

Sahlan Diver

**THE  
SECRET  
RESORT  
OF  
NOSTALGIA**

ISBN: 978-17-87233-00-3

© Sahlan Diver October 2018

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed upon the subsequent purchaser.

Find out more about the author and his novels and plays at the publisher's web site

<https://www.unusual-mysteries.com>

## The Trickster God



*In the summer of 1990, we didn't know it but we were at the end of an era, before the explosion of modern communications technology, before the omnipresent mobile phone, the Internet, universal email and social networking. Much easier back then to cut off people's access to information, if that's what you wanted to do.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Prologue</b>	<b>1</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>The Dining Car</b>	<b>2</b>	27	<b>Despair</b>	<b>167</b>
			28	<b>Carnival</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The Beginnings</b>	<b>9</b>	29	<b>Dublin</b>	<b>181</b>
			30	<b>The Trickster House</b>	<b>186</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Road Trip</b>	<b>12</b>	31	<b>A Brick Wall</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Fourth Earl</b>	<b>17</b>	32	<b>The Note</b>	<b>193</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>The Experiment</b>	<b>21</b>	33	<b>The Institute</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Night Train</b>	<b>30</b>	34	<b>Conspiracy</b>	<b>202</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Island</b>	<b>35</b>	35	<b>Firework Night</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Nostalgia Hotel</b>	<b>40</b>	36	<b>Festival at the Darkest Hour</b>	<b>214</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>The Follower</b>	<b>50</b>	37	<b>Escape</b>	<b>221</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Chess</b>	<b>59</b>	38	<b>The Temple of Pan</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Clocks</b>	<b>66</b>	39	<b>The Rebel Inn</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>Saoirse</b>	<b>73</b>	40	<b>Aftermath</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>The Hospital</b>	<b>80</b>	41	<b>The Wedding</b>	<b>242</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>86</b>	42	<b>Deceptions</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>15</b>	<b>The Mark</b>	<b>94</b>	43	<b>Dogs</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>16</b>	<b>The Rowing Boat</b>	<b>98</b>	44	<b>Full Circle</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>Tracks</b>	<b>101</b>	45	<b>The End of the Road</b>	<b>276</b>
<b>18</b>	<b>Ghosts</b>	<b>110</b>	46	<b>Return to Europe</b>	<b>282</b>
<b>19</b>	<b>A View of the Ocean</b>	<b>113</b>	47	<b>Diarmuid's Story</b>	<b>297</b>
<b>20</b>	<b>Hotel Cat</b>	<b>119</b>	48	<b>Unfinished Business</b>	<b>308</b>
<b>21</b>	<b>Eddie The Dalek</b>	<b>124</b>	49	<b>Postcard from Ireland</b>	<b>320</b>
<b>22</b>	<b>Regatta</b>	<b>127</b>	50	<b>Revival</b>	<b>321</b>
<b>23</b>	<b>The Inventor</b>	<b>140</b>	51	<b>Saoirse's Story</b>	<b>330</b>
<b>24</b>	<b>Salsa Night</b>	<b>150</b>		<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>333</b>
<b>25</b>	<b>Shadows</b>	<b>154</b>			
<b>26</b>	<b>King of the Hill Dwellers</b>	<b>159</b>			

## Prologue

The Trickster God returned last night and gave me the travelling dream. Always the same. I'll be walking the streets of a seaside town. There's never traffic, only people. Sometimes I'll be with the people, sometimes apart — observing from a distance. And *she* will be there: warm, friendly, sexy.

We take a boat trip together. I reach down into the water. That makes her angry. There's something concerning the sea I must not be allowed to find out. Back on the beach she slips away and I lose her in the crowds. My search ends at the wire fences. Through them I see the Dark Town, a grotesque reflection of my own. Where mine is day, the other is permanent night; where mine has people, the other has fleeting shadows; where I stand looking in, a Doppelganger of black stands staring out.

I have been to a place like that. I could return there now if not for the trick played upon me. In folk tales, the one who stumbles across a forbidden secret is visited by some terrible curse, transmogrified into a frog, imprisoned in a high tower, banished to the wilderness. My punishment was the place I knew and loved ceased to exist. But this is no fairy story. The place was real; the people were real; the conspiracy was real.

## Chapter 1

### The Dining Car

I saw everything. I saw nothing.

Right from the beginning, I got it the wrong way round. That, no doubt, was their plan. Did I know they had a plan for me, same as for everyone else on that journey? I must have sensed something wasn't right. Uncharacteristic of Mike Denning, twenty-two-year-old graduate from England, to be sitting in an empty dining car with the temptation of a lively Irish bar next door. Of course, there were the two women who'd squashed up against me in the crush of the one carriage devoted to serving alcohol. Their attentions had become embarrassing. I may be five foot eleven, athletic, reasonably good-looking, with a mass of black hair, but I wouldn't have marked myself down as a magnet for mature chicks. One of them, the one with the unfortunate laugh, like the noise of sheep being forced through a sheep-dip, she told me they were sharing a double bed, and winked as she added, "It's big enough for three."

Yes, I'd had to get away from the women. I made the excuse of wanting to listen to the pianist and pushed through the people to stand by the baby grand, where a man dressed in top hat and tails straight out of the nineteen-twenties furiously tinkled the keys in imitation of jazz-age music of the period. Stepping onto this train had been like stepping onto a film set; more than that, like stepping through a time warp and being sucked back into the past, the furniture and fittings of my compartment

imported from a golden age of luxury, everything impeccably finished, bright and gleaming, like new. But at the same time, it felt old. It took me some time to figure out why: the total absence of plastic — anywhere. All you saw and touched: wood, metal, leather or glass. And the lighting — no fluorescents, the sleeping car corridors in particular strangely dim, evocative of those old thriller movies located on night trains, *Murder on The Orient Express*, and such like. Not that I expected a murder during the night but I *was* concerned about an accident. Apparently, we were to be confined to the tunnel for six hours. What would happen if the train derailed, or a fire broke out?

Maybe what bothered me also was the perfection of *the girl*: intelligent, sexy, gorgeous to look at. They'd promised she'd be with me in a couple of days. An offer they knew I wouldn't refuse.

Or maybe *the cloakies*. Four people arrived as a party, wearing a kind of uniform, imposing long dark cloaks with turned-up pointed collars having the look of the pantomime wizard. Could I be soon to enter the realm of some mysterious cult?

And the man in the customs hall who confiscated my camera. "I'm sorry, sir. You can't take the camera with you. We'll give you a receipt for it and put it in our strong room, for you to collect on your return." I informed him of my job with the estate, that they wanted me to take photographs as part of my assignment. He assured me a camera would be supplied. I couldn't figure out the problem. Why couldn't I take my own?

The crowding in the bar suggested the whole train must be there. I gave up hope of attracting the attention of the over-taxed barman and came in here, the curtained diner, empty at the moment, softly lit with pink-shaded table lamps, all gleaming silverware and crystal glass. At the far end, the galley car, clattering with preparations for the eight o'clock meal. As soon as a steward appeared, I'd order a drink.

An old lady entered from the bar. With her steel grey hair, tie-dyed skirt and beaded necklace, she looked every bit the aged artistic hippy. "Mind if I join you for dinner?" she said, as she sat down opposite me at the table for two. Her American accent had a tinge of Irish, suggesting a long-term residency. I knew her as Molly. She'd been standing behind me in the customs hall queue when an official asked obscurely: "Any rocks or pebbles?" Molly came to my rescue: "He's saying do you want to change your money. One Rock equals one hundred Pebbles. You can change money when you get there but the bank has its late night on Wednesdays. They won't be open till after lunch."

Something strange about Molly. That business when the man took her to the room for questioning. I met her on the platform afterwards. She rushed off to get on the train, though right now she seemed to have regained her composure. "I always go for first service," she said. "It doesn't worry you young people but at my age I get indigestion if I eat too late. So, what do you think ... about where you're going?"



“I feel I’m on information overload. So many facts to absorb at the interview this afternoon.”

“You’re happy with it all? There’s nothing worrying you?”

“Only the long journey underground.”

“Oh. That!” She laughed. “That’s nothing! Here’s the waiter. Let’s order. We should get served first.”

The restaurant car was filling up fast. Four guys dressed in blue security guard uniform took their place a few tables away from ours. A poker-faced waiter arrived with the menu. Surprisingly, it listed no meat, only vegetarian and fish dishes, though all flamboyantly described. “Men tend to favour the potato and lentil pie,” said Molly. “It’s cleverly done with herbs and spices, so it tastes more like cottage pie. It’s the nearest thing they have to a meat dish.”

I said, “I’ll order it. The waiter doesn’t look like he’d appreciate me asking for a cheeseburger.”

Molly apparently thought my remark hilariously funny and laughed out loud, such that the couple on the adjacent table turned to see what was amusing her. Embarrassed, I looked around apologetically. I caught one of the blue guards eyeing me with an icy stare. He averted his gaze but not before I’d registered being under scrutiny. I mentioned it to Molly. She turned to look. “I don’t know him. The guards are told about new people. He was probably sizing you up.”

“What do they do?”

“They keep the peace. Look! We’re off!”

The train had started moving, so gently I hadn't noticed our leaving the station. Within a minute we passed into dense woodland, the gloom broken only once, by a wide beaten-earth path crossing the tracks and leading down between the trees to the garden of a large house. Five minutes later, we entered the tunnel. If the smile Molly gave was intended to reassure, what she said next did not: "The last daylight we'll see till tomorrow!"

The train slowed and came to a stop with a prolonged squeal of brakes, which gave way to an eerie silence. The engine had cut out. The chattering passengers lowered their voices, out of respect for the situation.

"Have we broken down?" I asked.

"You're nervous about this journey, aren't you?" replied Molly, "You needn't be. See what happens."

We'd stopped about a minute when I saw the driver coming along the outside, slamming down shutters over each window.

"The tunnel is lit every few yards," explained Molly. "The flash of light past the window might give people a headache or prevent them from sleeping."

"Also, they don't tell you this," she whispered, "but it's better if anyone suffers from claustrophobia not to be reminded they are in such a long tunnel. The train doors are shuttered and locked also, in case anybody goes screaming mad and tries to escape." Then, out loud, "Oh My! I hope *you* don't suffer from claustrophobia. I shouldn't have told you!"

The slamming faded as the driver progressed towards the rear, then increased in volume and faded again as he

passed by the windows on the opposite side. After a long wait with everyone talking sotto-voce as if in the presence of the dead, the rumble of the restarted engine gave permission for resumption of normal conversation. With its passengers now snugly cocooned, the train moved off. Through gaps in the shutters came a rhythmic waxing and waning as we passed the tunnel lamps. The light had taken on a curious glow. I'd already been told the tunnel passed through a salt mine; I guessed the pinkness of the light due to our now being deep inside the seam. Frustrating not to be able to see out.

"You'd soon get fed up of the view," said Molly. "For safety, we can't go any faster than the speed of a bicycle. That's why they only run as a sleeper. A journey through a ninety-mile tunnel in waking hours would be intolerable."

The waiter came round, closing the curtains.

"What's that rumbling sound?" I asked.

"We've changed to the undersea track, sir. You'll get used to the noise. Most passengers find it hypnotic. At least they get a good night's sleep. No fun for those of us who have to work with it half the night."

Molly and I ordered dessert then chatted over coffee. For a talkative person, she showed a curious reluctance to discuss our destination. Several of my questions she deflected with an irrelevant answer, or by asking me a question in return. On the other hand, just like they'd done at my interview, she asked many questions about my upbringing, in particular the seaside resort that had been my childhood home.

We conducted our conversation against the peculiar low rumbling from the train wheels and the visual backdrop of the waiter bustling in and out with his tray of drinks. At one point the train braked hard and he came flying down the aisle, refreshment tray held aloft. But he recovered his balance magnificently. The gasps of the diners turned to cheers and applause, which he acknowledged with a smile and a mock bow. So, there was a human being under the poker face, though the mask had returned when he came round next, clearing the tables.

I asked him, "Why does the train need to brake? There's not another ahead of us, is there?"

"Curves, sir," he replied.

Molly said, "Don't imagine the tunnel is a convenient straight line all the way. They had to follow the natural geology."

The staff wanted to lay for second service, so Molly and I parted. Back in my compartment, someone had delivered a glossy brochure welcoming travelers to the "Island Express". The spiel went into great detail about the undersea tunnel, describing how the health-giving effects of the salt rock enhanced air drawn into the ventilation system. Passengers often remarked passing the night on the train in an unusually deep and refreshing sleep.

I was unable to sleep, my mind turning over the events of the day, in particular the incredible story I'd been told at my interview that afternoon.

## Chapter 2

### The Beginnings

A week ago, there arrived the letter which had been the beginnings of all this, the letter from Publishing John:

*Nostalgia*  
*April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1990*

*Dear Mike,*

*I believe your contract is due to finish soon. I'm hoping it's good timing. I've broken my ankle, badly, and am laid up in hospital. I can still write but I need an assistant. I've already negotiated the hourly rate you've been getting in Dublin, though they won't pay travel expenses. You know how I've always admired your writing ability.*

The letter went on to give details of the offices of a large estate, situated way down in the southwest corner of Ireland, in a remote coastal area of West Cork. I'd had my eye on a bigger opportunity, in Singapore, starting in the autumn, giving me time to fill in the summer with what I fantasised would be a laid-back, Irish style, country house appointment — a posh suite of private rooms; an easy workload, helping them update their database or accounts software; leisurely strolls down to the village pub for extended lunch hours; traditional music in the bar in the evenings. Great craic altogether. And the family might have a pretty daughter, an eligible heiress.

Directly after graduating, I'd travelled to Ireland for my first job, a temporary contract in Dublin, where I

shared an office with three guys named John. The label on their door announced: "The Johns". Two of them had a technical training, like me. The odd one out I called "Publishing John", because of his former career in journalism and because he took charge of all product documentation, my role being to liaise between him and the technical guys. I'd be asked to write the first drafts, handing them on for editing and polishing — an education in itself, because he tore into my use of English, invariably rewriting what I had written. October 1989, seven months ago, he left the company abruptly, in mysterious circumstances. I arrived at work to hear raised voices coming from the boss's office. John was handing in his notice, unwilling to say who had made him the better offer. A rumour that he'd sold out to our chief competitor cast a shadow over his departure, not helped by his refusal to divulge even the tiniest clue as to his new job.

Even now, I felt a holding back. At the top of his letter, where you'd normally expect the address, the single word: "Nostalgia". That strange inscription wasn't the only puzzling thing. Why the effusive reference to my writing skills? Blatantly untrue. I could put it down to John's taking-the-mick sense of humour but the sentence jarred with the business-like tone of the rest. The thought crossed my mind he was trying to send a message, a plea for help, or a warning to be on my guard, by adding a phrase only I would know to be out of place. Did he think somebody would intercept the letter? Was he being watched while he wrote it? I discounted these ideas as the product of my

over-active imagination. How many times subsequently did I wish I had not.

## Chapter 3

### Road Trip

The journey from Dublin down to Ireland's far south west coast had been a long one, its tedium exacerbated by the scenery, the flat rural landscape of central Ireland dull and oppressive under a heavy blanket of grey with a drizzling rain. We reached the coast at Bantry, where I had to change coaches. The sun came out, and with it a rainbow, the terrain of rocky hills and sea inlets transformed in an instant from gloomy to glorious, the changed mood reflected in the new coach, packed full of lively locals, with just one free seat, next to a tiny old man wearing a light grey suit that looked like it had been specially miniaturised to fit. His face seemed fixed in a permanent grin. I guessed rightly the grin would be a prelude to a lot of talking. He opened by asking my name. "Michael, is it? Sure, you're an Irishman already! Or do you prefer to be called *Mick*?"

I replied my friends called me "Mike".

My companion lived in my destination town. When I told him the purpose of my visit, he said, "So, you'll be working for The Earl?"

I asked, "He's one of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, then?"

The old man laughed, "It's a joke, an honorary title, first given to his great-grandfather because of the way he lorded it over his lands. He made a fortune and bought up a vast area to create a country estate."

"How did he make his money?"



“He started off with a patch of hilly ground. He got it cheap. Nobody else wanted it.” The old man pointed at a muddy, boulder-strewn field we were racing by in the coach. “Like that one. Useless for grazing. He found out why. A rock-salt seam hiding just below the surface.”

“There’s not much money to be made from salt, is there?”

“Right! With the narrowness of the seam, they had to drive their tunnels for miles, the main problem being how to prevent the miners from suffocating. The first Earl was your typical nineteenth-century inventor. He patented equipment for deep tunnel ventilation. Then he hit on the idea of exporting his ventilation systems for gold mines. That’s what made him rich.”

From my talkative friend I got the entire family history. An eccentric lot. The first Earl spent his money buying up land between town and coast, turning it into a game-bird reserve for the amusement of his shooting friends. He also built the family home, a mock castle, where he hosted extravagant social occasions. By contrast, his son, the second Earl, a recluse, shut up everything, living out a life of isolation and mental illness. The third Earl tried to develop the land near the coast with a grandiose scheme for a seaport but the notoriously treacherous currents and tides and the difficulty of cutting a safe passage through the rocky foreshore rendered the project impractical. It was abandoned.

The incumbent Earl, the fourth, sounded the most eccentric. In the sixties he’d hosted wild parties and rumoured sex orgies for his hippy friends. An enthusiast

for motocross, he held a competition each year on a two-mile course across his land. In 1970 the races were cancelled and the course dismantled. No explanation given. In the same year, he cancelled a planned hot-air ballooning event. Again, no explanation. The locals worried the Earl might be showing signs of his reclusive grandfather's illness, then new activities started up. He amassed an impressive collection of vintage cars, open to the public every weekend. And he established an agricultural research institute. The latter caused disquiet in the neighbourhood, with the Earl's land now ringed by tall security fences, sightings of "scientists in white coats", and regular patrols by "green guards". They carried rifles fitted with night sights, supposedly for shooting vermin but, on more than one occasion, people who'd got too near the land had warning shots fired at them.

I asked, "If the family are so rich, why stay here? Why not sell up and move to Monte Carlo or those other playboy places?"

The old man made a wry face. "The estate is entailed. They can't sell it. They can't disinherit. Ownership must pass from father to son. Some families might see it as a curse, a millstone round their neck, preventing them enjoying their money. Still, we're not complaining. The Earl's goings-on keep us entertained. Without him there'd be no local economy. Organic vegetables are the latest thing. They grow a massive amount on the estate. They're even exporting tomatoes to Holland. We see the Dutch lorry twice a week in the summer."

Extensive tomato growing in Ireland was news to me. I remarked they'd need to have a lot of greenhouses.

The old man replied, "There's a puzzle there. Nobody knows where the stuff is grown. The estate employs townspeople in the packing sheds. None of them have seen the greenhouses. They must be somewhere, of course but the land stretches for miles, most of it is fenced off and the last known map was made fifty years ago. Wherever they are, I say they are being worked by the outsiders."

When I asked about the outsiders, my companion hesitated, as if he regretted mentioning them to a stranger.

"Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings," he continued at last, "a coach leaves the estate. A fifty-seater, full of people. Every Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday evenings, it returns, again full of people. It passes by my house. My street is narrow, a bottleneck, so traffic usually crawls by. I've made a point of scrutinising this coach. I'm willing to swear the same people are never on it more than once, either outgoing or incoming. Where do they all come from? Where do they go? What happens to them on the estate?"

I said, "I'm beginning to have second thoughts about this job."

The old man chuckled. "Ah, no! The Earl's a great lad. He's often in the town bars of an evening. I've had a drink with him many a time. You'll like him. I've never heard complaint from the locals who work for him."

"So you've never asked him about the outsiders?"

The old man paused to consider his reply. "There are things you can ask and things you can't ask. You understand what I'm saying?"

At that moment there happened the defining event of the day. Our coach had arrived at the town centre. As I stood on the pavement, waiting to collect my luggage, a 1920's, Type 39 Bugatti roared up the street, paintwork and fittings gleaming in the bright afternoon sunshine, at the wheel an attractive young woman dressed to match the period of the car. The old man nudged me. "You can guess where she's going in a hurry. The Earl's personal assistant — some say the Earl's mistress."

## Chapter 4

### Fourth Earl

I'd been advised to take a taxi to the estate. I found out why after we passed the gates. The driveway down to the main house must have been at least a mile and a half long. On the right, it bordered dense deciduous woodland. On the left, a patchwork of stone walled grass fields ran up to hills a mile distant. Access in that direction was denied by the high wire fencing the old man on the coach had alluded to, lining the roadside as far as could be seen. At intervals were notices: "Keep Out. Agricultural Research. Risk Of Contamination." But I saw no "green guards", nor "scientists in white coats", nor did I see any crops or animals in the fields beyond the fencing.

At the end of the drive, the road curved away from the fence, passing through trees, emerging to give my first view of the Earl's mock-castle home, grand and impressive, with a turret at each corner and ivy covering the walls. Parked outside, the Bugatti.

The estate manager greeted me at the front door and took me to his office. He had prepared the contract of work to be signed by both sides. Regarding the special conditions of the job, he told me I would be having tea with the Earl, who would discuss those with me directly, then, if I was happy to sign, they'd give me a day or two to settle in before starting work. When I asked about accommodation, he replied brusquely, "That's already been organised." At that moment his office telephone rang and he showed me into the library to wait.

The library had everything you'd expect from a stately home: high-ceiling, enormous fireplace, plush sofas, and walls lined with tall stacks packed with old books. A few shelves contained modern books, probably the only ones ever read. Unsurprisingly there was a whole row dedicated to vintage cars and another to organic market gardening. Otherwise, the Earl appeared to be a man of eclectic interests. My eye passed over *Economics of the Small Town 1900 - 1960*, *Quadraphonic Sound*, *Miniature Model Making*, *Hot Air Ballooning*, *Helicopter Pilot Training*, *Seaside Entertainments of Bygone Days*, *The Theatre Backstage Handbook*, *Murder on The Orient Express*. I settled into a sofa with a book on Bugatti cars but voices outside the window and the crunch of footsteps on gravel distracted me. Two men, dressed in green uniform, were crossing the driveway. So, these were the "green guards". Something odd about their appearance, the cut of their uniform severely dated, reminiscent of nineteen-sixties London Carnaby Street. I couldn't decide whether this made them look on the verge of camp, or sinister, or, if possible, both at the same time.

"I'm ready for tea, if you are." My host had entered the room without my hearing him. "Chilly in here, isn't it?"

About fifty, tall, his thick black hair slightly greying, the Earl possessed the kind of good looks that are a distinct aid to authority rather than an encumbrance to it. He opened the door to the office and spoke to somebody inside. "Tell them we'll have tea now, and we need the fire lit."

Sitting down directly facing me, he said, "Mike, I've read your skill-set. I'm happy with that but I'd like to know about your background. Were you brought up in a town or in a city?"

"In a town"

"Good! Inland, or by the sea?"

"A seaside resort, on the south coast of England."

"And how would you describe your seaside resort?"

"Run down. The main street full of cheap shops, a few seedy amusement arcades by the beach. High unemployment. Not much going on."

The Earl stared at me, fathoming my innermost thoughts. "But it wasn't always that way? Do your grandparents come from the town?"

"On my mother's side, yes."

"Do they ever talk about the past?"

"My grandfather does, all the time. He talks about the factories now long gone. In his words 'Full employment and no excuse to be a layabout'. And he tries to persuade me what a great social life they had at the old dance halls and theatres. He has postcards showing the seafront crammed with day-trippers down from London. He has others showing the fishermen standing outside their cottages. The fishing industry went years ago. The cottages are holiday lets now."

Curious to know why the Earl was showing such an intense interest in my upbringing, I almost risked the impertinence of asking him outright. Luckily, a middle-aged woman, entering at that moment with a tea tray, interrupted the conversation. After pouring out the tea,

she set about laying the fire. Hoping to get a clue as to a certain younger female, I changed the subject. "That's a great Bugatti you have outside."

"Our most recent restoration," said the Earl. "We're running her in. The policy of our museum is that a car should be treated like a living creature, allowed to roam wild and free, not kept in a cage."

"Do you have many in the collection?"

"They keep our hands full. We have them running at the weekends when we open to the public."

I thought it prudent interview strategy to empathise with my host's interests, so I said, "The car is a magnificent machine."

I couldn't have judged it more wrongly if I'd tried. With a look verging on anger, the Earl replied, "The car is a curse!" Then, smiling, "You can't imagine how I, a well-known vintage motor enthusiast, could say that. Consider this: Better to ban cars from the roads and confine them to museums. You may consider it impossible for modern society to function without the car..."

He paused briefly, waiting for the housekeeper to leave.

"...I can show you a place where not only is the car banned but society is all the better for it. What I am about to tell you is in the strictest confidence and will need a witness present."

He picked up the telephone. "Saoirse? Good! You're in the office. Would you come through to the library?"

The door from the office opened, and the most gorgeous girl I have ever seen entered the room.



## Chapter 5

### The Experiment

Seen close to, in her flapper dress, the Earl's assistant was even more attractive than I'd anticipated, age about twenty-five, of above average height, with nice legs and a slim but shapely figure, her expressive pretty face and large green eyes set off by long wavy natural red hair, striking and flamboyant in its colouration. She had a presence about her: quiet, calm and intelligent.

"Saoirse is here as a witness," said the Earl. "I am relying on your integrity that none of what I am about to tell you will you pass on, not even to the people closest to you. I should add there's nothing illegal or immoral involved."

I said, "In that case, I agree."

The Earl motioned for us to come close. "I ask that we form a circle and hold hands to set a seal on the agreement."

I decided to go along with the proposed extraordinary rigmarole, to see what would happen next. We stood in a circle of three. Saoirse gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

The Earl said, "Repeat after me: I agree to keep secret everything I will come to know about Nostalgia."

I repeated the strange incantation, as instructed. Then we sat down.

"Imagine an isolated place. Free of the motor car," began the Earl. "Having no easy means of conveying goods or people over distance, the community must rely

on itself for most of what it eats, most of what it needs, most of what it enjoys”

“You mean a back-to-nature, hippy commune?”

“No, I don’t mean that. I mean a place that has fully embraced modern technology, modern work and the modern lifestyle, but instead of technology being in the possession of faceless corporations and rapacious multi-nationals, that same technology is in the possession of, and in the service of, the people. There are companies and factories but everything is done on a small scale, locally. As dependence on the outside world is restricted, the community has to provide for itself, resulting in full employment, managed harmony with the environment, respect for the local ecology, people’s lives given meaning, crime and social problems eliminated.”

I said, “It’s difficult to imagine how a place like that could avoid the influence of the wider world”

The Earl paused and glanced at Saoirse. They both seemed impressed by my remark.

“Precisely the conclusion my friends and I came to in the late sixties. We were hippies but becoming disillusioned. Shall I tell you what was wrong with the sixties? It was all ‘Me, Me, Me!’ Have you ever heard of Dr Timothy O’Leary?”

“Turn on. Tune in. Drop out?”

“Yes. What a pile of dog shite! You know those movements where people try to build a better world through spirituality? It turns out, when you get down to fundamentals, all their focus is on their own precious spiritual state. It’s not possible to build a better world

when all you are thinking about is yourself. That's narcissism. The alternative is a life of dedication and self-denial — 'altruism'. People think narcissism and altruism are mutually exclusive. Narcissism appeals to the many and benefits only the few. Altruism appeals to the few and therefore cannot benefit the many. The intelligent way is to benefit yourself and humanity simultaneously. Then, you are doubly motivated — you benefit, and others benefit as a by-product of your motivation. Do you follow me?"

"Can you give an example?"

"An Indian guru in the sixties tried to get his followers in the West to become successful at business. Each follower would keep three quarters of his business profits for himself and donate the remaining twenty-five percent to charity. A brilliant concept, a win-win situation for everyone. Did his followers embrace the idea? No! They were too busy massaging their spiritual egos to want to dirty themselves with the ways of the world."

The Earl continued, "We found our own conclusions about reforming society increasingly at odds with the fashionable wisdom of the sixties. We wanted a place, remote and isolated, where we could develop alternative ideas. One of us suggested we start an underground community in the salt mine — a joke, but some thought the idea had possibilities, so we got out an old map of the mine seams. My friend, Dr Jim Braben, a geologist from San Francisco, took the map away to study. The next day he came back in a state of great excitement, carrying several more maps, including a nautical map of the west

coast of Ireland and a map of geological strata. He laid them out and pointed to a small island, about ninety miles from the coast. *'That's where your salt seam comes to the surface'*, he said, *'All the geological evidence points to it.'*

"The island in question — I'm not telling you the name — had never been inhabited, owing to its impenetrable and dangerous rocky coastline and tall cliffs. We had a mad, crazy idea. We would drive the longest tunnel in the world through the salt rock, take possession of the island as squatters, and build a secret isolated community. We had the technology; we had the money from my family's estate; all we needed were people who believed in the ideal and had the will to achieve it."

I asked, "Wouldn't they have needed to become expert tunnelers?"

The Earl smiled. "Clearly impossible. We openly declared a new mining company project. We put it about that my workers were driving a long test tunnel for a new generation of mine ventilation equipment. They laid the single-track railway as they cut the tunnel, along with power cables and the ducts for the ventilation system. Jim Braben took charge of the geological surveying, so no employee need be informed of our intended destination. Of course, we couldn't let any of them witness the tunnel surfacing the other side, so Jim excavated the last mile himself, with a small team of people drawn from our circle of close friends. A driven man. He and the others actually lived in the tunnel for weeks on end. Imagine their relief when they finally broke through to the island."

“What would have happened if they’d got their calculations wrong?”

“If they’d missed the island and come up through the sea bed, the pressure of the water would have collapsed the tunnel roof before they’d time to wake up to their mistake. Their tunnel would have become their grave.”

“You’re telling me you have a ninety-mile tunnel under the sea, by far the longest tunnel in the world, that nobody knows about!”

The Earl laughed. “I don’t blame you for not believing it. If you take the job, you’ll see for yourself. We’ve kept this secret since the early seventies. Over two decades we have bit by bit developed the land. Five thousand people live in the island’s town now, though it’s not entirely isolated — the inhabitants travel to and from the mainland by the tunnel railway.”

I asked, “Are they the people on the coaches? An old man from the town told me about them passing by his house. He says there’s never the same people on them from one day to the next.”

The Earl and Saoirse exchanged glances.

“Saoirse has tried to persuade me the locals are not as innocent as I think they are,” he said. “I see she’s right. So! Our turnover of people has not gone unnoticed? Our train is an overnight sleeper. It runs alternate days, arriving in the morning, leaving in the evening. It has bed space for fifty, maximum. You do the math. It’s solidly booked months in advance. Most of the island’s inhabitants only get one return trip per year. I can see we must be more discreet. What else did this old man tell you?”

“I got the full story of your ancestors. He was positive about the effect of your estate on the town, though he complained about a cancelled hot air balloon festival.”

“We had to call a stop to those at the end of the sixties. The thermals from the hills round here are treacherous, and, as is usual on ocean coasts, sudden mists and fogs get up. We had a weather-related helicopter crash on our land, the pilot and the passenger both killed. I won a subsequent legal action to prohibit over-flying of my estate. I wasn’t prepared to risk adding a balloon tragedy.”

The talk of a hidden place that only its inhabitants knew existed, I found hard to accept. I asked, “One thing I don’t understand. Concealing a whole town. What’s to stop anyone giving it away?”

“And throw away the ideal lifestyle we have provided?” said the Earl, “This is no random crowd. Each resident is carefully chosen on the basis of a whole raft of factors. Firstly, he or she must be an idealist; secondly, they must have a genuine aversion to the negative aspects of modern society; thirdly, they must bring a skill and be a good worker; fourthly, their parents must be dead. Shocking, I know, but what are they going to do when granny wants to visit the grandchildren? There are many other factors we have to weigh up. Selection is stringent and by personal invitation only. Naturally, we don’t advertise.”

“You haven’t explained the name,” said Saoirse. Not only was this girl a fantastic looker, she had an appealing voice to match.

“Ah yes, the name!” replied the Earl, “We decided to call our town, ‘Nostalgia’. It symbolises our objective: to get back to a sense of community, a sense of purpose in society, without rejecting the positive aspects of the progress of modern technology. You’ll find it a fun place – a lively seaside resort at work and at play. Any other questions?”

It occurred to me the primary reason for my being there had not been mentioned. I asked, “How did John get involved?”

The Earl glanced at Saoirse. “I’m sorry. We have tea. Impolite of me not to offer you some.” Saoirse replied she didn’t want any. I sensed an awkward moment.

“For when in the future we go public with our secret,” continued the Earl, “we need every detail of our story documented. That’s what we employed your colleague to do. He made a brilliant job of it, going everywhere, interviewing everyone. Unfortunately, he had an accident and now he can’t move from his hospital bed. So we need you to do the spadework, collecting the data for John to write up.”

I felt some qualms about the term “spadework”. I asked, “Can you be more specific? My university subjects were electronic engineering and computer programming – very different from John’s journalistic background.”

“John thinks you can do it,” replied the Earl, “and one thing we’ve learned about John is to respect his judgement. You’ll be required to interview people, archive the material, take photographs, maintain a database, type up reports, you name it. John was keen we should get you.

He says you're a fast learner, which will be vital — the work has fallen greatly behind schedule since the accident."

"What *was* his accident?"

"Your John unintentionally strayed onto a restricted area. How it happened we're not sure, as it's all fenced off. One of our security guards was racing down a path on his pushbike, not expecting anyone to be there. Turning a corner, he collided with your friend. John broke his ankle falling. I understand you've been shown your contract of employment? I'll go and get it."

The Earl went through to the office. Saoirse and I smiled at each other. I felt compelled to say something but my mind went blank. I could think of nothing more original than to lamely ask, "The building on the hill opposite. Is it the railway station?"

"The station is a mile further down, in the valley. I'll be driving you there later if you agree to work for us. I hope you will agree. The hilltop building is the agricultural research institute"

"What research are they doing?"

"Top secret!" she replied. I thought she must be kidding me but the look on her face told me otherwise.

The Earl returned and brought over the contract to sign. "It's time for you to make a choice. Either forget everything we have told you, leave this room and never come back, or accept our offer, join us, and become an honoured contributor to our experiment for a better world. I've freed Saoirse from her mainland duties for a



while, so, as from Friday, she will join you on the island and show you round.”

This offer of Saoirse’s company, whether innocent statement of standard procedure or calculated ploy to secure my agreement, was the deciding factor. Impulsively, I signed the contract, sealing my fate.

## Chapter 6

### Night Train

The train taking me to the island didn't leave till evening. The Earl invited me to wait at his home and provided an impressive first floor guest room, overlooking the driveway. The room had a TV but the comings and goings outside the window interested me more. First, Saoirse drove away in the Bugatti. During her absence, several business types arrived in expensive cars. Vans and lorries came and went intermittently, their drivers emerging with chits for signing at the office. Obviously, a busy and prosperous estate. At one point, the Earl came out and spoke with his green guards. He pointed up at my window, though I couldn't hear what he was saying.

It had been arranged I would go down at seven, when Saoirse would drive me to the station. On the dot, I heard the Bugatti coming up the drive. She shouted for me to jump in, and we sped off. My fear of seeming a fool again by asking inane questions was quickly dispelled. We chatted away like we'd known each other forever. I could have thought this a promising indication of chemistry between us, although I was more inclined to credit Saoirse's relaxed personality.

After passing through deciduous woodland, the road emerged onto open ground, where a security fence blocked the way ahead, forcing us to pull up at a barrier and guard hut. Saoirse took a document from her bag and rushed inside, emerging a few seconds later with a green

guard, who promptly raised the barrier and saluted as we drove on.

“That’s to stop locals getting through and discovering the railway,” said Saoirse.

Half a mile further we arrived at the station, a picturesque redbrick building of curiously old appearance, like something out of an Edwardian photo album. It even had an adjacent station master’s house, which seemed to me hardly justifiable for what, according to the Earl’s story, could be no more than six trains per week.

As I got out of the car, Saoirse said, “Enjoy your trip. See you Friday!” She pressed the accelerator and the Bugatti shot away in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

I entered the building at the customs hall. That’s where I met Molly and she explained the need to exchange my cash for Nostalgia’s Rocks and Pebbles currency. I handed over a bigger amount of Irish money than I felt comfortable about and watched it passed to a spotty young assistant who duly vanished through a door.

Molly and I exchanged pleasantries. I asked if she did the journey often.

“At that price?” she exclaimed, “Though I’m not complaining. They give you your money’s worth. Pure luxury.”

“Four Hundred Rocks and Two Pebbles! Catch!” I braced to intercept a large canvas moneybag hurled in my direction. The featherweight object I caught felt at first empty but at the bottom of the bag I found an envelope containing a bundle of Fifty-Rock bank notes and two tiny,

One-Pebble, coins. With a suppressed smile, enjoying his little, "heavy rocks" joke at the expense of the newbie, the spotty assistant disappeared back through his door.

We joined the line for the luggage check, no modern affair of a conveyor belt taking your case through an X-ray scanner, more like an old movie, a row of uniformed guys standing behind trestle tables, rifling through your suitcase. I noticed two officials scrutinising us with more than casual interest, so much so that I began to feel uncomfortable. One approached and asked Molly to accompany him to his office. Through the window I saw them in intense conversation. Every now and then, Molly gave me a worried glance.

"Is everything OK?" I asked the other official.

"Routine customs check, sir."

Released from the formalities, outside on the platform, a flustered Molly hurried past me. "Muddle over my ticket. All sorted out now," she said, breathlessly. In contrast with her former friendliness, she seemed anxious to get away, I assumed embarrassed by the customs incident, so I left her to board, while I hung around, observing the scene.

The railcars, beautifully painted a deep maroon, certainly gave out the promise of being luxurious. This was no ordinary transport, more one for conveying millionaires or royals. The bodywork tapered off at the front to a bullet-shaped nose cone reminiscent of a streamlined rocket from an old sci-fi film. Behind the driver's cab a powerful throbbing emanated from the engine car. Connected to it, some goods vans, followed by

the galley, the restaurant car, the piano bar, and a chain of six sleepers. I stood watching workmen load the goods vans with stacks of boxes and crates. The sleeping cars began to emit a gentle hiss of steam from their heating system valves into the cool May evening. Reassured by this comforting sound, I boarded the train.

#

My watch showed midnight. Admitting the victory of my sleepless state, I dragged myself out of bed, dressed, and left my compartment. Treading quietly along the dimly lit corridor, anxious not to wake anyone, I stumbled through the covered joins between the rocking carriages, eventually reaching the bar, where I found only one other customer, the blue guard who'd been scrutinising me in the dining car. His friendly greeting defused a potentially awkward situation: "At last! A fellow insomniac! Can I buy you a drink?" I suggested red wine might help me sleep. He returned from the bar armed with two glasses and a full bottle.

Early twenties, unusually short in stature at five feet, my new friend possessed that stockier build of the Irish set against the English. However, he failed to impress as carrying significant weight or muscle. A bald head might have lent him a certain "Don't dare mess with me" effect but he enjoyed almost as much black hair as myself. Whatever these blue guards did, unless the man possessed clandestine martial arts skills, I couldn't imagine the job involved confronting physical threat. He introduced himself as Tadhg, a guard returning to work after ten days holiday travelling round the steam railways of Wales. An

obvious buff, he talked enthusiastically about our tunnel train, explaining in laborious detail the locomotion achieved through special pods extended below the engine to pull us along an electro-magnetised track. Clearly, he wasn't technical, the physics of his muddled explanation pure nonsense, but the potent combination of his verbal ramblings and two large glasses of full-bodied Merlot had the desired effect of making me drowsy. I left him to finish the bottle, while I staggered back down the swaying carriages to my compartment.

I woke next morning to absolute quiet. For a brief moment I imagined the walls of my Dublin flat to be closing in on me — then I remembered. Drawing back the curtains, I saw the window shutters had been taken down and that the train was standing at a platform. The station clock showed eight minutes past seven.

A knock on my compartment door: "Six-Thirty call, sir."

I opened the door to the steward. I said, "The clock outside says eight minutes past seven."

"That's 'Island Time', sir. Thirty-eight minutes ahead of us. We keep mainland time here on the train. Don't forget to put your watch forward when you leave."

"Why is the island thirty-eight minutes ahead of the mainland?"

"I don't know *why*, sir. It just *is*."

## Chapter 7

### Island

I saw neither Tadhg nor Molly at breakfast. Most of the passengers had left early. Of course, as permanent residents, they all had homes to go to. By the time I quit the train, the dining car had emptied. The Earl's estate manager had given me the vaguest of instructions for getting to my hotel: "Take a canal boat to the town centre, then walk to the seafront," adding obscurely that I could either walk or take the ferry across the water. Not a man with any patience for elaboration, so I left it at that — how difficult could it be to find the only hotel in town?

The warmth of the railway cars hadn't prepared me for the damp chill island mist that clung to my face as I stepped off the train. The platform was deserted, the waiting rooms locked up, the customs hall in darkness. At the side of the building, I found an exit gate, which gave onto a broad cobbled square surrounded by woodland. A fingerpost, labelled "Water Taxi", pointed to a footpath leading down to a canal, where I could see a horse-drawn barge slowly drawing off. I shouted for them to wait, and made a run for it, culminating in a flying leap, which landed me squarely on deck before they had moved too far out. The bargeman's face registered his disapproval of the recklessness of my boarding. I joined a dozen people standing squashed together between the tiller and the cargo, I assumed passengers from the train because of their long dark cloaks with the turned-up pointed collars.

Had I truly arrived in the domain of an unknown cult? Too late now to reconsider.

The barge glided along, my fellow passengers standing cloaked, silent and inscrutable. An impenetrable mist enveloped our serene passage, deadening all sound, so you could hear only the gentle lapping of water against the barge sides, the regular heavy thud of the horse's hooves on the towpath, and early morning birdsong from the fields beyond. Then, like an image from a surrealist painting, there appeared, through the gloom, rows of luminous eyes, each row stacked on top of the other.

"The windows of the hill dweller houses," confided the bargeman. "That's the desirable part of the island. Everyone wants to live there because of the special amenities."

Who or what were these "hill dwellers"? A kind of displaced tribe? And what were these "special amenities" the other islanders so desired? An image of "pygmies with patios" came into my head.

I asked whether we would be negotiating any locks. "You need a river to feed locks," said the bargeman. "Hungry for water they are. We have to preserve our limited resources here. The canal follows level ground." He pointed ahead. "There's the town wall!"

Looming up in front, the fortifications of a bygone era, an ancient battlemented wall, the canal passing through an archway flanked by tall stone towers — except of course all fake — according to the Earl's story no construction on the island could be more than twenty years old. As our boat passed under the arch, two men in



blue scrutinised us from above. Strange that on this isolated island it had been thought necessary to enclose the town in a guarded wall.

Inside, the scene could not have been more different, a densely built-up area, long terraces of houses lining the canal. With most of my fellow passengers I disembarked at the first stop. Passing down the town's main street, full of quaint shops, none open yet, I caught glimpses in the fog of cloaked figures unlocking their doors and stepping inside. The end of the street gave out onto a quayside, where I searched for the boat to the hotel but none of the several fishing vessels roped to bollards remotely resembled my expectation of a ferry. I peered out to sea, straining to hear the sound of an engine from within the vast misty expanse, the only vessel on the dead-calm water a rowing boat being slowly manoeuvred in my direction by an old man. Reaching the quay wall, he shouted up "You want the hotel?"

Bemused and horrified at the thought of him taking me onto the open ocean, I reluctantly handed down my luggage. The ferryman assured me the hotel was no distance and we set off. The mist soon swallowed up the receding quayside and I could see nothing but vaporous white. I marvelled at the old man's sense of direction as he rowed on, never once showing concern he might be off course. He had little conversation, apart from alluding at intervals as to how "fierce hot" it was, so much so that I felt obliged to offer to share the rowing. He brushed off the suggestion. "Not at all! You're grand! Fierce hot, though, isn't it?"

The hotel now coming into view presented an extraordinary sight. An impressive rectangular three-storey stone building, it appeared to be floating on the water. In front and to the right of it, a wide paved area; on the other side a garden set out with tables and sunshades. The surrounding water ran right up to the pavement and right up level with the lawn of the garden. No wall or drop separated water from land; the one joined seamlessly to the other. The ferryman noticed my amazement. "Clever, isn't it? It'll stay that way for another hour."

"Is the hotel on a raft? Does it float up and down with the tide?"

"With that weight of stonework! "

"Does it move up and down on jacks?"

"Impossible!"

I could see the ferryman enjoyed baffling newcomers with the mystery of the floating stone hotel.

"You're won't get it. I'll tell you. This isn't open sea. It's a bay. At the back of the bay is a wall. There's pipes through the wall at the height of the lowest high tide of the year. Any tide higher and the surplus drains through to a salt marsh the other side. So, high-water mark is at the same level all year round. The hotel and gardens are built on concrete foundations at the exact high-water level."

"Surely the ocean tide is too powerful to be defeated by a few drainpipes?"

"I can see you're a bright lad. The opening at the sea end of the bay is narrow. It's blocked by another wall, with sluice gates. They close those gates as soon as the tide has flowed in."

With a sudden jolt, the boat came to rest against the hotel pavement. Stepping out onto land precisely level with the water, I fully expected it to sink as I put my weight on it. Retrieving my luggage, I asked, "What happens at low tide?"

The old man rowed off, shouting back at me between strokes, "There's a sandy beach... But it's not natural... The sand's imported... A by-product of the salt mine... Nothing's real here."

The mist reclaimed his boat, and he was gone.

Hotel check-in was straightforward. They took me past the ground-floor dining room, full of blue-uniformed breakfasting guards, upstairs to a second-floor front-facing room, bright, clean and simply furnished. No swish modern decor here: a bed, chest of drawers, a clothes cupboard, some bookshelves and a writing desk. I stood for some time at the windows, looking out at the fog, and at the silvery sea, which enveloped and clung to the land as though threatening at any moment to spill over, engulfing all. Then, still groggy from my interrupted night on the train, I took off my jacket and lay down on the bed.

From somewhere down the corridor, I heard voices. A man: "Has he arrived yet? Who's been assigned?"

Answered by a woman: "Quiet! He's there!"

## Chapter 8

### Nostalgia Hotel

Midday I woke to the distant sound of excited children. Sunlight streamed in through my bedroom windows. The morning mist had lifted. The tide had receded a great distance, exposing a wide area of sandy beach. Mothers and fathers took advantage of the fine weather to sunbathe, while their children built sandcastles or splashed about in the shallow water's edge. I planned for the next two days to get to know the place. From hotel reception I purchased a map, which cost me three Rocks and fifty Pebbles of their island currency. Sitting outside in the hotel garden, in the warm sunshine, with a pint of the local brew for company, I congratulated myself on landing such a plush and unusual assignment — luxury hotel, food and accommodation all paid for, drink also paid for (“within reason” the Earl had said), generous wages, fascinating location, fine seaside summer weather, possibility of a girlfriend ...

The map showed the hotel to be at the edge of a small rocky hillock, unimaginatively entitled “Little Island”. Behind the hotel, a network of a few short streets. An S-shaped curve, marked out on the map with parallel dotted lines, ran from the back of Little Island across the stretch of water to Nostalgia Town. I took it to be a tunnel but later discovered it to be a causeway that could be crossed at low tide. Further inland was marked the straight harbour wall, with an area behind labelled “Salt Marsh”, the very same wall and salt marsh the ferryman told me precisely

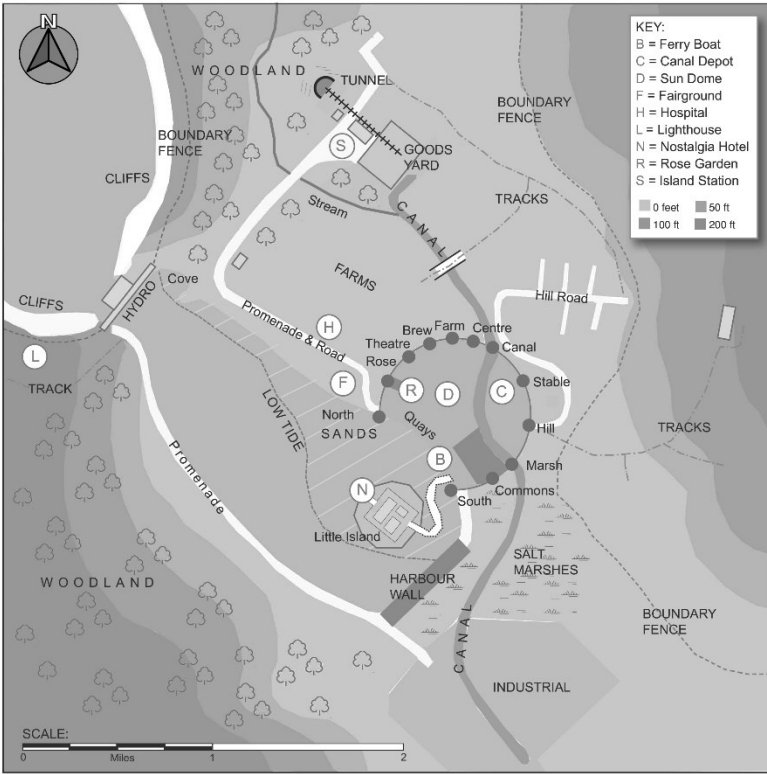
regulated the high-water mark. The wall cut right across the back of a horseshoe-shaped bay, two miles from end to end, a mile across at its widest point, tapering down to a gap of less than a hundred yards at its outlet through tall cliffs to the open sea. The legend "Sluice gates. Hydro Power Station" marked an embankment which closed off this outlet.

Across the water from the hotel was marked "Nostalgia Town". A magnified inset showed the streets in detail. I could easily appreciate five thousand people lived there. The wall, with its succession of twelve towers, or "gates", enclosed the built-up area. It formed a semicircle, terminating at each end at the long quayside. From the quays, a promenade and road ran along the side of the bay as far as the coastal cliffs, curving uphill through woodland and running back downhill to the railway station. Starting at the railway, the canal passed a steep hill built up with houses, which I judged must be the houses of the hill dwellers. The canal flowed into town under the wall, out again at the southern side, across the salt marsh, to an extensive area marked "Industrial". Various map symbols were obscure to me, but one I knew well from maps I'd used on cycle rides as a teenager in southern England: the symbol for a glasshouse. A vast area was marked off with glass, presumably the site of Earl's organic vegetable growing business.

On the far side of the water, a steep wooded escarpment ran the entire length of the bay. Another promenade was marked, stopping just short of the sea cliffs, with a building labelled "Lighthouse". Looking

from the hotel garden towards the coast, I could just make out in the morning heat-haze the round glass lantern of a tower sticking out from the wooded cliff top.

At the back of town, the contours indicated hills. An unlabelled feature, marked with a dotted line, stretched across this part of the map from one side to the other, with a single building the only other feature in this area of open countryside. Some tracks were marked also, but no roads. I turned over the map to study the plan of the rest of the island. There was no such plan, only an index of the grid markings for the town streets. I asked at reception if they had a map of the whole island. They told me the far side was used exclusively by the agricultural research institute — nobody ever went there, except the Blue Guards, who had the job of patrolling the security fence marked on my map with the dotted line.



### A Map of Nostalgia Town and Surrounding Area

I decided to spend the afternoon on a reconnaissance of the town. I now understood the estate manager’s cryptic instruction when he’d said, “either walk or take the ferry”. With the tide out, I could cross over by foot. The road behind the hotel rose steeply, winding its way between a jumble of quaint fishermen’s cottages before descending from the brow of the hill down a long straight street of ordered Georgian-style terraced houses to a quay at the back of Little Island. Two shops faced the quay: one an

aquarium, "Admission: 1 Rock", the other a typical seaside bucket-and-spade shop, with families queuing up for ice creams. Inside, an emporium of anything you might need for the seaside: beach balls, beach games, inflatable rubber rafts, swimming aids, swimming suits, bikinis, towels, bags, sun hats, sun creams, sun glasses, sun shades, canvas tents and windshields, food and drink, chairs, hammocks, loungers, fishing rods, fishing tackle, bait, beach carts, with stock spilling onto the already cramped floor space. As on the train, I noticed the distinct absence of anything made of plastic, the buckets and spades, for example, being made of tin and wood respectively. Was this an enforced policy of the town, to live up to its name by creating a pastiche of the past?

Leaving the shop, I walked the roadway to the far end of the quay. Here it sloped down to join the white stone-flagged causeway snaking across the golden sands towards the town. With the holiday atmosphere, the lure of the beach, the hot sun and the cloudless blue sky, I felt my enthusiasm for work rapidly diminishing. I decided my tour would go no further than the bay. Accordingly, I abandoned the causeway and made a half circuit of Little Island's rocky circumference. As I came back round to the hotel terrace on the far side, a pleasant light sea breeze tempted me to cross the sands and seek out the low tide mark. Close by the water's edge, knots of infants dug furiously with toy spades, flinging sand in all directions, creating little moated islands with towers and walls in imitation of their town. I took off my sandals and strode the shallows towards the coast for about a mile, then



turned back, striking off in the direction of the quays. From out here I had a panoramic view of Nostalgia, with the two round towers marking the quayside termination points of the surrounding wall. The town buildings were mainly two-storey, the exception dominating the view an enormous round glasshouse protruding above the line of all the others and containing many trees growing up to the apex of its domed roof. I speculated it might have a religious function. It might even be the temple of the wizard-like *cloakies*. The hippy origins of Nostalgia and the verdant greenery inside the dome suggested to me some sort of nature-worship cult. I imagined naked women joining hands inside, ululating, dancing round in a giant circle.

Near the quays, the sand underfoot became dry and powdery, obliging me to thread my way between more and more, mainly female, sunbathers. One woman, a brunette, aged around forty, wearing a bikini, and with fantastic legs, smiled at me invitingly.

A concrete ramp led from the sands to the tower known as "North Gate". On the far side of the road, a building labelled "Telegraph Office" had a sign up saying "Telephone Anywhere! Free!" This gave me the idea to ring John at the hospital. Inside, I expected the office to be a hive of activity but the door opened onto an empty wood-panelled chamber, high ceilinged, lit by a skylight, and having a partition and counter across the back. Telephone booths lined the walls, each containing a shelf with an old-fashioned brass telephone and a leather-bound directory. No telephone possessed a dial. The

woman behind the counter told me to lift up a receiver and listen. I did so and a well-spoken female voice answered, "What number do you want, caller?"

While I stood waiting to be connected, the woman from the beach stepped in from the quays. She had covered her bikini with a light blue summer dress. With the place empty, she could have chosen any booth but she took the one directly opposite mine. She stared at me as she lifted the receiver, her pixie hairstyle emphasising arresting blue eyes. Absently, she rubbed her right leg up and down her left calf, as if to relieve an itch, though I guessed a deliberate display, for my entertainment. She asked the operator for a number then abruptly turned her back to engage in conversation on the phone.

A crackly voice in my earpiece announced, "Hospital". When I asked to speak with John, they gave no response. I waited a few seconds, thinking I must have been cut off, then the crackly voice came back: Who was I and what was the purpose of my call? Another silence, then a different voice: "We're sorry. There are no telephones in the ward. You need to make an appointment." And the line went dead.

It shouldn't be this difficult to get in touch with John. The Earl's office might help. I asked the woman behind the counter for the estate number. She replied the network had no connection to the mainland. When I pointed out her sign, saying "Telephone Anywhere", she explained that meant anywhere on the *island*. She said I could send a telegram, and gave me a form to fill in. Not wishing to over-dramatise the situation of the aborted phone call, I

wrote the estate office a courtesy note thanking them for the hotel accommodation and dropping a hint about meeting John. I handed the form to a man wearing a green eyeshade, who proceeded to tap out my message in Morse code on a hinged contraption made of brass, like stepping back into the American Wild West. Curiously ancient technology for a town I found out later to be advanced in so many ways.

Leaving the office, I stole a quick glance at the lady of the legs. Halfway back down the road, a woman's voice behind me said, "You're new here, aren't you?" The lady herself.

She invited me to go with her to watch the incoming tide-race, apparently a sight not to be missed. I stood surveying the scene while she sat on the edge of the quay, those legs dangling over the side. I noticed she wore a wedding ring, as well as fetching, light-blue strappy sandals, matching her dress. The tide was still out, families dotted all over the extensive sands, children playing, enjoying the summer sunshine, a tranquil scene soon to be disturbed. Several guards went down onto the beach, anxiously consulting their watches. Others sprinted across the sands from the hotel while some with pushbikes took off at speed in the direction of the coast. All along, from nearby to the far distance, the sound of guard whistles. "That's to warn families to take care of their young children," said my companion.

The water was coming in fast now, covering the sand at such a rate it was like watching a speeded-up film. Clouds of swooping gulls marked the advancing tidal

edge, eager for food churned up by the rapid flow, the cacophony of their squawking making redundant any further use of warning whistles. The families had picked up their towels and things and hurried towards us ahead of the chasing wave. The children obviously thought it great fun, this daily race to beat the tide, their screams of delight mixing with the exultant bird cries.

Ten minutes later, with calm restored, where there had been a wide expanse of sand, now all was seawater. Fierce Hot came along, untied his boat and rowed two guards back to the hotel. I said goodbye to my companion and awaited the return of the ferry. Sitting in the boat, watching the receding quayside, I regretted I had not asked her where in Nostalgia she lived. She had told me only her Christian name: "Sally", the last thing she said to me, "We must meet again."

At seven, I went downstairs to get something to eat. The busy hotel dining room and lounge bar fronted the whole ground floor, taking maximum advantage of the view, the wide sweep of the bay out to the coastal cliffs. The muted decor of wood-panelled walls, plush sofas and country pub furnishings avoided the insolence of attempting to upstage the magnificence of the panorama framed by the windows. Just like on the train, the menu offered vegetarian dishes and fish, but no meat. Did they have a moral objection to meat, or did its absence from menus provide an indication of the size of the island, that it lacked the land area needed to support effective meat production?

Late evening, from the window of my hotel room, I watched the rise and fall of the glow from the distant cliff-top lighthouse. The lighthouse — now there was a funny thing! Who built it, and for what purpose? Wouldn't the lighthouse in fact draw attention to the habitation of the island they were so anxious to keep secret? With hindsight, I understand I was too absorbed at the time with my impending rendezvous with Saoirse to appreciate this question of the lighthouse was the first doubt in my mind about Nostalgia Island and the trust I should place in the people who controlled it.