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*Pennsylvania English*

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It's Saturday and the Pops doesn't work Saturdays, so I have the place to myself. I twist the head up into the air for an evaluation. It's a soft day, gentle, a kind day; but then May in Ireland is a kind month, it brings the summer in. I bring the head down and stand and scratch and stretch and, wait for it, a big yawn, no, hang-on, just a half-yawn, that'll do too, and steady, steady, stall, whist now, wait for it, don't rush, let her cook, wait now, wait, here she blows . . . and I let go of a massive fart that would rip a shipping channel through Antarctic sea ice. Good one, nice one. That'll get things going. What a rattle. And better out than in. It is ever thus with the thundered morning squall and today is no different. But wait, hold on, today *is* different. Today is cup final day and me and the Pops are going to the pub for the afternoon. Whoohoo! Great skalking stuff, Christy-boy. The cup final, that'll do. Whoohoo! And I just love that pub.

After the aerobics I fetch the fine-cut mower and load the trailer so I can begin my work on the greens. At the fifth hole I notice three abandoned golf trolleys next to the copse of woods that filters the fairway from the coastal dunes. That's fierce unusual and worth consideration so I stop for a look and catch a glint of something beyond the copse. What the . . . ? This'll need further investigation so I mosey over through the birch and alder. Skalking skittery crap-stations. What is that? Oh hell, what is that? It seemed much smaller when I first

noticed it, like way smaller, but now, now that I am here, right here in front of it like, it's huge, totally skalking huge. How can that be? What is it? Maybe it has something to do with the guests of the spa, a place like this attracts weirdoes. And I mean weird. Oh man, crazies altogether. But no, it's too big, way too big; and, to be honest, it's way too . . . alien.

*An appreciation of the thing:* So, if we took, oh let's say a large airplane, let's say a 747, a jumbo like, or one of those Airbus double-deckers, and if we took, oh maybe a hundred trillion gazillion of them, well we might be close to the size of this thing. Okay, maybe not. I exaggerate, but it's big, skalking big. It goes on and on and on, and although it appears that I look on a long flat wall, I think it is round, I mean circular, I mean like a disk, I mean like a huge silver disk. Although due to its size and my proximity, I mean me being right next to it, there is no way I can know what shape it is. I'm just guessing. And it's tall, it is as high at the old oak on the seventeenth. And it has the same off-sheen finish as the Mammy's dishwasher at home.

I walk along the big silvery and perhaps circular disc type thing and notice an imperfection on the face of it, some lines of discolouration. Or has that just appeared? I'm not sure. It is about one metre square and at the level of my head. Suddenly it moves and I realise it is a window or an opening being lowered. And something is lowering it, something is there. I wait for a better look. Yes, there's something there, a thing, a being of some sort. And it's a skittery alien all right and it is lowering the window and somehow it is signalling to me, maybe not signalling but beckoning nonetheless, man this is fierce skalking mad altogether. I approach. Well, what the hell? I'm here now and there's no going back. Or is there? Hold on, Christy-boy. Maybe I should wait . . .

'How's me ol' mucker?' says the alien, in a familiar kind of accent, though not a local one, and not even an Irish one. Man, this must be a foreign alien. But it doesn't move

anything and there is no clue as to where the sound comes from. I mean there is no mouth or face or anything. It just comes from, well, it.

‘How’s it going our-fella?’ says I, playing it real cool and matter-of-factly and continuing my stroll.

‘Out for a constitutional, me ol’ China?’ asks the alien.

‘Ah, no,’ says I. ‘I work here.’

And he gives me the nod. At least, I think he gives me the nod as I only imagine it as the thing has no skalking head at all. There is the shortest of pauses as we both, I guess, sum up the situation, before the alien introduces himself, real friendly too.

‘Archie Gribble,’ says it, ‘pleased to meet you, mate.’

‘Christy Keenan,’ says I, real quick, showing no hesitation. ‘It’s great to meet you, Archie.’

*An appreciation of Archie Gribble (the alien):* A pillar type structure some, well, I don’t know how tall Archie is as I only see the top part of him through the window-type opening and I don’t know how much of him that part is, that is to say I don’t know how much of him is below the window line, but I’m going to guess and say he is about eight feet tall and about, oh I’d say about three feet in diameter, no, maybe two and a half, and he is round, a completely round pillar with a gentle convex top, like the rounded top you’d find on an old pillar post-box, but with no limbs or anything useful like that, just a round pillar type thing for a body, and that body has the colour and texture of running water.

‘Well, you are here now, mate,’ says Archie, ‘you migh’ as well come in and have a butcher’s.’

And with that another opening appears, some sort of a door that slides down like one of them roller shutters that are popular on houses on the continent, and on shops and businesses here, but not on houses here, but in reverse, like opening down instead of up. I

step in. Man how cool is this? I'm in some sort of a grand foyer, something you might find in a classy hotel in Vienna or the Italian Riviera or somewhere snazzy like that out foreign and, in ways, not unlike the grand saloon out of the Titanic in the film you know the room with big fancy staircase that the first class skooks in their suits and big dresses slither down on their way to dinner with the captain, but here the area is vast and without the elaborate columns and posts but is a great open space with a tender combination of ornate wood, moulded ceilings, and painted panelled walls; though soft like, there's no metal or steel or any of that hard stuff. To be honest, it's a bit tasty. The alien appears from some side entry or snug or control room or human persecution chamber, I can't be sure, can I? And he moves with a kind of slide, not a slide exactly as I see tiny little movers at the bottom of the pillar body, not feet or anything like that, more like small thick hairs and many of them, hundreds like, maybe thousands, but not feet, let's call them movers.

'A nice place you have here, Archie,' says I.

And I was spot-on too with his height; I reckon he's eight foot on the button. Also, I now notice that the body is tapered, not much, but the pillar is bigger at the top than it is below.

'So, Archie Gribble,' says I, 'is this an invasion of the planet by an advanced race? Or what's going on?'

'No no, nuffink like dat,' says Archie. 'What it was, we were only passing.'

'And?' says I, pressing on and not letting him off the hook so easy, though I note he doesn't contradict me on the *advanced race* designation.

'And, well . . . ,' says Archie.

'Wait,' says I, looking at him but struggling for some point to focus on. 'Where are you speaking from?'

And with that a face, a human one too, appears about five and a half feet up the pillar of running water.

‘How’s that, bruv?’ he asks. ‘How’s that for an Uncle Ned an’ boat?’

‘Right,’ says I. ‘Much better. Now carry on, Archie. No wait, where did you get that face?’

‘Borrowed it,’ says he.

‘Fair enough. No. Hang on. Where was that?’ I ask.

‘Sarf Lahndahn,’ says Archie. ‘Lifted him clean off the street, proper like. Know what I mean? Straight up if you don’t mind, fough he was a bit Damien Duff, a right minger, if you follow?’

I don’t. And he doesn’t look anything like Damien Duff, but I let it pass. And Sarf Lahndahn? Where the skittery skalking blazes is that? Never heard of it. It must be some strange planet or galaxy or cosmic rock thing.

‘Lifted him?’ asks I to Archie Gribble. ‘Would that be abducted him as in an *alien abduction*?’

‘Yes, mate, somefink like that,’ says Archie.

‘And now you have him,’ asks I battering on with the interrogation, ‘and have err . . . like absorbed him, would that be *assimilated* him?’

‘Not really, mate,’ says Archie. ‘Though, maybe, somefink like dat. Like I say, straight up. Sweet as a nut.’

‘*Assimilated*?’ I ask again. ‘Like the skittery Borg?’

But Archie doesn’t know anything about the Borg, skittery or otherwise.

‘Don’t you have Star Trek up there?’ I ask.

He tells me that they don’t.

Hah! So no skalking Star Trek? Advanced race, me arse. ‘Fair enough,’ says I. ‘Carry on.’

And he does and it’s mad stuff altogether and we do a tour of the big silver disc thing and it too is mad stuff and also quite long and technical, I don’t understand any of it, and he loses me with detail and I drift away until we get to the thing that took them here in the first place. Oh yes, and there are *them*, like it isn’t just Archie. Some part of me registers that I should take note of their mechanics and their know-how as this stuff would advance mankind no skalking end, but, well, it’s a bit too much to compute and rationalise and hold onto and it tires my head right smartly, and so I can’t be bothered.

Three times he tells me about the procedure but it’s just so skalking mad and lunatic I don’t get it. Well, I do kind of get it but I ask again because it’s just so crazy.

‘Now then,’ says Archie, patient, yet in a kind of school-teacher fashion, ‘listen up, mate, and I’ll tell you for why. We just ping ‘em around the edge, using our anti-attraction propulsion rotator as a particle accelerator, that’d be an anti-gravity propulsion rotator to you geezers, a kind of LHC,’ and he pauses as he has the previous three times at this point and has a laugh at that, ‘*a large human collider*,’ he says right smarmy and laughs again as if that’s mad funny and I’m supposed to get the joke. Large human collider, me arse. That’s about as funny as Ebola.

‘What?’ says I, now accepting it and tackling the insanity of it. ‘You are going to ping Mr and Mrs Higgins and old Joe Carroll the former club captain,’ of whose abandoned golf trolleys I recognised by the copse of alder and birch and who I now know to be the local contribution to this LHC exercise, ‘around this anti-gravitational propulsion rotation thing at cosmic smosnic speed, smash them together, like right skalking whackers, and look for . . . ?’

‘Yes, mate,’ says Archie. ‘Ping ‘em around quick as you like, smash ‘em together wit dis, dat, and d’other, and have a butcher’s. Know what I mean? And if it’s dere, we’ll find it.’

‘If what’s there, Archie? You are losing me right handy. Like what are you looking for?’

‘The God particle,’ says Archie.

‘The God particle?’ says I. ‘The skalking skittery God particle?’ I mean, but what a skook.

And then he says it again, ‘The God particle.’ And real matter-of-factly too, as if it was obvious that’s what they would be doing. And when he explains why, well, perhaps it is.

He tells me that as they were passing this part of the galaxy, and that would be our sun and the local planet arrangement, like how crazy is that, anyways as they were passing and listening-in they heard non-stop chatter about this God thing, whatever the skittery crap-stations is that the aliens ask, and that this God, or so it seems, that so many of our planet’s top predators, that’d be us humans, believe to exist, believe it to be some sort of absolute leader and maker and king of the whole skalking thing including the entire creation of it and believe it to be a part of everything and more significantly part of everyone and inside everyone in some sort of a linkage or *spirit*, whatever the crap-stations is that the passing pillar type aliens ask, though everyone being limited to us humans with this so-called spirit or soul, that is us humans don’t believe it to exist in other planetary life forms, like, let’s say, in goldfish or geraniums, and so they, that is Archie and his space travelling pillars of running water gang, decide to have a look.

‘Will it hurt them, Archie?’ Stupid question I know as I presume Mr and Mrs Higgins and former club captain Joe Carroll will struggle for consciousness as they ping round the improvised LHC at the speed of light and will, in the big collision, I guess, exist only in sub-atomic form.

‘Hurt dem?’ asks Archie. ‘Listen, moy sahn, dat is bang out of order. Now behave, or you and me are going to have a fallout. Know what I mean?’



But, well, I'm not sure about that, I think Archie might be stringing me along for some reason. Maybe his entertainment? I mean, how the skalking blazes can I know? Who knows with aliens? I mean, they can be right skittery bastards. I change tack.

'I mean, are they frightened, Archie?' I ask, demonstrating my empathetic and sensitive self.

'I don't fink dey have a clue what's happink, to tell you the truth, mate,' says Archie. 'I mean, it's early bells yet so we can still catch an image of dem. But dey won't know anyfink once we ping dem; dey'll be in a right two and eight. Here, have a shufti yourself, put your mince pies on dis.'

I look to one of the screens that shows slowed down close-ups. Man, it isn't pretty. There are other people there, I mean humans other than the three local golfers, who Archie tells me they picked-up on the way. They are all horizontal and naked and kind of floating, they are not really floating as they already whizzing around at a fair whack and I am seeing it in a kind of slow-motion. There's at least a dozen in flight, their faces in a stupor of sorts, the surprise of their predicament frozen forever as their parting countenance, it all being too much for them, I guess, to put some sense to. Old Joe Carroll, the former club captain, in his horizontal daze passes through the screen his dangler dropped and showing due to there being no atmospheric pressure in the LHC or pressure of any sort and therefore no wind resistance to keep his private extrusion from exhibition. Oh man, this isn't good.

'Of course,' says Archie, 'it will only work if we have captured the standard model of elementary human.'

I glance up to see the naked pale fleshy saggy bottoms of Mr and Mrs Higgins enter the screen in horizontal arrangement following the shameless demonstration of Joe Carroll's dangler. I happen to know that Mrs Higgins is an enthusiastic devotee of the holy catholic

and apostolic church who encourages the aforementioned husband to accompany her to mass every morning.

‘Oh, yes, Archie,’ says I, ‘you’ve hit the holy Joe sweet spot there.’

Though in reality, of course, I can’t vouch for the spiritual beliefs and compliances of old Joe Carroll the former club captain. But why burden the alien research with doubt? What difference will that make? And, well, it’s too late now, anyways.

‘Hey, Archie,’ I ask suddenly just thinking of it, ‘how do you keep them alive in there, I mean, with no air and that?’

‘A concentrate infusion will keep ‘em ticking over,’ says the alien. ‘We can’t let ‘em extinguish, before we smash ‘em.’

‘Right,’ says I. ‘Well, whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.’

‘What?’ asks the alien.

‘Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,’ I repeat. ‘*Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker*, from Nietzsche. That’s what old Joe Carroll says every time he loses a golf round. Although, it never made him stronger, it was just crap and a skalking self-delusion; it was just a sweet softener for him to suck on, to comfort the blow of the lost game, the skalking eejit. I told old Joe it was crap,’ says I continuing, ‘and that he should try telling *whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger* to them poor skooks above in the crisis ward or in the paraplegic unit or to car crash survivors or to a convention of the Multiple-Sclerosis or Motor-Neuron or Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s societies or those above in the loony bin in Saint Patrick’s where the damaged heads are corralled away from the rest of us after they go skalking mad or have a nervous breakdown or have ran bollock naked down Main Street shouting Jerónimo. But *whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger* is one of those sugary waffles we humans like; it feels good in the mouth but, really, is pretty useless.’

‘That’s proper interesting, mate,’ says Archie Gribble the watery pillar alien, in a tone that left me in no doubt that he didn’t find it interesting at all. ‘That’s the mutt’s nuts altogether,’ says he.

Right up his own arse he is, the skittery armless round-topped pillar of an alien. That is, if he had an arse, the condescending skook.

‘Well,’ says I, getting back to Archie’s assertion on the alien LHC research requiring the standard model of elementary human, ‘you hit the jackpot here all right, Mrs Higgins is a true believer and Mr Higgins is a follower, so a finer coupled example of elementary human you could not find. But then our human instinct, Archie, is to herd and follow. In fact, it is scientifically proven that humans are 99.72% sheep. It is only the 0.28% that prevents us from growing a woolly coat. Indeed, it is categorically recorded that no human has ever passed a field gap without being gripped by the abrupt urge to have a run and jump at it.’

Archie the alien doesn’t say anything to this revelation but he gives me the *that’s proper interesting, mate* look again.

‘And why here?’ I ask Archie turning away from the uncomfortable view of the Higgins’ bottoms. Why land your big flying-saucer silvery spaceship thing here?’

‘Why not?’ says Archie with a dismissive look on his borrowed human face and me now knowing that it should be apparent, even to a klutz like me, that one place on the Earth is the same as any other when one is travelling the cosmos in a big silver disc thing and so I let the enquiry go and look again to the screen hoping old Joe Carroll and Mr and Mrs Higgins have passed.

‘Lively in here, init?’ says my alien guide. ‘It’s like a Saturday in Kelly’s Pie and Mash.’

‘What’s that, Archie?’ asks I.

‘Bethnal Green Road, bruv,’ says he. ‘Do you know nuffink, mate?’

Obviously not, but I let that go as it seems we are getting close to some kind of action as the watery pillars are getting jittery.

‘Kickink off big time now, me ol’ Chinas,’ says Archie Gribble. ‘Have some of dis, me darlin’s.’

And with that we get a blue light and the accelerator, well, accelerates.

I leave them to it, their looking for God, and make an exit. I leave the control chamber as another alien enters to join the eight-foot pillars already there. They are all identical, the aliens. Archie catches me up.

‘Whoa!’ says he. ‘Did you see the ripples on that one?’

I didn’t.

‘An intern,’ he tells me, ‘know what I mean?’

I don’t. I just shrug.

‘Cute, isn’t she?’ he continues. ‘And lovely colours. The right bee’s knees she is. I could do with some of dat; I ain’t got none in a while. Know what I mean?’

And I know that he would give me one of those nudge-nudge wink-wink me ol’ mate shoves if he could, I mean, if he had any skalking arms. I tell him I don’t see any colours either, that she is just running water like the rest of them.

‘There are none so blind,’ says Archie, getting all theoretical and philosophical on me, the whole looking for God thing already, it seems, having some impact; but then Archie doesn’t know what we humans know, that any sort of credence in the God thing brings a fall to the puritanical. And I know Archie must be shaking his head at me, if he had one. But he laughs now and I realise that he is only having me on with his pretence.

‘You muppet,’ says he to me.

‘Hah! Nice one, Archie. You had me there fair enough.’

We move on.

‘This God particle thing,’ says I to my alien companion, ‘you won’t find it. We humans can’t handle an unknowable, so we make up shiousta, we invent it. And then we feed it and it grows. And then other humans gather it and develop it and return that shiousta right back at us and then on reflection of that development, and the mad skalking surprise of it, even though we made it up in the first place, we believe it to be fact. Inventing shiousta is the relentless profession of the human animal.’

Archie has nothing to say to this as we continue through a curved corridor.

‘So,’ I ask, pressing him, on a roll now that I’ve started, ‘what’s your impression of the standard model of elementary human?’

‘A bent to bias and violent with the leaning,’ says he without a pause or a thought, and now that I think about it, well, there’s no skalking debate with that.

‘Here’s the thing, Archie, me ol’ mucker,’ says I, falling into the easy groove of his lingo and getting us back to the particle quest, ‘God doesn’t exist. But everyone knowing that won’t make the human world a better world. And people not believing in God won’t make them better people. Because it isn’t about belief, it’s about belonging. Humans need some skalking thing to belong to as much as they need food. And the human search for reason or salvation or eternal life or any of that bigger shiousta, comes second to the need to belong. Human reason is not built on logic, it is built on desire. We want God, so God exists. But if God was gone tomorrow, nothing would change. Not a skalking thing. Humans would find or invent something else to belong to, and the perversion of human behaviour, that prejudice and dominance and violence on the back of it, would continue. That’s who we are, Archie. We’re goosed. And we’re goosed by being us. Being goosed is our very essence. God has nothing to do with it.’

And I pause there to let him stew on my clever insight and my deceptive astuteness. Oh yes, Archie the alien, you didn’t see that coming.

‘Are you having a wind up, mate?’ says the watery pillar. ‘Or what are you yakking on about?’

I don’t bite and we fall into a kind of blown out silence, like the feel of a football stadium an hour or two after the game has ended. But I’m not finished so after a while I carry on.

‘And now, Archie,’ says I, ‘we have this Big Bang shiousta and everybody is getting on board with that and thinking they are right skalking clever and can understand big shiousta. But they don’t, because that’s just another unknowable we’ve made up. That’s just another God to grasp and belong to. Because if you got all the best scientists and physicists and mathematicians and cosmologists and astro-theory people together, gathered them into one big brainy bunch, and you asked these geniuses to imagine the universe, and they’d love that and their big skittery heads would be bursting, and then you asked them to take everything out of that universe, all the galaxies and all the nebulae and all the stars and all the planets and all the rocks and all the dust and all the gasses and elements and all the dark matter and all the anti-matter and all the energy dark and observable, like absolutely everything, until what was left was nothing, a complete nothing, and you then asked the gathered geniuses to produce a *Big Bang* from that, they couldn’t skalking do it. Because it can’t be done. Because something cannot come from nothing. And despite their convoluted mathematical marvels and magic, when you ask how or where or what this Big Bang came from they say it just did. Well, Archie, it just did is jack shiousta. And jack shiousta is all they got.’

The alien gives no response but it doesn’t matter as I am really only chewing the matter over with myself.

‘That’s proper poetry, mate,’ says he, after his short silence. ‘Proper lovely like.’

Archie walks with me, well slides beside me on his little hairy movers, back to the opening I entered through.

‘You know, Archie,’ says I to him. ‘There is something wrong about the scale of this. When I first saw you, I mean this big skalking silver disc spaceship thing, well, it seemed to be but a small glinting thing, no bigger than the buckle of a belt hanging from a branch and the sun catching it, then it was huge, and I mean real skalking huge and big in the LHC chamber too, real big, and yet in here, as we head back, it’s all a bit, well, let’s call it medium size. It’s all a bit Dr skalking Who, if you know what I mean?’

He doesn’t. But he stops his slide and looks to me.

‘About this size fink,’ he asks. ‘Is it a fact? Or is it just your opinion?’

‘It’s a fact,’ Archie, I tell him right smartly. ‘Haven’t I seen the whole thing, start to finish, with my own eyes?’

‘Well, me ol’ China,’ he says, ‘there’s your problem. That’s just an optical conclusion.’ And he has a laugh at that.

A skalking optical conclusion? I mean, what the blazes? And he is still laughing. I suppose he’s thinking that’s mad clever.

‘Listen up, Archie,’ says I to him, ‘here’s another optical conclusion for you, one of my own construction. If you took all the really bad stuff, like, you know, greed, disease, plague, famine, cancer in children, rape of children, old people robbed in their homes, best dad in the world getting killed on the way home from work by a drunk driver, back seat full of birthday presents wrapped and ready for the party, beautiful girl just qualified as a doctor gets crushed on her bicycle by some truck driver who didn’t look, violence domestic and otherwise, marauding gangs, religious fanaticism, killing, all the killing, nail bombs in a market place, some guy chopping some other guy’s head off because they don’t read the same book or they do read the same book but they like it differently, some neighbour

ushering a family onto a train so they can be taken and exterminated because though they like the same deity they like it differently or they hear it differently or they wear it differently so off you go now and cheerio and thanks for the furniture, some guy killing some guy because that guy fancies boys instead of girls, hunger, like real skalking hunger, starvation and that and skinny children with bloated bellies and puffy yellowed corpses floating in murky diseased waters, sickness, madness, dementia, depression, families having no home and no money and no food, great floods and storms and earthquakes and disasters with thousands or millions killed, war with pikes and knives and guns and bombs and poison falling from the sky, millions and millions and millions killed, men women children, all dead, or not dead but burned, or not dead or burned but mutilated, and if you gathered all that bad stuff into a single pack of evidence and if you analyse it and consider it you have only two possibilities: one, there is no God so bad stuff happens, or two, there is a God but, as luck would have it, it is a God who lets bad stuff happen, and, I mean, really lets it, maybe even enjoys it, therefore in any analyses, or in any way you look at it, we're goosed.'

But Archie, too, doesn't bite and I can't tell if he's silently nodding along with me contemplating the depth and precision of my argument or if he's just ignoring me and thinking of something else, probably lunch, the watery alien skook. We get to the roller shutter door thing.

'Well, mate, thanks for the chin wag, ta-ta for now,' says Archie Gribble as I step out and when I look around they are gone and there is no trace that they were ever here, no marking on the dunes, no ground indentation, no flattened grass, nothing at all but three abandoned golf trolleys by the copse of alder and birch. I walk over to trailer and strap the mower down and move on to the sixth hole.

*An appreciation of the morning so far: Skalking mad.*



Around eleven bells I spot Herself. If the weather is decent, some of the clients add a march around the grounds to the gym exercises. Herself is one of the holding-back-the-years brigade. You know the type; speed-walking, pole-walking, hill-walking, high-stepping, side-stepping, step-stepping, in the skalking pool stepping, yoga bending, pilates stretching, reflexology rubbing, detoxing, deep-sea-mud bathing, scrubs, wraps, biotech booster anti-wrinkle facials, lava shot massaging, ohh-la-skalking-la indulgent massaging, hot stone body polishing, manicuring, pedicuring, mineral mud infusing, herbal madcap tea consuming, holistic this that and the skalking other, coconut here, honey there, and aloe-skalking-vera everywhere. I wonder what Archie Gribble & Co would make of that caper. It's all in the search of some fixer, some brake on the clock, some magical elixir, some potion of purity. Ah, purity; that elusive thing. But they might as well be off flying the cosmos in the big silver disc and smashing humans apart looking for the skittery God particle. Make me feel good, they want. Make me look good, they really want. Oh yes, and above all, make them notice. Well, it's a waste of time. But Herself's a believer.

*An appreciation of Herself:* A dumpling, in truth, the flesh kept in check by the visits here to the spa, and by her wicked wants. Perhaps she was a cute little thing once, like maybe a hundred years ago. An eager thing, too. And a busy body.

I watch her for a moment; she's doing well to keep the old carcass together, I admit that. She sees me and salutes.

'Good boy, Christy,' she calls. And then, when the others cannot see, she gives a small wink.

'Ah, hello there Mrs Fleming,' says I. Jaysus, she's brazen, I give her that. And I give her the other thing too, but that's another story.

I carry on and as I'm tidying some rough along the tenth, I get the Damien Duff rhyme. Hah! Good one, Archie. I get the tractor-mower out and I cut the fairways until one. Lunchtime, Christy-boy, fill me up the Mammy won't ye. And then I go for a shower.

By two o'clock, and with an hour to kick-off, we are in the pub. Good, there's plenty of room. Most have yet to come, the skalking eejits. But not us Keenan boys. We're no eejits. We ride ahead of the posse. The Pops goes to the bar and orders. Only twice a year does he drink beer; Christmas day and the day of the cup final. For Christmas he buys a six-pack of Smithwick's and drinks three of the bottles, one before the dinner and two after. He never makes it into the other three beers and by Saint Patrick's the Mammy will assimilate them into some culinary creation. The next Christmas another six-pack is bought and the thing repeats. The only day the Pops goes to the pub is the day of the cup final. And he does that for me. I have been football mad since I could crawl and chase a ball the Pops would roll across the floor, and the cup final is our big thing. As a child I watched the build-up from early morning and since I was twelve he has taken me to the pub for the bit of atmosphere. For my fifteenth birthday he bought us two match tickets and we travelled over on the boat. It was the greatest day ever. I think of telling the Pops about the big silver disc thing and about Archie and about Mr and Mrs Higgins and old Joe Carroll the former club captain being abducted and sub-atomised for alien scientific experiment in the hunt for the skittery God particle. But, well, where would you start with a story like that? I give him a thumbs-up as he orders two beers and as he does three heads come in by the side door.

'The royal party is arrived,' I call to the Pops. 'Blessed are we amongst money-counters.'

The Pops smiles but says nothing. The Pops doesn't have a bad word to say about anybody. The Pops is one of the good guys.

*An appreciation of the approaching money counters:* Garrett: an accountant of local practice. An average man of average stature and void of any outstanding feature or gesture or statement, except, perhaps, for a resplendent head of shiny grey hair, oiled and brushed back from his shiny forehead. Carries a proclivity for comment launched from the shallows. Fleming: a bank manager. Rotund of limb, torso, and face. A big balding head on him, with a few strands of grey and white stretched across the top. Fond of arm movement and of exaggerated gesture and salutation. Leydon: the tax collector. Tall and thin of body, and gaunt of face. His speckled hair is inappropriately long and cut to a style that was popular in the middle-ages. Disturbing. His skeletal face carries an eternal moan-bag expression as though some kid has stolen his sweets and comics. And maybe one has. I would.

The three heads advance before veering off towards the cushioned seating, them business types having fierce delicate arses and all that. I greet them with a line as they pass.

‘An accountant, a tax collector, and a bank manager walk into a bar,’ I say to them.

They ignore me, but each in turn signals a hello to the Pops. I watch them as they take to the raised platform by the side wall and, as always, they wait to be served. Lucy, one of the bar staff, nice but with a big podgy arse on her, goes over, wipes the already clean table in front of them with a folded towel, welcomes them, and takes their order. They wait for the bargirl to go before they begin to talk. I lean in for a listen.

‘There’ll be a big crowd in for the match,’ Garrett, the shiny skalker of an accountant, says rubbing his hands together. ‘We might get marooned. We could get surrounded in riffraff.’ And he laughs.

Jeez. Mister skalking ha ha.

‘Yes, we might have to rough it amongst the peasantry,’ Fleming, the bank manager chips in. ‘Well, just for a couple of hours.’ And he winks to the accountant.

‘As long as they don’t get in my way,’ the skittery tax collector Leydon says lifting his head back and pulling a face. ‘I hate when they all stand and shout in front of the telly.’

As if he’d have a problem, the big tall lanky skitter, the long string of misery. I lean over the platform rail and smile.

‘They’d have to bring a stepladder to get in the way of that,’ I tell them, pointing to the new LED widescreen television that is suspended from the pub ceiling.

‘Gawd Almighty, look at the size of that beauty,’ the tax collector says. ‘Hector must be doing all right to invest in such snazzy new gear. And I thought he was barely getting by. At least that’s what his returns show.’ And he pulls another face. You know that face, the us-all-together-in-the-skalking-know-wink-wink face.

The bank manager gives the accountant a playful shove and they laugh. God Almighty indeed. There’re a pantomime, these three skooks.

Half past two and the big build-up is on the telly, team formations reviewed, players evaluated, who might do what and what if, the route to the final shown in clips, famous personalities making comments and predictions and all that stuff, and in walks me old bud Jem Garrett.

*An appreciation of me old bud Jem Garrett:* A sound man. A good friend, he would never leave you to make your own way home of a drunken night or let you slip off to engage in some unwise frantic romance with any old bat who wouldn’t make par on a sober evening. The sporty type, is Jem, mad into the football. He plays everything too: the catch and kick stuff and the one with the stick, any swing bat game, tennis, badminton, ping-fecking-pong, squash, as well as snooker, darts, volleyball, water polo, and handball. And, I mean, who the skalking blazes plays handball? But you name it, he plays it. He even plays the golf; well, nobody’s perfect.

‘Jem Garrett, me old bud,’ says I to him and Jem comes over and slaps my shoulder and he with a big smile on him.

The Pops sees him coming and shouts for a third beer. Jem goes over and shakes the Pops’s hand, formal like, but informal too, genuine and warm. Only the good can do that and get away with it. Everyone else looks like a dick. Yeah, he’s not a bad one, me old bud Jem; and that’s a miracle considering he’s a product of one of the seat-me-softly money-counters and, wait for it, the one and only Ol’ Sanctimonious Me. She once wrote a letter to the Mammy and the Pops when she heard my language on the football field during a match. She said it was disgusting, and that she didn’t want her son, that’d be her boy Jem, exposed to that class of vulgarity. And she could have said more, she said, lots more. But she was holding back. Hah! What a skook. I tell you, some skittery people. But then Jem’s mother is fond of firing off a letter of complaint when the world doesn’t turn on her axis. Oh, writes she, it is only a *little* complaint. Have a *little* think about it, writes she. Man, if they cut her open there’d be nothing but black gunk inside and there’d be no heart, just a mechanical pump propelling bile around her pious piping. And there’d be no brain in that puritanical head of hers, just a skittery short person sitting on a box giving out and giving out and giving out. Hah! And all the things she could say if she let the whole truth out. But no, she holds it back. She only mentions the essential. Skalking hell. Poor Jem.

*An appreciation of Ol’ Sanctimonious Me: A skittery skook.*

‘How’s life amongst the self-righteous,’ I ask Jem.

But he ignores me. And he’s right too. Me old bud Jem is too good for that sort of shioust.

The match starts and we’re off and in the thrill of the kick-off I call a couple of beers. The Pops gives this round a miss, he being of the slow-drinking human variation. At halftime

and with the game still scoreless, I follow Jem up to the raised seating so he can tap a few quid of his old man, Jem being a student and so being perpetually skalking broke.

‘So the interview came to nothing,’ Garrett the oily grey headed skalker of an accountant starts straight into me. ‘Bad cess to you anyhow, Christy Keenan, but I don’t know what that family did to deserve you.’

He’s talking about my interview with McCoy’s Cash & Carry, the interview that he set up for me.

‘I only arranged it for that suffering father of yours,’ he goes on. ‘Placing you elsewhere, any damn where, would give that poor man a break. Lord knows he deserves that. The man’s a saint to put up with you.’

I nod and smile to him. I only help the Pops out with work on the grounds, it isn’t a proper job. I guess the Pops has me there to give me something to do, and to give me a few quid for the pocket, and to stop me meandering away off into my own world. But the three musketeers here are always going on about it. They were at school together, the three amigos and the Pops, but as these three took careers in the counting of other people’s money the Pops stayed where he was born into, the gate lodge at the manor house that is now the hotel and spa, and the employment of gatekeeper and grounds-man that comes with the lodge and that was his own Pops before him, and his Pops before that, and, madly enough, his Pops before that, and with any luck, will come my way in good time. And the thing the Pops became is an ornithological and botanical illustrator. It’s what he is made for, it’s just that there’s no money in it. The day job makes up for it and we have the gate lodge; and the grounds are more or less ours if we ignore the skooks, and we do.

‘You made a total show of us,’ Garrett the shiny skalker continues his indictment. ‘You made a right hames of that interview, didn’t you, Christy. No doubt, you fluffed it on purpose.’

‘Not at all,’ says I. ‘It was just a bad moment for the Tourette’s to flare up. I have to put the whole loss down to poor timing.’

And Garrett gets so mad that his face goes all red and he can’t speak.

*An appreciation of the job interview at McCoy’s Cash & Carry:* ‘Tell me,’ the blue suit said kicking the thing off and getting straight in to it, ‘what do you like best about being human?’ And the blue suit sat back in the glow of his shimmering brilliance, the skalking skook. Man, he was he loving it. And fair enough, it was a good opener. But still.

Anyways, there were two of them doing the interview. The job, at least initially, was part-funded by a government employment scheme and so a blonde one was there representing some department or another. The clown in the blue suit was McCoy himself, owner of the cash and carry. And McCoy is just the sort of skook who joins the Rotary Club or the skalking Lions Club and shares a fancy ohh-la-la chain of office around every year, you this year friend and me next year and our other friend the year after. Well, that lot, the kings of commerce and such, they think they are the emperors of China.

The two interviewing clowns sat across from me in office-type armchairs. There was a glass coffee-table between the two clowns and the similar armchair that I had just sat into.

‘What do I like best about being human?’ I softly reflected the question across the room whilst pushing myself further back into the chair and extending my arms before me and linking my hands, all in a mad effort to buy the extra seconds I needed to get some sort of a response together.

I could see that the skook was showing off with the question and that he was enjoying the moment, and that he was intent to impress the blonde one with this insightful and unique interview strategy, showing her that he was thoughtful and deep and probably well read with a big bookcase at home in the visitors’ lounge, as well as being a businessman of note. Oh wasn’t he a bright spark and fun too and handsome enough for his age and good company

and knew loads about wine and if she wouldn't mind he could slip those pretty little knickers off her no bother at all, shirr wasn't he a great man altogether? Well, no he skalking wasn't. He was just being a skook and pleasuring himself in front of us. And at my expense too. Well, he might as well have unbuttoned himself, reached down, lifted it out and started tugging. I mean, but what a total skook, tugging away like that in front of the blonde one and me. No respect at all. I couldn't stand for that. No way, José. I looked at them both in turn, nodding real confident like, knowing that single simple act would wrestle the sure ground from under the skook.

‘What do I like best about being human?’ I floated it across the room again, but a bit creepy this time, and awkward too, us all now knowing that I was way over the acceptable time allowed between a question being asked and a response being given.

‘Well . . . ,’ says I, still delaying. And then this mad crazy skalking stuff rushed into my head and once I allowed the thought of the blonde one's pretty little knickers into my mind I could think of nothing more than whipping them off her myself. Oh no. Skittery skalking crap-stations no. But it was too late, the thought had set.

‘Well,’ says I, looking straight at her, ‘the best thing about being human, is riding the arse off a good woman.’

And, well, that was that. I didn't get the job.

‘Your father could have done more, had he wanted to,’ Leydon says, the tall lanky skitter, picking up the let's batter the Keenan family baton from the momentarily disabled Garrett, that skalker being still so annoyed he can't get that annoyance into some sort of deliverable vocabulary. ‘He was smarter than any of us,’ the lanky one goes on. ‘But, I suppose, in his case, there was the artistic need that held him back. It was a compulsion for him, like some sort of an addiction. At least he has an excuse. It's not my cup of tea but, yes, he's the genuine genius on the native flora and fauna, be that only the drawing of ditches and



weeds and field mice.’ And he gives the ever so small lift of the head that complete skooks give when they are referring to something they think they understand but don’t, to something they think isn’t of value but is, to something they haven’t a skalking clue about. *Not my cup of tea but . . .* is what patronising condescending skooks say about stuff they don’t get.

‘But you, you pup,’ Leydon says with the voice rising. ‘I mean it to say, that the gatekeeper should surely be gone the way of the footman and the gas-lighter and the print compositor and the knocker-upper and the serf.’ And he stops there for air feeling all skalking mighty after his big skalking speech, the lanky skitter.

I mean, a skalking *serf*. It’s a laugh. He hasn’t a clue. I take the moment and rise.

‘You’re right, my good sirs,’ says I before we get any further into this nonsense. ‘And felicitations, oh wise ones, on detailing so distinctly these indictments of Keenan insufficiency; delivered, to your credit, without a hint of sanctimony. Indeed, I have it myself to say, to think that we suffer with the penury of the gate-lodge when we could be counting other people’s money like you three geniuses.’

Both Fleming and Leydon move to reply but can’t find something and in that delay I am up and gone back to the Pops at the bar.

‘All right, Son?’ the Pops asks.

‘All right,’ says I to the Pops. ‘Sure it is. In fact, it couldn’t be better.’

Full time and it’s one goal each, so it’s thirty minutes of extra-time. We call for more beers. Even the Pops joins this round. I see my pal Des Dowling slip out the front for a cigarette and I join him. There’s a farmers-fair in the village for the weekend with stalls of farmhouse cheeses and rapeseed dips and craft beers and mini-quiches and sour breads and wood-turned bowls and wickerwork and all that, and some stuff for kids, bouncy castles and that, and right now a samba band is coming up the main street making a racket. I mean, a skittery samba band. It’s like, okay so you can’t play music and you can’t sing and you

haven't a musical bone in your body or a note in your skalking head, well, no problem bud, come and join the samba band and we'll give you a big loud skalking drum and a shrieking loud whistle and together with a bunch of other lunatics who haven't a note in their skalking heads we'll get a load of big drums and some headbands and we'll paint our tee-shirts for no good reason and make a band and go places and annoy people. A girl in an oversized paint-splattered top approaches, jangling a bucket of coins. I lean towards her.

'Every sixty seconds in Africa,' I tell her, 'a minute passes.'

And with that Dowling and I stamp on the butts of our cigarettes and bundle back into the pub. End of the extra thirty minutes and its two goals each. So it's penalties. I stand beside the Pops and we cheer every score and miss. We don't care who wins. City take it four to three on the penalty kicks and I walk the Pops home, he having had, due to the extended match and the excitement of the penalty kicks, more beer than his annual quota. I think again about telling him of Archie and the silver disc and the Higgins's bottoms and the skittery God particle. But just as I'm ready to let it out he shushes me to silence.

'Listen,' says he.

And I do and I too catch the *hwo-hwo-hwo* from the big chestnut that marks the entrance to the manor grounds.

'A hoopoe,' says the Pops. 'Wait.'

And we do until we see the flash of colour and stripe break from the drooping leaves and we follow the bird as it flies away.

'Be god,' says the Pops, 'but I haven't seen a hoopoe here since I was eleven. It's a great day, Christy,' says he to me with a big smile in his face.

'A great day indeed for unusual visitors,' says I to him and we burst into the house with the Pops mad keen to tell the Mammy all about the hoopoe.

In no time the Mammy has the tea on the table: fried eggs and brown bread of our own produce, that is eggs from our own hens and not shat out by our good selves, that'd be just too skalking mad, and apple and cider sausages with spicy tomato chutney from the farmers' fair. The whole thing is a gastronomic belly-tickling delight, I mean right tasty, and afterwards I go up for a bit of a lie-down. At ten bells and twenty I get a text message from Herself. The coast is clear, it reads, get here now.

She is on the kitchen island unit, she loves the kitchen island unit, and she's in red; a lacy red camisole, a lacy red bra, and lacy red knickers, she knows lacy red will do it, that it'll bring the blood up.

'And is he asleep tight?' I ask.

'He's in the pub all day drinking,' says she. 'And I fed him a serious dose of whiskey when he came back. He's not asleep tight, he's in a fucking coma.' And with that she pulls me in to her.

'Oh now, Mrs Fleming,' says I, 'aren't you fierce naughty altogether.'

And with one hand I'm pulling my own pants off whilst trying to stay in her, and with the other I'm holding her two legs by her red high-heeled boots, straight up are her two legs, like those synchronised swimmers you see at the Olympics, mad yes, but that's the way she likes it. I get free of my clothes and now I can do her with a kind of liberty. That's better. Grand stuff. I catch a quick sight of us in the long mirror by the tall dresser. It's a mad skalking image altogether; Herself in her lacy red get-together and on the flat of her back on the kitchen island her two legs straight up and tight together in a perpendicular construction and me holding her two booted ankles in one hand and gripping her red lacy camisole and lacy red knickers with the other and me battering into her below a herb basket hanging from the ceiling over that kitchen island like some leafy mad hat on me and I am thinking of that mad cookbook *Les Dinners de Gala* and, well, the whole skalking setup is like a Salvador Dali

painting after he got loose with a couple of bottles of Champagne and a porn mag and an Ikea catalogue. The thought of that makes me laugh and in the pause she pushes me back and then pulls me down towards the badgery box. Man, she is right eager, it's a skalking pool party down there. And it doesn't take long before the stretch and splutter. I get back to my standing self and take her again and in the finish I'm chewing the leather buckle of her boot.

I leave the bank manager's wife and make for home. Three houses are nestled together here in a private cove, the three of them built when the three money counters bought a chunk of land that used to be a railway yard. The end house in the cove is Herself's and so I must pass the other two on the way out. Next is the Garrett house and through a crack in the living-room curtains I see the oily grey headed shiny skalker of an accountant slumped on the couch as *Poker-Live-Tonight* plays on the telly. Me old bud Jem will be above and reading, Jem's a great man for the books. And Ol' Sanctimonious Me? Well, she could be in the back over a big cauldron or something. Who knows with her sort? Or maybe she's writing a few letters; the work of the virtuous is never done. The first house in the cove, and the last one I pass, is the lanky Leydon's. The house is in complete darkness, no one but himself lives here now, the wife having left him for a less contrary skook. It looks and feels like a ghost house. But then that career of his couldn't inspire much excitement to bundle-up under your arm and bring home. I can't imagine there being parties with all the family gathered and the money-counter regaling them with funny stories of the times when he collected this and that taxes. I mean, that's skalking unlikely.

At home the Mammy is stretched out on the couch, her head resting on the Pops. Both are asleep. The Mammy has a newspaper in her arms, and her reading glasses have fallen to the side of her face. The telly is still on and showing the highlights of today's football that the Pops must have been watching. On his drawing table by the north window I lift his evening's

work. It is a hoopoe breaking from a leafy chestnut. Good old Pops. He never rushes, he never rests. He's got the whole thing figured out good. He moves and wakens.

'It's beautiful, Pops,' I tell him.

'It's for you, Son,' he says.

I carefully lift the page from the pad and climb the stairs.

'Thanks, Pops,' I call behind me.

I pin the drawing on my wall amongst his other sketches and I strip and fall into the bed. That was some day. And as I go over it I can't get the taste of the leather buckle out of my mouth. Mad, isn't it, how some things linger? I think again of Archie Gribble and his co-adventurers in the big silver disc thing and the gravitational propulsion system that whizzed the fleshy Mr and Mrs Higgins's bottoms and old Joe Carroll's dangler around at the speed of light in the hunt for the skittery God particle and about the standard model of elementary human being bent to bias and violent with the leaning and about the need to belong and about reason not being built on logic but on want and about being 99.78% sheep and about optical conclusions and about any way you analyse the God thing we're goosed and the parting of the visitors without any trace and the spa-steppers search for purity and the crowd in the pub and me old bud Jem Garrett sound man that he is and the accountant and the bank manager and the tax collector being condescending skooks and the cup final penalty kicks and the skittery samba band and the apple and cider sausages with spicy tomato chutney from the farmers' fair and her-lacy-red-self on the flat of her back on the kitchen island unit under the leafy hanging herb basket with her two legs raised perpendicularly like those synchronised swimmers you see on the television at the Olympics and me battering away like some Dali depiction on human distortion or perhaps just a skalking cookbook illustration if you are a mad bastard like him and the three lonely money counters at the day's end and the Mammy and the Pops asleep on the couch. But still I have the leathery taste of the boot buckle in my

mouth. Tired now, Christy-boy, time for the sleep. Sleep, Christy, sleep. Oh, yeah, sleep. And just for the hell of it I imagine myself jumping a gap into a field. Hah! Good stuff. Good man. Or should that be out of a field? Oh skittery skalking crap-stations. Who cares? The God particle? Hah! The skittery God particle. Madness. Oh and the hoopoe, don't forget that. And the Pops's face when he saw the bird. Magic. Pure skalking magic. Sleep now, Christy-boy. Sleep now. What was that rhyme again? Oh yeah. *Three blind mice. See how they run. See how they run. They all ran after the farmer's wife, Who cut off their tails with a carving knife, Did you ever see such a sight in your life, As three blind mice? As three blind mi . . .*

*An appreciation of the day: A skalking riot, start to finish.*

The next days are manic. The place is bedlam, a little at first, slow, but it builds into the mystery of all mysteries; we get flooded by the enquiry, and by the reporting, and by the curious; and then it fades, a little at first, slow, but then it falls away to legend and secret, my secret. What has happened to the three golfers? How can they just disappear? People can't understand it, without a trace they say, without a trace, it's some fierce mystery altogether. I say nothing. Yes, I saw the three abandoned golf trolleys next to the copse of woods that filters the fairway of the fifth from the coastal dunes. No, I did not see the golfers. Nothing unusual in that? No, it is not unknown for older players to get caught short on the course and make a run for the clubhouse. It happens. I didn't think anything of it. No, I did not see anything or anyone unusual about that morning, except Herself of course, but I do not give detail on that adventure. No, I did not see a huge silver disk alien spaceship abduct the three players and ping them around an anti-gravitational propulsion rotation thing at cosmic smosnic speed, smash them together, like right skalking whackers, and look for the skittery God particle. No, only joking, they don't ask that. No, the whole thing is wild enough; so I say nothing.

It is Thursday evening, nothing special, just a Thursday evening. I sit with the Pops as he finishes a drawing of a buff-tailed bumblebee on the snow white flower of a blackthorn. It is good work; the Pops is mighty with detail. The Pops draws and the world settles. It's kinna mad, spooky even. We finish and eat. The air is clear and the moon is full so we snatch the Mammy and the three of us walk out to see Old Sionn, a big dog fox who is our neighbour. Old Sionn, our red four-legged friend, is busy elsewhere, chasing tail no doubt, and is not to be seen, so we meander over the dunes and then return across the golf course to the lodge to see a hare sitting on the first fairway. Seeing us, it rises into the silver moonlight. It stands on its hind legs, and it screams. Spooky, but not the good spooky sort, not like the Pop's drawings. No, this is the other spooky, the bad sort; the sort that thrusts spikes of ice through the valves of your heart; and that's not good. The hare drops and runs away.

'That's an odd thing altogether,' says the Pops.

We walk on and in the gate-lodge the Pops settles to sketch the hare, the Mammy settles to reading, and I go to bed.

I put the music to shuffle and stretch out long across the bed with the two arms tucked behind the pillow nesting the head. It is four weeks since Archie Gribble & Co have visited in their huge silver disk. Mad as it is, I don't think about it. It's just too much. There is a holiday weekend coming, so it will be into town on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night. All the lads are going and I can't wait. It's gonna be mad.

Suddenly I'm ripped out. Just ripped and hurled. A storm blasts through my ears and eyes and mouth and into my head. I am propelled into the night sky and through that sky and beyond it, way beyond. I am propelled, I am hurled, I am thrown, I am flung, I am jettisoned, I am rocketed; yes, all those, but still they do not describe what is happening. For it is much more. More than I have words for. More than is possible. More than exits on Earth, I know that. Even in this immediate chaos, I know that. I am in some sort of chute or tube, but that

does not explain things either. The chute exists but it doesn't. It has no walls or shape, yet it has form. It bends and waves through the cosmos. Yes, through the cosmos. Oh skittery skalking crap-stations of enormity. I am passing stars and galaxies and all sorts of stuff. But I am passing so fast I only catch a blurred sense of things. Everything is behind me and gone before I can hold a view of it. I am shaking, vibrating, trembling, like a doomed aircraft breaking-up in freefall. I do not know how long this lasts; minutes perhaps? Maybe hours? There is light. I mean, a light. I am approaching the light, a big huge gleaming bright light. A hard light, silver but not silver, metal but not metal. Like an arc light from a welder, but brighter, like hugely brighter, unwatchable, and, oh let's say, the arc light is the size of a planet, like skalking enormous. But not white. No, not white. And that's bad. I know that's bad. There is nothing soft in this. It is impossibly blindingly bright; so bright that I have to close my eyes and look away, but I can't get free from it and it hurts. And I know I am dead. I just know. I know this is not Archie and his watery pillar gang. I just know.

I do not get to the light. I get near but I fall along it, past it, and I am flung away and down. I fall and fall and fall. And I do not know how long this lasts. Below is a grey Earth.

'No, I shout.'

Oh, this is bad, real bad. I fall through the ground. Through rock. And down I go; down, down, down.

'Please no,' I shout.

I know I am going to hell. I just know it.

'Please, please, God, please, please, don't send me to hell.'

It is below, I sense it, I hear it, I smell it, I feel it. Immediately, I know the dread, the stench, the void, the despair, the hurt, the pain, the pit of it, the torment of it, the endless cruel ruthless horror of it.

'Please, God, no. I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry. God, I am sorry. I am so sorry.'



I am thrown or stop or land into a dark chamber, something like a junction of stone corridors or mines or caves, or, perhaps, like rugged dungeons chiselled from rock below some great castle. I sense that hell is below me. I mean, I know it. Maybe, then, this is purgatory. Maybe, I have been given a chance.

‘Please, God, give me a chance. Please, I’ll do good, I’ll do good.’

There are people here, so many people. Slowly, they are walking, following some route or circuit. Their walk is laboured, ambled, and dragged. They are in dark long-coats, old coats, battered coats, like something used in a war hundreds of years ago. They don’t speak or make any sound. They stare, but they stare to nothing. They carry the weight of those who have gone through madness and came out beaten. They are forever lost. They carry hopelessness, knowing that is all that is. I find myself amongst them and I too shuffle along in this zombie parade. I don’t know how long this goes on. At another junction or corner there is a platter. I see the people take and eat and when I look it is torn scraps of uncooked meat; no, not meat, flesh.

I shout, with all I’ve got, ‘Forgive me, God, forgive me, please forgive me. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please give me another chance, please, I’ll change, I promise, God, I’ll change. I’ll change.’

And I am back in my bed, face down, arms out, as if I have been flung there. And I am wide awake, like I have never been this awake. I get up, fast. I get dressed. I go out and walk. At Sharkey’s five acre I lean across the barred gate and look into the night sky. Something moves behind me. It is red-legged, he has found me.

‘What was that, Old Sionn?’ I ask him. ‘What was that?’

*An appreciation of the night’s events:* Scary beyond scary. Skittery crap-stations scary.

It is Friday morning and I help the Pops on the golf course. He has another interview lined up for me in the coming afternoon.

‘Give it a chance, Son,’ he says. ‘Listen to what they have to say, there may something there for you. Just give it a go.’

‘Yes, Pops,’ I tell him.

It isn’t a real job interview as such; it’s with a mediator for the employment service. It’s with someone who can help get me ready for a job, I mean, help with a CV and application letters and all that, or can help me to find a training course. I’m still not well with the expedition during the night, so I tell the Pops that I’ll give it my best. But, a mediator; like what?

The Pops drops me to the edge of town so I can take a bus. The interview is in the city centre and traffic in there is manic busy. Better to take the bus.

‘Good luck,’ the Pops says. ‘Call me if you need a lift.’

I wave him off as the bus approaches. The lower coach is full of mums and grannies with pushchairs, and with old men staring out though misty windows, so I climb to the upper deck. Here too the coach is almost full but I see a free bench-seat halfway down the bus. I go and swing myself in. Nice one. I look out, there’s a kind of fog falling and the light is odd.

‘Mary Immaculate,’ the driver calls the next stop, ‘Mary Immaculate.’

The bus stops, pauses, and goes again. An old woman makes her way up the narrow spiralled steps. She is carrying heavy bags and she struggles. She nearly falls back, but catches the rail in time. Nobody notices. Well, nobody rushes to help. I do.

‘That’s a wicked amount of stuff you are carrying there,’ I tell her, reaching down, taking the bags, and helping her to the deck.

‘The troubles of the world are weighty,’ she says to me.

‘Right,’ says I, leading her to the halfway bench and settling her in. ‘I saved you a window seat,’ I tell her as I store her heavy bags.

‘Queen of Heaven, next stop,’ the driver calls, ‘Queen of Heaven.’

I look outside, the fog has thickened.

‘Aren’t you a ray of sunshine,’ she says to me. ‘What is it they call you?’

‘Christy Keenan,’ says I, ‘at your service.’

She laughs. ‘You’re good at this, aren’t you Christy Keenan.’

‘At what?’ says I.

‘People,’ she says. ‘You’re good with people; it’s a gift.’

‘So, dear lady,’ I ask, ‘what is your name?’

‘Are you chatting me up?’ says she, and we both laugh. ‘Many are my name,’ she goes on, ‘but you can call me Maya.’

‘Well,’ Maya,’ says I, ‘it’s fierce good to meet you.’ I look out again. ‘That fog has really taken hold.’ I tell her, ‘It’s hard to see anything.’

‘What?’ says she. ‘Wait till I have a gander. Ah, Christy,’ she continues, looking out, ‘that fog is always there.’

‘Mother Earth, next stop’ the driver calls, ‘Mother Earth.’

I let this go, still disturbed and perplexed as I am with the mad events of the night.

She touches my arm with her hand. ‘So, what’s the story? What has you perplexed, Christy? Was it the big light that put the frightener on you? Or was it below?’

‘What?’ I ask.

‘You know,’ says Maya.

I don’t answer. Like, is she talking about the bus, or . . . ? No, that can’t be.

‘Ah, it’s nothing,’ I tell her. ‘I’m just going to a big interview.’

‘You sure are,’ she says. ‘So, tell me, what is it you’d like to do as your work?’

‘I don’t know, Maya. I never really thought about it. I guess I’d hoped I could labour with the Pops and learn some stuff, and maybe someday he’d retire to his drawings and I’d take on the post.’

‘Some of the most important work goes unseen,’ Maya says. ‘The keeper of the gate is a vocation. It’s a calling. And not many can carry the weight.’

I’m confused again as I’m sure I didn’t mention anything about us being gatekeepers. And I’m not sure cutting grass goes unseen and qualifies as a calling.

‘So how do you think it’ll go?’ Maya continues. ‘I mean with the interview.’

‘Artemis, Isis, and Cybele,’ the driver calls the next stop, ‘Artemis, Isis, and Cybele.’

‘I don’t know, Maya,’ I tell her. ‘I’m not good at that stuff.’

‘Don’t worry, Christy,’ says she. ‘A lot of them are only throwing shapes. So, what will you be asked?’

‘They’ll ask, what do I want to do with my life?’ I tell her. ‘They always ask that.’

‘Ah, Christy,’ says she, ‘that’s a tough question, don’t worry. But what have you done with your life? Wouldn’t that be a better question?’

‘I don’t know, Maya,’ says I. ‘I think not. I’d fall down on that one.’

‘Perhaps,’ says she. ‘Let’s have a look.’

And with that a big screen thing appears in front of the big front window of the top deck. A ripple of anticipation rides through the bus. An old couple across from me shuffle in readiness, he rubbing his hands and sitting up.

‘Here we go,’ says he, ‘here we go.’

A movie reel flickers into action, I mean, in the way of those old movie introductions with a cross and a circle and a spinning dial and a countdown of bleeps, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, with a longer bleep and then the start. And so it starts and it’s a baby and the whole bus goes *aahhhh*. And then the shot widens and it’s the Mammy and the Pops over a cot, and so I

guess that must be me. This is bonkers, pure complete nut-cracking bonkers. I look to Maya and she is engrossed in the screen. I look around the bus and all are watching, eagerly watching. Hey, that's me. But nobody is paying me any attention. I mean, paying attention to the actual me, the me sitting in the bus. No, baby me has the stage.

‘The Goddess Eostre, next stop,’ the bus driver calls. ‘The Goddess Eostre.’

The reel goes to the lodge kitchen where I am sitting at the table with the Pops. I am three and we are drawing a wood mouse. Luchóg, we called him, and I know this because I still have that drawing. Next, I am six and walking home from school with the Mammy. She is carrying my bag and I am all talk telling her the events of the day. All events. And she listens to every word. I am nine now and cycling my new bike through MacMurrough's lane. The shot broadens to where unseen by me the Mammy and the Pops are watching from Coote's hill. Now I am twelve and it's the first day of secondary school that I don't like. I have a new uniform that I don't like. All is not good until I meet up with me new bud Jem Garrett and everything changes. I am thirteen when the Pops brings the orphan fox home. I am there in the garden with Sionn. ‘Not too friendly,’ says the Pops, ‘we have to keep him wild.’ After a few months the Pops shoos him off into the fields, but the film shows me climbing out at night and bringing him food. Two teenage girls near the front of the bus are clapping. I am fifteen now and me and me best bud Jem Garrett are smoking cigarettes up on Coote's hill. At sixteen I am back on Coote's hill exploring the body of Brenda Jeffers. A *whooo* runs around the bus as I fumble under her jumper.

‘The Great Mother, Demeter, Gaia, and Kali,’ the bus driver calls. ‘The Great Mother, Demeter, Gaia, and Kali.’

The bus stops, nobody moves, and the bus goes again.

The movie continues in that same sixteenth summer and it is me and the Pops guarding the badger set we found in a birch copse near the golf course. There are cubs and

the Pops is worried some golfers or farmers will harm them if the set is found. All year we guarded the secrecy of that set. I am eighteen now in the movie and me and me bud Jem Garrett and a gang of others are in pubs drinking and in night-clubs chasing women. We are lashing beers down and throwing our heads back with great guffaws of laughter. Then there is a very loud rattle as I let go my morning thunder squall with everyone in the bus shunting back in their seats.

‘Haven’t you a great construction for producing a foul breeze,’ says Maya. ‘That massive fart would rip a shipping channel through Antarctic sea ice.’

She nudges me and everyone laughs.

Archie Gribble is next with his watery-pillar merry-men in the big silver disc thing on the search for the God particle. And then there’s me complaining about the human need to belong and the evolution of contrived beliefs and that something cannot come from nothing and on we go to the three money counters and there are a few tut-tuts in the bus when they hear me go on about the skittery samba band. And then the hoopoe, and the Pops and the Mammy. And then Herself. There is a cheer and *whoop* from the younger ones at the back of the bus when the movie cuts to the kitchen island scene.

‘Look at him checking himself in the mirror,’ the old man across says to me. ‘Isn’t that gas?’

The two teenage girls in front cover their eyes with their hands.

‘That’s a very funny hat you’re wearing,’ Maya says.

‘It isn’t a hat, Maya,’ I tell her, but she just winks at me and laughs.

‘Inanna and the Magna Mater,’ the bus driver calls. ‘Inanna and the Magna Mater.’

The movie ends with a rear view of me and Old Sionn at Sharkey’s five acre with me leaning across the barred gate and looking into the night sky. There is a single credit, Christy Keenan. And there is a tune playing to that credit; it is *Three Blind Mice*. Then the film goes

to a flapping reel and then it cuts to nothing and the bus returns to normal and the screen is gone.

‘That’s mad,’ I say to Maya. ‘But I don’t understand.’

She looks to me. ‘I thought you asked for another chance,’ says she, ‘I thought you said you’d change. But how can you change when you don’t know what you are.’

I shake my head, I have nothing to say.

She reaches to me, touches me. ‘Sometimes, Christy, reinvention is better than cure. Look for it. Find it. Learn it. Do it. Shine.’

‘Find what?’ I ask.

‘The particle,’ she says, giving me another wink.

‘The particle? But, Maya, that’s madness.’

‘One creature’s madness,’ she tells me, ‘is another’s salvation. Find it, and it will lead you to the gate.’

‘Okay,’ says I. ‘Fair enough. I’m right on it. And hey, what about Archie and those?’ I ask.

‘Skooks,’ says she, ‘they’re everywhere.’

‘Star of the Sea,’ the driver calls. ‘Star of the Sea.’

‘That’s my stop,’ says she, making to go. I get her bags for her, but somehow they are much lighter. I lift them up. ‘Well now,’ says she, taking them from me, ‘isn’t that something?’

I walk her to the stairs.

‘See you, Christy Keenan,’ she says, as she disappears down the steps.

*An appreciation of Maya and the bus ride:* Well, let’s say, somewhat odd and unusual.

‘You know something?’ says the interview man, ‘I’ve just had a thought jump into my head. You’re good with people; we could do something with that. It’s not as common as we think. In fact, it’s a gift. I know a place where there’s great work done. You could volunteer and see how that goes. I’ll put a word in for you.’

‘Right,’ says I. ‘I’ll give that a lash.’

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘I’ll set it up.’

I am just in the door at home bringing the Mammy up to speed when I think of something, so I call the interview man. ‘Where is great work done?’ I ask him.

‘Star of the Sea,’ he tells me. ‘Star of the Sea.’

It’s Saturday and the Pops doesn’t work Saturdays, so the whole morning long I have the place to myself. No I don’t, because bang on schedule come Archie Gribble & Co in their big silver disk spaceship thing.

‘How’s, Christy Keenan, me ol’ mucker?’ says my alien compadre from the square window.

‘Archie,’ says I, walking over to him. ‘How’s it going our-fella?’

‘Fancy us avin another Ronan Keating,’ says he. ‘Déjà vu or what? Nah, only messing, bruv. We’re on the return leg and I stalled to the penny-a-pound to see me ol’ China? Still out on dat constitutional?’

‘Still working,’ says I.

‘Aren’t we all, mate,’ says the watery pillar. ‘Any news?’

‘Not a whisper,’ says I. ‘All calm.’

‘Well,’ says Archie, ‘we’d better be off before we cop a load of grief. Don’t want to be caught bustin’ the *Prime Directive*.’

‘What’s that, Archie?’



‘Don’t you watch Star Trek down here?’ And he has a big laugh. ‘Stone the perishing crows, ol’ China, but dat berry gezzar had a proper line open to the nine. Now isn’t that curious?’

‘What’s that Archie?’

‘Strewth. The nine above yonder. The council.’

‘Still not with you, Archie me fair bucko.’

‘He was slippin’ you muppets a glimpse, the berry geezer. Betcha didn’t cop dat.’

‘What glimpse?’

‘Yip, who’d adam an’ eve it? An’ annuver fink, he had one of dem cocks alongside, what’s der name . . . the what’s-its-kamers if you please, barons an’ all, and dey been havin’ a dicky bird all along wif the German geezers and the American geezers and who not, movin’ ‘em away from the fiery-fluid rocket, slinkin’ an’ teasing ‘em the proper juice, the proper sparks, if you get me. What pipes dey are. Den again, mate, maybe dey were clean and good and it’s me dat is slinkin’ an’ teasing. Hard to know who’s who, ain’t it bruv?’

‘You’ve lost me, Archie.’

‘An’ you didn’t shop us to the old bill for taking the golfers. The eh . . . *alien abduction*’

‘No evidence,’ I tell him. ‘And who’d believe it? I’d be seen as a mad fool.’

‘A mad fool for sure, moy sahn. Isn’t dat the way it always is. It’d only bring you barney. Well, best get this jam-jar on the frog. Hey, wanna come, China? It’ll be a right ol’ knees up. A proper giraffe. And plenty of grub and Rosie Lee.’

‘Sounds good, Archie, but no thanks. I have to stay and do stuff.’

‘All right, bruv,’ he says. ‘Well, whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.’ And he laughs.

‘Yeah, Archie,’ says I, ‘you have me there fair enough. Hey, how’d you get on with the search for the God particle? Any joy?’

‘Nah,’ says Archie, ‘not a whisper. We haven’t a scooby where it is. Anyways, ol’ China, God doesn’t exist. But everyone knowing dat won’t make the human world a better world. And people not believing in God won’t make ‘em better people. Because it isn’t about belief, it’s about belonging.’

‘Yeah,’ Archie, says I, ‘you have me there again. Fair play, Archie, you nailed me.’

‘Bad shiousta happens,’ he says. ‘Anyways you look, mate, you’re goosed.’

‘I’m not so sure, Archie,’ I say. ‘We humans haven’t got a handle on it yet.’

‘Damn right,’ says the alien. ‘Remember, Christy, jack shiousta is all you’ve got. Well, ta-ta for now.’

And once more they are gone and again there is no trace they were ever here.

*A further appreciation of Archie Gribble & Co and the big silver disc spaceship thing:* Unearthly, unholy, beguiling, and very very skittery.

Some want me there at the end; I don’t know why, they just do. I stay with them, talk them through it. It isn’t always a good ending. The body and mind and soul can be misaligned and in disagreement. One or two of the self may not trust the other. There is confusion and anxiety. And great pain; the type of pain medicine can’t reach. It can be a struggle. I do what I can to soften the road. I am here one year and to mark the anniversary the Mammy and the Pops are putting on a special celebratory dinner in the lodge. They are made up with the whole thing. Me working in the Star of the Sea; well, that is beyond their wishes. In the mid-afternoon I get called, someone wants to see me.

‘A street lady,’ the nurse tells me. ‘A bag lady.’

I go. She is tiny in the bed, just skin and bones. And the breathing, it’s not good; it won’t be long.

‘Hello, Maya,’ I greet her.

‘Christy, Christy, Christy,’ she welcomes me.

I sit beside her and I lift her hand. It is cold.

‘You’re freezing, Maya,’ I tell her, ‘let’s get you warmed up.’

‘Many are cold,’ she says, ‘but few are frozen.’ And we laugh. ‘We can all get lost on rough ground,’ she says. ‘But isn’t it a blessing, after taken a wrong path, that you can return to the junction and find yourself there waiting?’

‘It is a blessing,’ I tell her.

And she nods.

‘Did you miss me?’ she asks.

‘Every day,’ I say.

‘Ah, Christy, you’re such a sweet talker. Are you being good?’

‘Yes, Maya.’

‘Is that right?’ she asks.

‘Would I lie to you, Maya?’

‘*An appreciation of Christy Keenan,*’ she says. ‘Not all bad.’

‘Thanks, friend,’ I say, ‘fair play to you.’

‘Keeper of the gate,’ she continues. ‘And the particle.’

I look to her and smile.

‘Tell me, Christy,’ she asks, ‘but what do you like best about being human?’

I lift my free hand to her old beautiful head. ‘The existence,’ I tell her. ‘The experience. The being. The predicament. The wonder. The who, what, and where. The not knowing. The sound. The view. The wander through.’

‘That’s some list,’ she says. ‘What don’t you know?’

‘Anything. Nobody does.’

‘And the wander through what?’ she asks.

‘The five fundamentals,’ I tell her, ‘and the two mysteries.’

‘And what in the name of all that is good would they be?’

‘Purpose, love, contribution, thought, and the push and pull.’

‘The push and pull?’ she asks with slowing air.

‘Emotion.’

‘What would that be?’

‘Gravity, electricity, magnetism. All emotion. All motion. All energy. Including us,  
and I raise my hand and tap my head.’

‘Hah! That’s mad fancy,’ she says smiling. ‘And the two mysteries?’

‘God and the soul,’ I tell her. ‘The unknowable.’

‘That’s very good, Christy,’

And she stops at that and closes her eyes. She struggles for breath. I lower my hand to  
her and circle my fingers on her forehead.

‘Maya, full of grace,’ I tell her, ‘Blessed art thou amongst women.’

She recovers. She smiles. ‘Now at the hour of my death,’ she says.

‘Yes, Maya,’ I say, holding both her hands. ‘Now and forever.’

‘The greatest two gifts we can give,’ she tells me, ‘are encouragement and peace. One  
I give to you, and one you give to me. That’s a fair exchange, my friend. I’m tired now,  
Christy. I think I’ll go.’

And with that, she went.