

Eirene

Looking back, Jack supposed it was the hat that said the most. Large, broad brimmed, stylish – even a bit rakish, perhaps – and bright red. Or sunshine yellow. Or shocking pink. Any colour so long as it drew attention to itself. A statement that shaded her eyes so that you could never really look into them for truth. A cover in many senses of the word, like her always pronouncing her name as Eirene while spelling it as Irene.

Eirene, goddess of peace and spring and one of the keepers of the gates of heaven. Irene, expensively dressed woman of no known background, abode or income, who like her Greek namesake spent much of the time heaven knows where and then briefly appeared unannounced amongst mortals before vanishing again.

She was good at disappearing. Sometimes Jack would spot the hat further along the street and think ‘That’s Irene’ and then he’d look again and she was nowhere to be seen. It couldn’t be as simple as her just taking it off, because where would she put it? They were too cumbersome to carry discreetly and hats like that don’t fold. They live on the head or in hatboxes, which was another thing. Wherever she lived, she must have had a room full of large hatboxes, for the extravagant brims were always immaculate. Who has space for such things now?

She reminded him of a great aunt – sweet and kind and with a face impossibly old and caked in face powder – who wore equally large hats whenever she went out, though these were in more subtle colours. At some stage they had replaced the neat clothes in photographs of her when she was a sports car driving, cigar smoking flapper in the nineteen-twenties. Slightly curious as he was now to know when and why this change occurred, small boys did not, at least in his childhood, ask impossibly old great aunts about their millinery, or indeed anything much. Any more than he asked his father why he used to wear a hat for so long and why he stopped at an age when his balding head had even greater need of protection from the elements. Some time in Jack’s life, hats fell from grace as everyday wear.

Yet he never saw Irene without one; except for the last time.

When he started out as a trainee reporter on his local newspaper, Jack’s first job was to cover the goings on of the county set. The official goings on. Much that he learned could not be put in the paper, although the editor would always ask him if he had any scandal.

‘For my bottom drawer,’ the editor would say. Resting until the time is ripe, Jack supposed, like his own rejected novel. It would not have surprised Jack if he had discovered the editor regarded these titbits as a potential supplement to his pension.

It struck Jack as odd that he was never sent with the photographer, until the editor explained. Jack was sent early to get the details while everyone was sober; the photographer was sent at the end, when everyone had had a good time. Jack got the facts, with or without a few rumours on the side; the photographer got happy faces and the dirt. More bottom drawer material.

‘You’re there mostly to find out what’s *supposed* to be happening, but don’t give me any stuff from Earache,’ the editor had once commanded. ‘Far too unreliable.’ Jack only worked out that Earache was Eirene a moment before the editor told him, taking pity on the puzzled features of one so wet behind the ears.

Irene was certainly a talker. Underneath those hats there was a mouth that rarely seemed to rest, at least at such county functions as Jack found her to attend. Since Jack was only ever there for the first half hour or so, it was not long before Irene spotted the pattern of his appearances and sidled up to him very soon after his arrival to tell him who was who and what was what. No matter his editor’s opinion, Jack was very grateful to use Irene’s knowledge, especially before the faces became irritatingly familiar.

She would stand next to him, glass in hand, hat brim in danger of slicing his jugular. ‘My dear boy,’ she would always begin, ‘now do you know everyone? I suppose not. Well...’

Side by side. No eye contact.

After several encounters Jack became quite curious. When he asked others anything personal about her, like whether she was married or had any children, nobody could say, although there was no question that ‘everyone knows Eirene’. Even club secretaries could not advise that they possessed an address to which to send invitations, only that ‘someone’ would always invite her or bring her as a guest.

When he tried to ask Irene herself, she would either be inconsistently vague – she was from the North, or the South, or ‘not a native’ – or she would turn the question aside, often with another question. Husband? ‘My dear boy, you seem only to think in units of one. Are *you* married?’ Children? ‘Heartbreakers, don’t you think? Do you have any?’

And Evasion No. 1, which Jack’s father had claimed to have found much used by the Jehovah’s Witnesses he engaged on his doorstep. When put in any slightly tricky spot, they would throw the burden of proof back onto the questioner.

You might say to them that God appears to be extraordinarily absent from the world.

'Why do you think that is?'

Because he doesn't exist.

'Why do *you think* that is?'

Because he appears to be extraordinarily absent... oh damn! Beg pardon...

Even broader smiles on the faces of the Witnesses.

So with Irene. Were Jack to ask if she ever actually had a ticket for these events, she would in all likelihood respond, 'Would you think the less of me if I hadn't? I'll show you mine, if you show me yours!', knowing full well Jack had none. A touch of vulgarity did sometimes escape from beneath the sophisticated hat. It was slightly unnerving.

Then she disappeared. For nearly nine months. After his first couple of functions with no Irene to be seen, Jack asked if anyone could say what had become of her. Nobody knew, nor seemed to care overmuch. Irene had always been somebody else's guest. Nor could anyone provide him with her surname. Most people agreed that it was Russian, or Polish, or Latvian, something East European, but beyond it probably beginning with R, there was no agreement. The suggestion of Raskolnikov was vaguely familiar, but when he proffered that to his editor, he was told to go and get an education.

He once thought he saw her on Spencer Street, but on this time catching up with the hat, he found that it was someone else.

Had Jack not been promoted to covering the courts, he would not have seen her again. Somehow he must have missed the trial itself, which was puzzling, but he was there when Irene Ross, also known as Eirene Rostov, Rostropova, Rozanov, Romanova and several similar names, appeared for sentencing. Guilty of money laundering and receiving stolen goods, and as an inevitable consequence, tax evasion.

An eye-watering fine and two years in prison.

From the public gallery there was no way Jack could initiate eye contact with her, but in any case her gaze remained fixed straight in front of her, as though she were looking through the paraphernalia of the court at something else. She was never a large person, but Jack thought that she appeared much smaller than he remembered, shrunk, a flower that had closed its petals and folded in on itself as darkness fell.

Withdrawn. Silent. Hatless.

GATEWAY

The hospital gown, she thought as she struggled to put her hands into armholes that seemed to be three feet apart, must be the single most unattractive, unflattering, unwieldy and unco-operative garment ever devised by man. And it could only be a man. And a sumo wrestler too if this was meant to be the normal size.

At least if they had told her she could wear it like a dressing gown she might have had a chance of wrapping it round her like a badly cut kimono, but this way – it was if the tapes at what was now the back had been deliberately placed where they could never be reached by the wearer's fingers. It was a two person garment in every respect: two people required for it to be done up and capacity for two people, if not more, inside.

She supposed she should be grateful really. She was on the accelerated Gateway Programme and had to admit that, compared with her experiences in casualty and trying to get something done about her knee, this was a fast-acting and smooth operation. Once something was potentially seriously wrong, they looked after you very well. She sighed, just wishing it wasn't 'potentially serious'.

The first indication of trouble has been a real shock. Normally the results from the annual Health and Social Wellbeing Checkup would not come through for a week or more, but it had been only five hours after her scans and tests that she had been contacted by the on-call doctor asking her to come in, trying to put her at ease by saying that it was just precautionary and probably nothing to be concerned about, and then chopping off her resuscitated hopes at the legs by saying, 'Do you have a partner who can come in with you?'

And no, she didn't. Not now.

'Tiny little spots showing up in the prefrontal cortex. That doesn't need to mean anything but it would be better to have it looked at more closely,' the doctor had said. 'I'm going to put you on the Gateway Programme and you'll be seen within two weeks for a deep scan. It's probably nothing, but we can't just leave it, you do understand that, don't you? The consequences of doing nothing?'

So here she was. She sat down on the narrow bench, looking at the little basket that now held her clothes and belongings. That could be her old life in there. This might now be the start of some prolonged and debilitating and even ultimately unsuccessful treatment,

while her carefree former self – well she looked carefree from here – lay neatly folded up in a blue plastic basket.

‘Shit.’ Not a word she was given to using, but how absolutely right it could be.

The nurse appeared again, drawing aside the cubicle curtain, which was another shade of blue. Everything seemed to be blue. Branding gone mad. ‘I’ll take that,’ the nurse said, picking up the basket. ‘Follow me.’

In the scanner room she met Vittorio, really quite handsome, disarmingly Italian and confidently reassuring. Ah well, in another world...

He explained that he would insert a cannula and inject a dye that would help give a better picture on the scanner. She might get a metallic taste in her mouth and feel that she had wet herself, but nothing would actually have happened. Then he told her to lie back. He would talk to her through an intercom from the next room. She smiled inwardly. Dear God, the romance of it all!

Lie back and think of– anything but what this was really all about. Did people who had to come in for treatment on a regular basis have a special imaginary world they could slip into to replace both boredom and anxiety? Like a prisoner building a castle in the air, adding rooms and hallways, staircases and turrets, secret passages and tunnels. Escape routes.

She had presumed the padded base on which she lay would transport her into the scanner, but instead the machine moved to embrace her, closely enveloping her head, quite claustrophobic. She breathed as and when instructed, eyes shut against the proximity of what felt like a helmet of purring plastic.

‘All done,’ Vittorio’s voice suddenly announced and although her eyes remained shut, she sensed the free space around her head as the scanner retreated. From then on it was painless: a dressing over where the cannula had been, back to a cubicle, unfold her old self, some smiles and thank-yous and try to find the hospital exit and remember exactly where she had left her car.

In the scanner control room the older man seated next to Vittorio, indicated the Italian could take a break and then magnified the image on screen. Remarkable. Interesting. A lot of red dots. A lot. Nothing joined up yet, nothing you could call a growth, but any one of them might become a cause for concern. You didn’t often see such a spread. All over the prefrontal cortex and leeching out into other areas. And the woman probably had no idea she had a problem of this magnitude.

The question, as ever, was whether to try and nip all this in the bud or wait until there was something larger to work on. With this many seeds of rebellious thought in random distribution over such an area, there was no chance of addressing the issue with just focussed re-education. Act now or wait? Which would be more effective, kinder in the long run? For there was absolutely no doubt in his judgment that this case would at some stage need to be diagnosed as terminal.

Ghost

‘Ghost ship, ghost town, ghost walk, why can’t I have a ghost dog?’

‘Strictly speaking a ghost walk isn’t itself a ghost.’

‘So you want a ghost taking a ghost dog for a ghost walk? With a little ghost bag of ghost—’

‘The Hound of the Baskervilles?’

‘Not a ghost either, or even a demon. People imagined it to be ghostly.’

‘Well imagine a dog. As a ghost.’

‘How does it bark? Wooo-ooo-ff? Wooo-ooo-ff?’

‘I think you will find that in most representations of ghosts, they cannot make sounds. Only signs.’

‘Mine spoke. Well, one of them did. Father to son. Crucial to the plot.’

‘As ever, you are the exception, Will.’

‘No soul.’

The cacophony of voices screeched to a halt.

‘What?’ said the young doctor whose desire for a ghost dog had set in motion the clattering of comments. ‘Would you repeat that, Jonathan?’

‘No soul. Animals do not have souls. Therefore they cannot be ghosts.’

‘All living creatures have souls,’ the doctor replied. ‘That’s what having life means. It gives them their beauty and their truth.’

‘What a singularly preposterous view for a medical man, my dear John,’ Jonathan said, ‘only once again confirming my opinion that they are all crooks and charlatans – not yourself of course, but then you quickly gave up practising, did you not? Notwithstanding that, it is a complete cartload of—’

‘Gentlemen, gentlemen,’ Charles interposed. ‘Not only do we have ladies present, who more than deserve our respect for all they bring to our table, but I ask you to remember the golden rule of this Writers’ Circle. Trenchant criticism welcome, but no personal abuse.’

‘In my heyday that’s what writing was about,’ Jonathan muttered and sank into his best imitation of offended silence – usually so convincing that only he knew it was imitation. And even he sometimes forgot.

‘It is an interesting point though,’ ventured Emily. ‘Do ghosts have to be dead souls. What after all is a ghost?’

‘Well a dead soul is not going anywhere,’ Jane pointed out. ‘I think your question is whether ghosts are the souls of the dead.’

‘Whatever,’ Emily sighed. ‘You are perfectly aware of what I mean.’

‘Well I do think it helps to be precise,’ Jane declared rather primly, before bursting into a small fit of distinctly unprimly laughter. ‘Oh I do love it when you put on that face!’

‘Views round the table?’ ventured Charles, stroking his beard, as he was inclined to do when otherwise turning attention away from himself. ‘Are ghosts the souls of the dead and if not what are they? Will?’

‘Mine were always the dead returned,’ Will replied, ‘and always will be. Not necessarily souls as such.’

‘And always murdered too,’ John added. ‘In your plots ghosts are always people who had come to an untimely end, except for that murder weapon of course.’

‘The manner of their deaths was *why* they came back,’ Will said, ‘either pricking consciences or demanding revenge. The murder weapon was just a hallucination by the way. Probably.’

‘That’s the real point,’ Emily suggested. ‘The imagination is supremely important. It doesn’t matter whether ghosts are real or not – what is reality? – but the imagination can see or even create them. The imagination holds all the power – for good and evil.’

‘Quite so,’ John agreed.

‘Consequently the unimaginative may not see what the imaginative do,’ Jane said. ‘I’m with Emily on that. I once wrote a piece where the heroine imagined every horror and threat, when in point of fact none existed at all. She was just overwrought.’

‘Yes, but you always come down on the side of cold, dispassionate reason,’ Emily remarked, ‘so you’re not really with me at all. In my version, the horror might be there or might not. It’s up to the reader to decide. You undervalue the imagination...if I may say so.’ The others knew that Emily, indeed none of them, wished to invoke Jane’s scorn which could and did cut to the quick. Her smile could slice bread.

Charles held up his hand. 'I'm not sure. I've had ghosts who were essentially, I don't know, ideas, concepts, externalisations of what people would not admit to themselves. I don't recall anyone criticising them as not being ghosts.'

Jane leaned forward. 'I for one would always call them spirits if they are not, or rather were not specifically people. And especially if they come to visit from the future.'

'So,' Jonathan declared, interrupting Charles's response before it could begin, 'in reality there simply isn't much to a ghost, is there? The soul or something else, if you will, of a dead person, from the past, with some reason not to be resting peacefully. Anything else, idea, concept as you call it, anything from the future, not a ghost but a spirit or a force or a malevolent being, but not a ghost. No wonder all ghost stories revolve around the same plot. And are utterly humourless.'

Charles shook his head. 'What about Oscar Wilde's *Canterville Ghost*? That has humour.'

'That self-satisfied piece of etiolated bourgeois faggotry!' Jonathan exclaimed and dismissed both writer and story with a noise that might, perhaps, have been a snort. They all knew better than to rise to the bait.

'Another thing,' John asked. 'Can a ghost hold an object? Can it attack you with an axe, or does the axe just fall through it. Or to put it another way, can a ghost write?'

'At last, the ghostwriter joke,' Jonathan murmured.

'I mean, hold a pen or a quill.'

There was a moment's silence. 'Good point,' said Jane eventually. 'Several stories have ghosts leaving messages when they themselves are described as transparent and trans... transambulant.'

'Walking through objects?' Charles suggested. Jane smiled sweetly.

'Have you just made that up?' asked John.

'Yes,' said Jane, 'to both questions.'

'Well done,' Will said. 'I like that. Good word.' He wrote it down.

As he did so, Emily offered her opinion that ghosts could hold things from their own previous lives, such as a quill or of course their own head, but that items from different times would prove very slippery if not totally beyond grasping.

John opened his mouth to say something about ghosts just making writing appear but stopped immediately as the chimes of the church clock sounded from the bottom of the road.

‘Time, I think, ladies and gentlemen,’ said Charles, rising to his feet. ‘We don’t seem to have set a task for next month, but if it’s acceptable with you I will think of a title and communicate through the usual channels. We are expecting Henry back next month as well.’

‘He had a good ghost story,’ said Emily. ‘The adult thought it was imagination but the children knew it was real. Scary.’

‘Oh,’ said John, ‘ I thought it was all in the governess’s mind. Like with the professor in *Oh, Whistle and I’ll Come to You*. Except perhaps that wasn’t. Ah well, never mind.’

And they were gone, all except for Charles, who quickly checked that nothing had been left behind. There was never any lingering at the end of meetings. Once it was time, the group members tended to leave as if they had urgent appointments elsewhere, tonight passing straight through the walls.

‘I do wish they wouldn’t do that,’ sighed Charles. ‘There’s a perfectly good door.’

There was, although he did not go to the trouble of opening it. Outside, he stood for a moment contemplating the night air, then turned right and made his way down the road. Around the corner at the bottom by the church, he saw that yet again some incomprehensible pet owner had hung his little bag of delights on the lower branches of the tree overhanging the graveyard wall.

Charles sighed. ‘Oh, come on...’ he muttered.

As he passed the lych gate, an indistinct shape in the weakening moonlight – a vapour of dankness, the shadow of a shadow, something with only the vaguest idea of edges – detached itself from the gloom cast by the gateway and started silently to follow him home.

Happy Birthday

*Happy Birthday to you,
Happy Birthday to you,
Happy Birthday dear–*

The doorbell rang. Two quick, one long.

Lisa glanced up, the smile still rather ridiculously decorating her face while her stomach felt as though she were plummeting down a liftshaft. Her father was already opening the French windows onto the small balcony while her mother made ready to close the shutters once he was through. She nodded to Lisa.

Going into the hall and approaching the front door of the flat, Lisa told herself not to be silly, not to be afraid. If it was real danger, the door would have been battered down by now and who would ring like that except a friend? Or someone to whom a friend had been coerced into revealing the signal?

She took a deep breath and on tiptoe looked through the spyglass in the door. There appeared to be no one there. Turning to her mother, who now stood in front of the closed door of the bedroom, her arms folded in obvious defensive defiance, Lisa shook her head. Her mother nodded again and Lisa carefully opened the door.

There was indeed no-one there, although she thought she could hear fast but faint footsteps echoing up the stairwell. On the grey plastic tiles in front of the door lay the free monthly magazine that offered local news and adverts to the few who ever bothered to open it. She recognised the cover. She had already thrown away an identical copy earlier in the week. Picking it up, she turned back into the flat.

'Mummy?'

Her mother put one finger to her lips and held out her hand for the magazine, which she then flicked through as though looking for something. Then evidently satisfied, she went back into the living room and knocked softly three times on the shutters before opening them. Lisa saw her father laying flat the small ladder that he would, if necessary, have used to cross to the next door balcony and the next after that, where old Mrs Smith (was that really her name?) lived all alone.

Her father took the magazine from her mother, placed it on the newspaper on the table and after retrieving a sharp craft knife from the bottom draw of the sideboard, turned the pages until he found one that pleased him and cut along its top edge and outer side. Lisa

quickly realised that two pages had been stuck together to form a compartment out of which her father carefully drew two smaller pieces of paper.

As he flattened them out to read carefully, Lisa could see that there was a hologram image at the bottom of each, like on a bank card, and that one had a passport photograph of her father, and the other held similar photos of her mother and herself.

Her father looked up and spoke one word: 'Now.'

'Oh my God,' thought Lisa, 'This is the best birthday present ever. We're going. At last we're going.' And quite incongruously, given her certain knowledge that numerous risks surrounded the journey ahead, her head filled with song: 'We're off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard—'

'Sshh.'

She hadn't realised she'd given any sound to the words. But she knew what to do. They had practised enough times: the change of clothes into those that would not mark them out; the packing of essentials into bags that could at a glance say happy shopping more than travel; the changes of hair style to match the photographs, blurring what their friends would think of as their immediately recognisable profiles. It did not take long; they could not be burdened by carrying very much. 'Natural' was the key word her father had drummed into her.

Once in the hall, they looked each other over. Lisa's father put the document bearing his photograph into his jacket pocket and handed the other to his wife. She gave him a long look before opening her handbag. He gave a small shrug, smoothed his hair, looking so peculiar to Lisa as it swept the wrong way, went to the door and then suddenly stopped. He turned, placed his hand lightly on his wife's shoulder and kissed her lingeringly and unashamedly on the lips. He turned to Lisa, who had started to blush at this unexpected and rather shocking parental intimacy, and bending slightly, kissed her on the cheek. Then with a quick nod, he opened the door and they were off, Lisa's heart beating as if she were running hard, when she was all too aware that was the last thing she must do.

Avoiding the lift – 'We don't want any surprises when the doors open,' her father had said – they descended the stairs, her father slightly ahead and looking over the banisters on each landing before beckoning them on. They had just got out onto the street when Lisa heard her father mutter 'Damn!'

'What?' asked her mother, her eyes scanning up and down the street before she turned to face him.

'Her birthday present. It's still on the table.'

'Never mind that. It's too late. We mustn't stop now.'

'You two go on. I'll just nip back. It won't take a moment. I'll meet you at Marks and Spencers.'

'No. Don't be stupid! No!'

But he was gone, hurrying back into the building, breaking every rule. As usual.

Lisa looked at her mother. She was both angry and about to cry.

'Mummy?'

Her mother quickly took her hand and started to walk briskly, before recollecting herself and calming the pace. 'I can't look back without attracting attention. I think you can. When we get to the phone shop, you look and see if he's behind us yet.'

At the phone shop the answer to that was 'No.'

'Look again at the end of the street, before we cut through Boots.'

But when Lisa nonchalantly turned her head outside Boots, she saw two vans pulled up outside Borough Gardens and what might have been her father being pushed into the back of the nearest as a dozen or more yellow jacketed police support officers looked on. She snapped her head back sharply.

'Is he there?'

Lisa's brain was already calculating. In case they got separated, they each knew how it should start: the tea in the Marks and Spencers café and the man named John who would ask if they had rung for his taxi, after which they would be in the hands of others. If they stopped now, they increased their chances of also being arrested. If she told her mother that her father was not yet visible, her mother might want to go back to find him, despite all that been agreed. And as she did what she knew she must do, the question that rattled in Lisa's mind would not lie down: was she trying to save her mother or really only herself?

'He's on his way,' she said. 'But he mustn't run. We need to get on.'

Lisa had never before had to fight against tears as she did now. Quite what might have happened to her father between that moment of Lisa supposedly having seen him following behind them and his failure to arrive in time at the café would, she knew already, torture her mother for the rest of her life; while between her and her mother there would rest this appalling secret, this lie that perhaps her mother even suspected but would never accuse her of telling, and which would be part of her own desolate baggage until she herself died.

'We'll finish the song when he comes.'

'What? Sorry, pardon?' Lisa said.

'We never finished singing Happy Birthday to you. We'll finish it when we're all together again.'

Just the Ticket

“A boy’s name?”

“Yes.”

“It’s definitely a boy?”

“My dear, I do know a... tiggYWinkle when I see one.”

“John, Thomas.”

“Well if you prefer—”

“No. John. Glve him the name John.”

“Any particular reason? It’s not really family. There’s no John in the immediate family, as you know.”

“That is my point, Thomas. He isn’t family. And if you do go ahead and adopt him, as you seem strangely determined to do, then I would think it wrong to name him as if he were family. What would Matthew think? Oh by the way, a letter came today saying that he will be coming down on the eighth but will be staying with some new friends he has made and so won’t come up until the fifteenth.”

“You make him sound most unsettled. Will he mind an adopted brother? There will be such an age difference I can hardly think it will affect him very much.”

“And me, Thomas? Have you thought about me? I know I am many years younger than you, but I have not been well, and even putting that aside, do you not consider that you are laying most of the burden for the child’s upbringing at my door?”

“But surely with a nanny—”

“*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, as you so often delight in telling me. And besides, I am not sure that we do not need to find a wet nurse before a nanny.”

“A wet nurse?”

“Oh Thomas, don’t tell me that you have forgotten everything. Because if you have, I really do not think that adoption is a good idea at all.”

“But what else can we do with the child? Hand him in to a police station, so he can be sent to an orphanage, where, God knows, as well as you do Elizabeth, his chances of making anything out of his life will be next to none? We have the means to do some good in the world and I cannot help but feel that we have been given this child for a reason.”

“We? Given?”

“Yes”

“In error. Where is the bag that I gave you for your fiftieth birthday, Thomas?”

“I may yet hope to retrieve it, even without a ticket. This other one is of course no substitute at all, but what I have temporarily lost along with your... lovely bag was just an overcoat and a few books, all of which can be replaced. What came in this new bag was a life, a calling, dare I say, a duty.”

“You will now tell me that God moves in a mysterious way.”

“Oh dear Elizabeth, to mock my belief in that will not make God move less mysteriously. You must ask yourself why this has happened.”

“I would say, principally because a fool at the left luggage office cannot read a ticket, either through lack of education or over-consumption of alcohol. I say you should take it back, baby and all. Does it not occur to you that the real owner of that bag might be, perhaps agonisingly and frantically, looking for it even now?”

“Frankly my dear, I do not think that will be the case. Babies are abandoned on doorsteps and other such places in the city where they are likely to be found, and I am afraid, in the country, in places where they are not. I have no doubt that whatever unfortunate woman deposited this bag, with full knowledge of its contents, at the left luggage office expected the child to be discovered. Once he should have become hungry, he would surely have started to cry out and then be found.”

“There is no evidence in the bag as to the identity of the owner?”

“Only the initials LP near the lock. Nothing else at all.”

“Well, Thomas, if we do adopt this foundling – and I make no promises yet – he must have a full name. If he is to be John to us, he must be John Somebody to the rest of the world. And it cannot be Cardew. He is not of our blood and cannot be thought to be so.”

“Indeed, dear, I follow your point. What shall we have? We need some inspiration and yet, with a certain irony, we do not want a name of anyone who is famous enough to inspire, lest a connection be thought to exist. We must be inspired to the mundane.”

“Somewhere you have been today, Thomas? A street, a square, solid but unostentatious.”

“Victoria will hardly do. John Victor? Or, as you know, I was spending time with my old colleague John Higginbotham at Lancing. John Lancing? We had lunch at Goring-on-Sea, but that will hardly do. We had scones. John Scone? No, half the world does not know

how to pronounce it properly. Scon, scoon, oh this is difficult. Must we do it now? Can we not leave it until later?"

"Come, Thomas, you give up too easily. It will be worth it, I promise."

"Worth it, Ah, do you know I have here in my pocket my first class ticket to Worthing. The Brighton line. John Bright-on? John Bright. What about John Bright?"

"I fear that may prove something of a hardship for the boy at school if he should turn out to be of little more than average intelligence. Let us make it Worthing. John Worthing. The line is immaterial."

A Tour of the Lab

Well, like any busy laboratory I suppose, it's a mixture of old experiments, ones that are being conducted right now and preparations for new ones, new ideas. I'm afraid if you were expecting to see everything in neat rows, you are going to be rather disappointed.

It's hard to keep eyes on everything at the same time. There's always some clearing up to do – this experiment exploded, that one imploded, another is just dormant with no sign of life, or apparently so; half the time you can never really tell – but to be honest the driving force is the impulse to create something new, not to dust everything down and stack it in order, put it away. Yes, untidiness can sometimes compromise what one's trying to do, but the other side of the coin is serendipity. Suppose that man Fleming had been one of those 'a place for everything and everything in its place' type of people. What then, eh?

In an ideal universe I suppose you would start at one end and keep moving in the same direction until you ran out of room. Then start again at the beginning, clearing out the old stuff to make way for the new. It never works out like that in practice. Look at this for example. It was quite promising for a little while, but it soon became obvious that it was going nowhere. It just sort of died. Like that one over there. Meanwhile the one next to it, on the left, is bubbling away nicely, although it's probably tempting fate to say that. There are so many things that can go wrong. And to be completely upfront with you, there aren't many experiments here where there's a defined outcome being looked for. More often it's a case of seeing what happens if you do this or do that with only a general idea of where you want it to go. I am in the very fortunate position of being able to afford that luxury.

Now do have a good look at this one. It's – how shall I put it? – in the balance. Nearly all the time. Will it come good? Will it go bad? I'm supposed to have a fairly good notion of how things should turn out, but with this one, I have no idea. It constantly confounds expectations, one way or the other. Sometimes I think I'm going to get the most positive results to date and then suddenly there's a complete set-back and it all goes haywire, mad even. I've thought more than once about bringing it to an end but then I'll take a closer look and find something quite extraordinary and fascinating is taking shape. Or trying to. And given the effort I've put into this particular project, it would be a real shame just to stop it in its tracks. Though it may in the end have to come to that. I suppose if I had to classify it, I would say 'shows promise, at times' like a coded school report that really means 'You have the ability but would achieve a lot more if you actually tried rather than just coasting'. Quite infuriating really.

Which is why I'm trying to replicate it over here, or at least replicate the best parts while looking to avoid the mistakes and dead ends of the original, which in many ways I'm now just using as a kind of testbed for this new one. I must say, I think this one should or at least could turn out rather well. It's early days yet, of course, but there are small signs that it is beginning to evolve. I'm really looking forward to seeing how it develops. If the earlier model is anything to go by, it shouldn't take too long. Just four or five billion years.