

Darby visits Transition; Compton at large ...

When Darby rang the security buzzer at the entrance to Transition, he was still smarting from the cruelty of Truffington's parting shot.

"Retirement pay?" Truffington had shouted. "What the devil's gotten into you, Darby? Haven't you been reading your horoscope lately? You know, *you create your own reality? Be careful what you wish for, you might get it*, and all that rubbish? Now stop whinging and get the hell out of here and over to Transition."

You'd think the bloke would show some concern, all I've done for him, Darby thought, leaning on the buzzer a second time. *I've got a right to think about me future.*

"Yeah? State your business!" said a gruff, electronically-twanging voice that issued from a small speaker behind the perforated metal grill separating inside from outside.

"Owen Darby on Deathling Crown Lottery business, orders of Lord Truffington. This is urgent. Buzz me through, please."

"You can just buzz off, is what you can do, 'less you ask nice 'n' proper!"

"Excuse me, but what is your name and rank, sir?"

"Mr. Micah Jeremiah Jones to you, sir, and for rank, you can add an Esquire while you're at it!"

"Oh, dear, *excuse me*, I had no idea who I was talking to. Is this *the* Micah Jeremiah Jones, of Transition fame?"

"The very same. That's more like it. Now if you'll just remove your mitt from the buzzer, open the door and step into the cage, we can proceed with the formalities."

By the time Darby had cleared security the word "reamed" had taken on a new

meaning. Still, his mission was urgent enough that he put personal discomfort aside, walking with a stiff-legged gait through the next auto-lock door.

“What’ll it be, m’lord?” yawned the clerk at the administrative desk just past security.

“Who’s the archivist here?”

“Yours truly, your lordship. Mr. Conrad Cotswold, at your service.”

“Well, finally,” said Darby with relief. “Listen, Cotswold—”

“Call me CeeCee, if you don’t mind, m’lord.”

“Very well, CeeCee, and stop calling me m’lord. I’m Mr. Darby, Lord Truffington’s personal secretary.”

“Have it your way, m’lordship. Now, what was it you wanted?”

“I want the recent files, inclusive, on a Mr. Arthur Compton, Grand Prize. His current status, diagnostics, treatment records, whereabouts, the works.”

“I can show you the files, all right, but as to his whereabouts, I’m afraid Mr. Compton has gone missing, he has.”

“Missing? How is that possible? Did he escape again?”

“I’m afraid he has, sir—a right regular rogue, that one is. There’s even a rumor goin’ round—just whispers—but word has it he chewed right through the leather straps on some crazy jacket. A real bulldog, like I say. Bobbies is lookin’ for ‘im as we speak, but so far no luck. Now do you still want that file?”

“Yes, yes, the file, everything you’ve got. And while you’re at it, give me whatever you’ve got on a Mr. CedrosCM.”

“Ain’t he the bloke won the prize?”

“That’s right. I need the entire file for him as well.”

“I’m afraid you’re out of luck there, gov’ner. Prize-winner files is over at Narrative Section.”

“But that’s where I’ve just come from!”

“Well, then, that would explain it now, wouldn’t it, m’lord? Me not havin’ the file, and you with your bloody thumb where it don’t belong. You’ll need to sign for these here Compton files and I’ll need your ID number and thumb-print, and if you’ll just stand still for the camera, sir.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, this isn’t the bloody Stasi, you know.”

“Close to it, m’lord, very close to it. We do try.”

“Say, Cotswold, how would you rate the general performance here at Transition, I mean all the other blokes, not yourself, of course. How do they get along in their work?”

“Rate ‘em? How d’you mean, m’lordship?”

“Well, in terms of ... you know, bureaucratic efficiency, things getting lost, bugged up one way or another, that sort of thing.”

“Oh, they’re all the time gettin’ stuff bugged up, they are. Not me, though. Not CeeCee Cotswold. It’s them other buggers.”

“What do you mean, ‘bugged up’?”

“Well, take, for example, the time they forgot to drain all the old fluids before pumpin’ in the new. That was, oh, near on six years ago, I believe.”

“And what was the problem with that, CeeCee, a little bit of the old fluids?”

“Oh, it was a regular hell. Poor bastard turned out like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, if you know what I mean. I think old Miss Witherspoon was the winner that year. Enters

every year. Finally won. Tried to narrate him into bein' a regular gentleman, she did, wantin' him to go to tea parties with her and all. Didn't know he was a check swindler, a little counterfeitin' on the side. Fleeced her proper, he did. Got her to turn over her shares to him, insurance policies, the mortgage on her little flat. Run her to the ground, he did, 'til she was flat broke. Oh, it was a pretty mess, it was, 'fore they got it covered up proper."

"Covered up?"

"Well, of course, m'lord. The whole country counts on them narratives, 'cludin' the Queen herself. Wouldn't do to be havin' a big scandal, now would it?"

"So," Darby began slowly, "how *exactly* did you cover it up?"

"Simple. Old Miss Witherspoon was the next Grand Prize. Public never knew a thing. Tea parties went on pretty as you please. Rumor is the Queen Mum herself wrote up them tea parties, even threw in a little Agatha Christie, if you know what I mean, a little whodunit. I can tell you this much, m'lord, nobody was the wiser for it."

"So, in other words, Cotswold, you've had experience with this sort of thing."

"CeeCee, if you please, m'lord?"

"Oh yes, sorry. Um, CeeCee," said Darby.

Cotswold cleared his throat and continued.

"Oh, not me, m'lord. I don't do no coverin' up. I just keep me records straight and me mouth shut. Security takes care of coverin' up all that muck. Regular circus in there."

"Security?"

"No, m'lord. It's Transition I'm talkin' about. A bloody mess in there. Security is what cleans it up."

“Security. Hmmm. I see. Well, we may be needing their services soon.”

“You mean for that Compton bloke?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Well now, they’ll have to catch him first, won’t they, m’lord?”

Once out the door, and laboring like a galleon carrying Spanish administrative files from the Indies to Seville, Owen Darby set sail for New Highgate to check on the latest disposition of Mr. CedrosCM and his so-called “writer’s integrity.” If the Compton fiasco should get too far out of hand, CedrosCM might just have to be the next Grand Prize, writer’s integrity or not.

Meanwhile, a few blocks away, a pigeon, pecking at curbside debris, flew up in alarm as a cast-iron grate shifted slightly from a storm drain. Four hairy fingers reached through the open grillwork, gripping the heavy cover and pushing it aside, as Arthur Compton emerged from the tunnels below. He quickly looked in all directions, stealthy and alert, like a feral beast. His face had taken on additional creases and dark smudges since he was last seen in custody. He lifted himself onto the slick pavement in one fluid motion, moving toward a shadowy mews like a tomcat following a scent.

Compton gets excited ...

Compton was accustomed to being chauffeured in the warm leathery comfort of his Bentleys and dressed impeccably by his man Stewart. His present condition was humiliating: naked, shivering from the cold, creeping along through the darkness of a back alley. Like some feral animal, he turned his head this way and that, jumping at the uncertain sights and sounds of this unlikely geography.

Clothes.

He needed something to cover his nakedness, though he doubted even with the voyeuristic nature of modern society that anyone would be interested in viewing his privates. At the third dumpster he discovered a large plastic bag that had been filled with kitty litter.

How apt.

He would have used his teeth to open leg holes in the plastic, but he'd lost his dentures, no doubt somewhere in or around Transition. A bit of local searching brought to hand a piece of scrap metal and he was soon wearing his new duds and felt pretty clever for it.

Duds.

Describes perfectly his condition. This whole Deathling Crown Lottery with him as prize brought back to life by that clown CedrosCM is a dud, a complete dud. But

something has gone wrong, he was certain of that. He did not feel at all that he was being narrated. Had he escaped the writer's clutches? Or had something gone awry with CedrosCM? He couldn't figure it out but he knew now that he had only one goal in mind: to bring down the whole lot of them: CedrosCM, Truffington, Lord Brabazoom, all those buffoons at Transition, hell, even the Queen if necessary.

But how?

He needed a place to hide so he could plot it out. He was jolted by an unexpected thought. Could it be that the narrative capacity worked both ways? He'd listened to the quantum physicists at Reticular Medicinals with only half an ear, but he vaguely remembered them talking about time running both ways, and particles at sub-atomic levels being made to spin both ways, and how this would bring him greater fortune if this both-way-ness could be harnessed and made to affect the brain and matter *per se*. So why not with this narrative mess he had found himself in after he'd died?

Excitement.

How long had it been since he had felt excited about anything? A long time. A very long time. But he was excited now. The prospect of turning the tables, twisting the plot, turning the main character into an author!

"Oh my, this is sweet," he said aloud, as he began to skip along the alley in his kitty litter suit.

Compton's Gender Ambivalence ...

Arthur Compton pranced out of the confines of the grubby mews and into traffic, where he was nearly flattened by a double-decker bus screeching to a stop. Compton was so excited about his quantum-reversal narrative brainstorm that he didn't see the onrushing red monster or hear the hissing of its air-brakes.

But the boys at Transition had been meticulous in their work: Compton's re-constituted reflexes were so well-tuned, and his neo-adrenaline levels so high, that he leaped away from the bus like an electrified frog. He missed the deadly collision by inches, a close-call for the bus driver as well, who shook a fist in Compton's direction and then, for good measure, made an obscene gesture with his fingers.

An elderly red-haired lady in a white uniform had barely stepped off the bus and onto the sidewalk, when the fuming driver stomped on the accelerator and steered the massive vehicle back into traffic. Pushed off-balance by the gust of diesel fumes and the wind-stream generated by the bus, the red-haired lady was blown directly into Arthur Compton's hairy arms.

"Oh, my heavens, I'm so sorry," exclaimed the woman, a private nurse with an agency specializing in home-care for elderly Arabs. She clutched a red vinyl purse in one hand and, with the other, held a white nurse's cap in place over her brightly tinted hair.

In the confusion, Compton lost his bemused quantum-scientist expression and instantly reverted to feral mode. With panther quickness he slapped one arm around the ample waist of the startled nurse and dug his claws into her flesh. She squealed feebly as he scuttled off with her into the mews, like a giant cat dragging a doomed wildebeest into a lair.

“Uh, excuse me, excuse me,” the timid, red-haired lady cried as Compton hauled her toward a greasy dumpster. “Would you mind releasing me, please?” But Compton only snarled and threw her to the ground in the darkest corner of the alley. Quickly he tore off her uniform, taking care not to strip the buttons—he was not *that* feral—until she lay shivering in the mud in nothing more than her bra, panties and white stockings. Then he ripped off his kitty litter plastic sack and tied it around the nurse’s head and over her mouth. That was when he noticed that her abundant hair was askew, drooping over one eye. A hairpiece! Compton snatched it from her head and tossed it on the pile of clothing.

Heaving the hefty nurse into a dumpster would have challenged most men Compton’s age—his nominal age, that is, at time of death. But in his re-constituted, re-hormonalized state, Arthur had more than recovered the middle-aged vigor of the famous “Bulldog Compton” of old.

Shoving her to the back of the fetid container, he then covered her with several garbage bags, stuffed mostly with crab shells, stale beer cups and cigar butts, by the smell of it. Then he closed the lid, returned to the pile of clothing and outfitted himself in the nurse’s dress and shoes, which were oversized but better than bare feet. He tried on the hairpiece and it fit perfectly. Topping off the whole array with the white cap, he set it at what he judged to be a chaste angle. Not too raffish now, he thought.

The stout lady was in her seventies and outweighed Compton by a good forty or fifty pounds. She was one of those dear souls who, having reached a mature age without a husband to nag her, would enjoy a slice of cheesecake between meals now and then, if she felt like it, and a glass or two of warm sherry after dinner. Naturally, her shape and size were different from Compton’s, but compared to the kitty litter sack her starched

uniform fit him like a dream.

Rummaging through the red vinyl purse, Compton located the nurse's wallet and apartment keys. The woman was safely buried in the dumpster, Compton reasoned, and as good as dead; thus, armed with her address, keys and credit cards, he could occupy her flat, assume her identity and buy some time while he worked out the details of his brilliant, vengeful plan.

As an afterthought, he fished around in the handbag and withdrew her lipstick and a small mirror. He could see that his lips were rough and cracked, surrounded by a bristly growth of black stubble—stimulated by the fluids at Transition, no doubt. So he uncapped the lipstick tube, twisted the stem and dabbed some on his lips, smacking them together to even the application. Holding the mirror at different angles to check his appearance, Compton decided that, from a distance, the wig and lipstick would allow him to pass for a hirsute woman.

What next, then, for the deceased CEO of Reticular Medicinals and recently narrated Grand Prize of the Deathling Crown Lottery? Off to his new digs, of course, in a nearby London flat, where Arthur Compton would assume his new identity as Miss Agatha Crossworthy, RN.

Within minutes Compton had suppressed his wrestler's swagger and adopted a more estrogen-friendly gait. He gingerly mounted the steps to a three-story brick building not far from the site of his attack on Miss Crossworthy, whose name appeared on the list of tenants, opposite the buzzer for Apt. 1-C. Compton tried several keys on the massive black entry door before one finally slipped in place and the lock snapped open. Once inside, he scanned the dim hallway and found Apartment 1-C. Third doorway on the left.

Safely inside the flat, door locked and dead-bolted, Compton realized he was famished. Several days of underground living, and the excitement of the attack on the nurse—not to mention the pathetic intravenous feeding he had previously been receiving at Transition—had left him bordering on hypoglycemic. He raided the contents of the under-counter refrigerator and wolfed down some leftover quiche, the better part of a cheesecake and a half-gallon of pasteurized whole milk. Evidently, Miss Crossworthy had a taste for dairy.

Compton's next move carried him straight past the tiny loo off the kitchen and into Miss Crossworthy's bedroom. He felt strangely buoyant and invigorated as he slid open the doors to her closet and beheld her entire wardrobe. On the top shelf, above the knit suits, sweaters and racks of shoes, sat a tidy row of sumptuous hairpieces, like regal crowns, in varied styles and resplendent colors—red, auburn, brunette, platinum-blonde, jet-black. There was even a short-cropped, shaggy punk hairdo with streaks of fluorescent purple and pink, a remnant from Miss Crossworthy's earlier, wilder years, perhaps.

Compton flexed his tingling hands and licked his rouged lips. Slowly, he rotated his head, like a motorized security camera, pausing to examine first one hairpiece then another. Softly, he said to himself, "I think I'm going to like it here."

The *London Daily News*, under the usual pressure to increase circulation, ran an article the next day, with a front-page headline in 60-point bold typeface: *Mature Nurse Stripped Naked, Left for Dead in Dumpster*. A photo accompanying the article showed a tall policeman with a notepad peering into the black metal container. The article read as follows:

Miss Agatha Crossworthy, RN, was found stuffed into a dumpster in a deserted mews on Tuesday. Miss Crossworthy was still alive. Police Inspector Alfred Mays-Gordon told the Daily News that authorities were pursuing a few leads. So far, he said, the investigation centered on a black plastic sack found near the scene. Holes had reportedly been torn in the sack, giving it the appearance of a Halloween costume. Due to the arm-holes, as well as traces of kitty litter found inside the large bag, police theorize that the assailant may be a juvenile cat lover. According to Mays-Gordon's unofficial statement, "Jenny and Jim, ya know, our crime-scene techs, they lifted a pretty clean set of prints offa that bloody plastic bag, but the only match Johnny found—he's our print-lab specialist, he is—belonged to some bloke in the dead file, so it looks like a dead-end, print-wise, I mean. Anyways, how could a dead bloke rip them holes in that bag? It don't make sense, does it?" When asked whether he expects to apprehend the criminal, Mays-Gordon grimly exclaimed, "Oh, we'll catch him all right, long as it takes, just like in Les Miz. We'll run him to ground like the miserable sewer rat he is—have no bleedin' doubt about that—considerin' what he done to poor old Miss Crossworthy, leavin' her nothin' but her bra and panties and all." When asked for a description of the suspect, Mays-Gordon replied, "We're lookin' for an alleged red-haired male bloke runnin' around in a nurse's costume." Medical reports indicate that Miss Crossworthy, shaken but uninjured, was treated at a local hospital for superficial chicken bone abrasions, then released.