlicks before it was time for bed.

September 16th 2003: Upon waking, I realized that I hadn't really had a look at Uncle Reg's bequest to me. Thus, I opened the package over a nice cup of PG Tips and proceeded to examine the contents. The black pudding smelt a little dubious, so I threw it away. Goodness knows what I will do with the Tabasco sauce (and as for the Bonnie Tyler CD...) but Wisden is just thick enough to fix my wobbly table leg. This left only the manuscript. On examination it is about the size and thickness of a ream of A4 paper, with the pages being quite thick and a little yellowed. The cover seems to be some sort of leather or skin, with what I would swear is a large hairy mole on the centre of the back cover. There is a bookmark, some 6 inches in length which appears to be cut from the same piece of material as the cover, but strangely is tattooed with the words "I Love Olive" in dark blue ink. I wonder what that could mean? The bookmark itself is attached to the cover and appears to be sewn together at the back, although the end is a bit frayed. Disturbingly, the bookmark appears to stiffen slightly when you touch it. The contents of the book seem to be a journal of some sort - there are various strange symbols and diagrams interspersed within the text which is written in a very small, cramped hand in very dark black ink. The frontispiece bears the inscription "R. Q. Mule. Esq." written in a bold gothic hand in what appears to be dried blood. Most peculiar.

I believe that I shall read this manuscript, because frankly I don't have anything else to do except sign on occasionally! This at last shall give me opportunity to use the critical thinking skills learnt through my degree in social studies that I spent so many hours slaving for at the OU.

17th September 2003: Reg's book is a very difficult work to understand, so I've only skimmed it a little. It starts by describing his time in the merchant navy (he was a junior apprentice purser on the Fishguard to Holyhead ferry), which was clearly fairly boring until he went fishing in 1947 and caught some sort of small mermaid (a fat green winged body with an octopus head about 2 feet tall, as he describes it). This creature could apparently talk by speaking directly into Reg's mind described itself as a Great Young One and promised Uncle Reg untold knowledge of forbidden things that would bring him great wealth and prosperity if he would only let him go. Obviously Reg was always slightly potty, but on the other hand Uncle Reg did seem to do rather well for himself despite his humble background as what amounts to a naval lavatory attendant! Reg promptly threw the thing back, left his job, foreswore eating calamari, and began writing down his dreams. They told him to study certain texts and learn the secrets within them. Books with strange titles like Cultes des Ghoules, The Revelations of Glaaki, Von Junzt's Unaussprechlichen Kulten (I didn't know Reg could speak German), The Book of Eibon, The Necronomicon of Al-Azred, and (I think he must have been joking, but you can never tell) Noddy and Teddy's Bumper Fun Book. Apparently Reg sought all these out and copied bits out of each one into a sort of occult précis. Now, it seems very odd to me that all these tomes were written by authors with grand names. You never have a book called "The Grimoire of Dave", "How to be a Cultist", or even "Jane's Occult Deities". I suppose having an exotic name helps create some sort of mystique about a book, although to me this is a little pretentious. Thus, I think I will call my Uncle's manuscript "The Book of Reg" to redress the bal-

ance a little bit. I shall obviously have to devote more time to a proper reading. I could really use the wealth and prosperity part.

20th September 2003: Haven't made a diary entry for a few days. Book of Reg too interesting. Fascinating details on Pacific Fish Gods.

30th September 2003: Have just realized that "I Love Olive" is an anagram of "O-O, Evil, Evil". I think this may be some sort of warning. In too deep to stop now though.

12th October 2003: Book taking disturbing trend towards necromancy. Apparently the cover of The Book of Reg is human skin taken from Reg's tyrannical former boss aboard the ferry. Reg describes how he flayed the skin from the boss's buttocks and turned it into the binding... Wait, this means that the bookmark must be.... ewwww.

13th October 2003: Bought some old wallpaper to cover the book in [the binding gives me the creeps].

18th October 2003: Wibble.

1st November 2003: I'm a little teapot short and stout, here's my handle, here's my spout. Another cup, vicar?

20th November 2003: I believe that I may be the victim of some form of curse precipitated by reading the Book. There appears to be a foul miasma arising from my person and when I look in the mirror I see that my face has changed in some indescribable way. What evil has befallen me? Why did I not heed the warning of "I Love Olive"?!

20th November 2003 (later): Panic over. I came to my senses and realized that due to my preoccupation with The Book of Reg, I have neither shaved nor bathed for some weeks, explaining the odd odours. Things are now improved following an encounter with a bottle of Dettol and a pumice stone. I shall have to get out more and take more care of my personal hygiene, although my work consumes me!

18th December 2003: At last it is accomplished! I have completed reading The Book of Reg. I now know the Secrets of the Universe! The knowledge of the Great Old Ones is Mine! Sorcerous power courses through My veins and I am ready to ascend to my rightful position as one of the Secret Masters of Humanity! All that is required is single minded, icy devotion to the cause and utter ruthlessness in dealing with obstacles and those that would dare oppose Me! Tremble at my Power mere mortals, for I am Artemis Mule, a God in human flesh! You shall worship Me, and Me alone!

19th December 2003: I have suffered a minor setback to my plans. Today I attempted to sign on, after a break of several weeks. The man from the DSS (Mr. Weatherspoon, a snivelling little wretch of a jobsworth) told me that because I had failed to attend my appointments at the job centre for the past 4 months, my benefit claims have been terminated and I must reapply. I tried to reason with him and make my case that I had been involved in a programme of study critical to my future career as Supreme Ruler of the Universe, but he seemed disinterested and had the gall to "tut" at me! Eventually he gave me a stack of forms to fill out in triplicate and the smirking little toad said that my benefits might be restored in 6 to 8 weeks. I wanted to Smite him there and then, but there were too many witnesses and my power is yet weak. I shall have to survive the next few weeks on my meagre savings whilst I gather my strength. But be warned Putney DSS My Ire shall fall upon you! I Shall have My Vengeance!

To be continued...

Lovecraft's Lament By Christopher Fulbright

There's something most beautiful that I have seen;
more pulchritudinous than woman or dream.
A creature that roams in the darkness of light;
drawing forth the aesthetic watchers of night.

'Ere they gather though wont to roam;
seraphic - daemonic, upon tentacled loam.
They watch and they listen - this thing to behold;
all hatreds forgotten 'neath creature of old.

Its existence to them was all but unknown;
yet now having seen it they're heretics grown.
Their glittering heavens, their dank pits of hell;
lo! Slithering aether within the true realm.

Homecoming

By Nick Brownlow

Eric Craven dreamt of darkness; an immense, impossible darkness as big as the world. He fell through the empty vastness for a while, confused but not frightened, until a low, maddening roar began to build in his ears, growing ever louder. When it finally became unbearable, he screamed. A baby began to cry.

Eric Craven awoke to find it was daylight; the room he slept in was without curtains. The windows in the tiny, rented flat streamed with condensation, lending the small West Country town outside a strange, distorted aspect.

Coughing, he lit a cigarette, slipped on his glasses and got out of his bed; carefully navigating his way around the empty bottles and discarded foil containers that littered the bedroom floor to the bathroom. He pissed and then washed himself perfunctorily. His ablutions complete, he dressed and went out.

The night had seen a hard frost; presently, it coated the town's roofs and gardens in patches, like a fungus. The roads had been gritted, but the pavements remained icy and treacherous. Unsteady on his feet after the previous night's boozing, Craven stopped for a moment to light another cigarette. An old woman hissed at him as she passed.

The town was hostile to him; he knew that now. At first it had appeared anonymous, innocent enough, but lately the oddly curved roofs and shadowed church spires had taken on a strangely intimidating character that made it impossible for him to feel comfortable here. In the pubs and tea rooms the locals eyed him with distaste and hostility. He no longer ventured out at night.

Craven made his way towards the library. He wasn't due to meet Sallis until three, and so found himself with plenty of time to kill. The town library was an ugly, decrepit building that squatted down an unregarded side avenue lined with terraced houses. Inside, it stank of chemical air freshener. A few old men shuffled about, selecting their daily reading from the shelves before squeezing themselves into the bright orange plastic chairs, in most cases eventually falling asleep. He ignored the furtive glances of the ones that managed to stay awake.

Once again Craven lamented the fact none of his own books appeared in the Library's catalogue. Of course, it had been years since he'd written anything new; and given his own, outré specialisms, he doubted that many of his books had found their way onto the shelves of provincial libraries like this one anyway. After a short browse he selected the book he'd been perusing yesterday, Nigel Stanford's *The Black Road*; a supposedly autobiographical work describing the author's experience of belonging to a local witch cult during the 1970s. According to the Bio sleeve, Stanford had disappeared without trace nearly twelve years ago. Craven had never heard of him before yesterday.

After a while, something about the content of the book came to disturb him, and he replaced it on its shelf. He passed another hour leafing through the day's headlines and the latest issue of the *Fortean Times* before leaving in order to make his afternoon appointment. Sallis had condescended to meet him at the Sun Inn, one of the few drinking establishments in town the gypsy had yet to be barred from. It was a small, split level pub that, TARDIS-like, appeared to occupy a far greater space within than it looked capable of doing from the outside. The improbable interior was panelled with battered, well-worn oak, whilst the low ceiling was heavily stained by tobacco. Bending to avoid striking his head, Craven ordered two pints of bitter from the wary, shaven-headed barman and took them over to the dimly lit corner where Sallis waited for him.

"You're late" he scowled, snatching his pint from Craven.

"No I'm not. You said Three."

Sallis didn't reply, and quaffed back his ale. Craven didn't push his point; he couldn't afford to antagonise the man, nor did he particularly want to. Sallis had once earned a living taking on all-comers in fairground boxing booths; a fearsome pugilist who in his day – according to hearsay – had killed at least two men with his bare fists. He was old now, of course, but beneath all that hair his features still had a sharp, angular, predatory aspect.

Wiping his beard with the back of his hand, Sallis eyed Craven warily. "He's agreed to meet you", said the gypsy, with a voice like gravel.

Craven's heart skipped a beat. "When?"

"Today. Now. I'm supposed to take you."

After all this time, Craven didn't quite know what to say. "Thank you", he answered eventually.

To that, Sallis just cackled.

The gypsy finished his pint, and seeing that his companion was struggling, took Craven's and downed that as well. He led him outside. The two men walked a few hundred yards down the street, then turned into a narrow, litter-strewn alley. A battered white Transit waited at the end of it, filthy with grime and half-eaten by rust.

For a moment Craven feared that Sallis intended to double-cross him; that at any moment his gypsy brethren would step out from the lean, hungry shadows, rob him and leave him for dead. But Sallis simply got into the van and indicated impatiently that he should do the same.

The van's interior smelt of cigarette ash and petrol. Sallis had to turn the ignition a couple of times before it started, then pulled out onto the street and pointed the van in a westerly direction, heading out of town. As the winter sun dipped below the horizon, he switched on the headlights.

Craven could hardly contain his excitement; it had after all been a strange few years for him. As the biographer of the renowned Victorian occultist and Masonic scholar Frances Eel-Foster Barrett, he had of course dabbled in esoteric matters before; this was altogether different however – a personal quest, triggered by a chance encounter at the British Museum that had taken him to Egypt, Rome, and now (finally?) here. His occult adventure had revealed something of the secret shape of the world to him, transforming him physically and psychologically in startling, unexpected ways. It had cost him his marriage, a lucrative book contract, and, he suspected, no small measure of his own sanity.

Eventually Sallis turned off the main road and drove the car through a gate onto the stretch of barren, corrupted land the locals knew as Zaman's Hill. This was where Sallis and the other gypsies were encamped. When Craven had tried to gain entry before, he'd been abused and intimidated; the Romany children had slashed his car's tyres with knives and hurled rocks at the windscreen. The adults had leered at him menacingly, calling him gorgor and daring him to step outside his vehicle.

Now, they merely stood and watched; their pale faces immobile and expressionless in Sallis's headlights.

Sallis drove past the main camp and pulled up beside the largest caravan; a shabby-looking static that stood on its own, well away from the others. Craven could see it was broken-down and uncared for; partially submerged in the earth and covered with mould. Clearly, it had been there for some time.

"We're here," said Sallis.

"Is that—?"

"Yes."

"Why so far away from the others?"

"He's not one of us," sneered Sallis. "Now get out."

Craven did so. Sallis drove back towards the camp, leaving him alone with his destiny.

Craven watched him go, then turned to face the caravan, its dark, oblong shape pregnant with the possibility of revelation. "Hello?" he inquired, knocking softly. There was no reply. Trying the door handle and finding it open, he stepped inside.

The atmosphere was hot and humid; the smell, awful and overpowering.

Bones, some of them no doubt human, littered the floor.

All the curtains were drawn, and he could see little until some terrible movement drew his attention to the rear of the caravan.

Transfixed, he watched as something massive and loathsome began to shift and uncurl in the dim light, like a crab emerging from a shell.

"Hello Father," he said. "I'm home."