

1997

It is now generally accepted that George Orwell chose the date 1984 by reversing the last two digits of the year in which his novel was written.

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were all set to different time-zones. Harold looked nervously around as he waited for the entry phone to be answered. Eventually it was: he gave the codeword (which today was 'primogeniture'), and he passed quickly into the building as an empty Budweiser can crashed into the wall above his head, fell, and clattered down an open manhole.

Inside the concourse all was clean, and plush and quiet: a million miles removed, it seemed, from the degradation of San Carlos Square just beyond the electronic entrances. (The square was in Islington; it had once been called Mandela, or Mugabe, or some such name: but all that had changed when the Commissioners had taken over from the 'borough council' in the later 80s). Harold was searched, took the lift to the 16th floor, and held up his ID in front of the securiscope, before the mistress of the house deactivated the lasalarm and let him in.

It was his first day working for this couple. They had rung the agency at short notice, wanting a man for 'general duties', and as Harold had only worked for seven days in five weeks, it was welcome, whatever 'general duties' were. His speciality was butling (the agency called it 'stewarding'), but he could turn his hand to ushering, or valeting, or even gardening, and at least the job would last for several days. The next five weeks or so were bad ones for the supply servant trade: with all those public holidays (Jubilee Day, Royal Wedding Day, and next week, naturally, Belgrano Day) you were lucky if you did a full week in the months of May or June.

Nice couple, Harold thought. The point, the mistress said, was that nanny, housekeeper and both the maids had taken William and Dorothy to Merionethshire, and Sue and Bryan were needing somebody to keep the place, you know, just ticking over, for a week or two, until they'd all return. And if he could come in daily, do the plants, switch the freezer over to the generator if the national grid went down (*when* the grid goes down, laughed Bryan),

Thanks to Eve Brook and Bob Rowthorn for many of the ideas contained in this story.

and keep the place in shape, then that would be just fine.

At which point Bryan checked his worldwatch, announcing that if he didn't get to work before the markets closed in Delhi they would have his guts for garters. But he'd be back for sure by eighteen GMT.

(Harold knew, of course, that Bryan would not leave the building as he, Harold, had entered it: he would take the lift down to the basement car park, past the service concourse, and drive out through the electronic doors, which would close like a jaw behind him, and off he'd go, past the garbage and the pot-marked pavements and the open manholes, as if he and his family didn't really live in Islington at all).

By 9.00 (by normal British time, thought Harold, sniffily), the flat was empty. Everything was clear. All servant agencies now signed an anti-theft agreement with their clients, and although half your pay was docked against temptation, an agency like Harold's still suffered quite substantial losses. Harold however was known for his punctilious honesty (too stupid to steal, people at the agency remarked) and so was one of the few people on the books to be trusted with a job which gave him free run of someone else's home. He started in the kitchen.

The flat was large, and well-equipped, with a gym *and* a solarium. The master, clearly, was a banker: Chase Manhattan, probably, or maybe First National of Tokyo, or even Intermid or EuroWest. Madam, she'd said, was in the civil service (which she'd admitted quite apologetically, as if it was something to be vaguely ashamed of, like being a pornographer or a sociologist). She hadn't told him which of the four ministries she worked for, but from her general demeanour he could guess. He chuckled as he took the pulses out of soak. He could remember when the Government was like an octopus, its interfering tentacles were everywhere (the *Government* owned factories and mines, and even built the roads!). But then, as her last gesture before retirement, the Great Aunt (as she was still affectionately known) had rigorously rolled back the ever-expanding

David Edgar

agencies, reducing them to a manageable four. The first was the Department of Security, which ran the army, the police, and dealt with foreign governments; the second was the Department of the Budget, which dealt with all financial matters (it had once been called 'The Treasury', but that implied an open crock of gold, whereas the word 'budget' implied frugality and thrift). The third was the Department of the Family, which dealt with education, health and poor relief, and the final ministry, the Department of the Government, had started life as the Prime Minister's private office, but now oversaw all operations, and since 1986 had been responsible for the work of the Commissioners who ran the cities and the towns. The Departments were colloquially referred to as DOS, DOB, DOF and DOG, and Mrs was undoubtedly a Doffer, probably one of those busybodies who oversaw the FPG.

'Busybodies'. Harold smiled, as he cleared away the carrot juice and bran from the breakfast bar. He was beginning to sound like Jane, who was always railing against this or that. In fact, he'd voted for the Union Party solidly for nearly 20 years, back from the days when it was called 'Conservative'. Whereas in her time Jane had at least considered voting for the lot: the Labour Party, naturally, and the Democratic Labour Party, and the Labour Party (Tribunite), and the Labour Party For The Pact (and the Labour Party heartily opposed to same); but also for the Alliance, and the Alliance (Owenite) and the Liberals and the National Liberals, not to mention all the various varieties of Social Democrat (from 'Real' to 'True' to 'Genuine') that had mushroomed in the wake of '88. In fact, the opposition (or, the 'other parties', if the truth be told) had consistently got higher national votes, and indeed collectively won far more seats, than had been mustered by the Union. But as the largest single non-Governmental group was never more than 70, and each felt personally betrayed by all the others, it didn't make much odds.

Jane didn't take this view. She felt the opposition parties should unite again, as they had in 1988, during the brief

Labour-led administration that had provoked such violence and hostility, both without and within its ranks. (Jane understood the jargon of the parties, and so knew why 'pactist' had become such an insult, worse even than 'Hobsbawmist', to which 'pactism' was connected in ways disputed by all groups and factions, including the 'Hobsbawmists' themselves). She felt that nearly 20 years of virtually uninterrupted Union rule had been a disaster for the country, and while Harold didn't agree, he could understand Jane's point of view. She had been born in Liverpool, then a thriving industrial town (even a city). By the late 80s, however, the only real industry left was one unprivatised car manufacturer, left in business as a kind of memento mori for the bad old days (like the one state-owned pit in Rotherham, or the one remaining shipyard on the Clyde). The factory was small and its products massively subsidised by the DOB: but at least it allowed the town to stay sufficiently alive to sustain a minimal level of services, of hospitals and shops and cinemas and schools. Most of the inhabitants of Liverpool, indeed (and the same was true of Leeds and Wolverhampton) were engaged in selling increasingly mediocre and threadbare services and things, not to the outside world, but to each other. And so while all the young and ambitious had long since moved down south (to populate the shanty-towns on Hampstead Heath and Clapham Common), there was this kind of ghost economy remaining in the northern counties, to sustain the ageing population as their once-great cities crumbled quietly around them.

So he could understand how Jane must feel. Her place of birth had once been larger than Northampton; and indeed both Manchester and Coventry had once been much, much bigger than Buckingham or even Norwich. But, as the Great Aunt had so often pointed out, cities like Liverpool and Bradford — far from the European ports, their infrastructure in decay, surrounded by bleak countryside — were unviable in the contemporary world, and there came a point when natural sentiment must give way to the harsh realities of modern times.

He heard a discreet buzz, and looked up at the worldclock. It was 6.00 in Washington, and time to take a coffee break.

At least, in casual work, you could take a break (you couldn't smoke a fag, of course, in a job like this: indeed the doorman frisked you for your packet when you first arrived). In the FEZs, you worked a straight six hours, and woe betide you if



nature called. The FEZs (the acronym stood for 'Free Enterprise Zone') were set up in the 80s, to encourage business back to the inner cities, by offering tax and rates and customs concessions, and by exempting firms from all those irritating rules and regulations which had made it so prohibitively difficult to make an honest profit in the past. Now, within the older southern cities (the few FEZs in the north had been dismantled following the long hot summers of 1987 and 1991), the Zones provided almost all the industrial employment, and they even still had unions, and closed shops of a sort (despite the Bill of Rights, which had banned closed shops, as well as guaranteeing everybody's right to purchase private medicine and education). So although you had to work much harder than you'd had to in the old days (and there was nothing wrong with *that*) you got high wages, and the jobs were highly prized, and even sometimes fought over, which explained the wire fences and the checkpoints at the entrances. And with things being as they were, the unions were prepared to turn a blind eye to the upsurge in industrial accidents, which had resulted (malcontents would claim), from the repeal (within the Zones) of the more ludicrously restrictive provisions of the Factory Acts.

Harold sipped his decaff. In the old days, he'd have read the paper, but of course now you could only do that on a screen, and although Madam had said he could use the VDU, he wasn't quite sure he could make it work. He didn't have one in his flat (you couldn't get a rent rebate if you could afford to rent a receiver or a quadro, which, when you thought about it, was quite fair and reasonable), and the channels were proliferating now at such a rate he didn't understand the system any more. He knew that the old channels — ITV 1-16 — could still be received by everybody, but that for 'minority' networks like the ITNs and BBC, you had to pay. But how you got NBC, or British Satellite (1-17), or Home and Garden (1-6), or ITS (1-9) for Sport, particularly on the ICC (the Independent Control Console, which you pointed at the screen, and pressed a button, and things happened), let alone how you could talk directly to the bank, or to the shops, or to your mother (like as not), or call up Mirrorscreen or Sunscope, was a mystery.

Still, he would have a go. It took some time to find the 'on' switch, and what came 'on' was a list of figures about 'future softs', but by dint of much pressing of the ICC, the channels did start flashing by, and he recognised the logos of the 16 ITVs — which were showing quiz games — and that

must be NBC (a film about rich people in America) or ABC (a play about the wealthy in the United States) or CBS (a serial apparently concerned with the moneyed classes of the USA). And then he passed both Mirrorscreen and Sunscope (which were both announcing details of a competition), and Expresserama and The Daily Mailout (which were broadcasting the winning numbers of a lottery), and he'd have liked to stop, but the ICC appeared to be stuck on channel change, and so on he went, through seven snooker channels and some cricket and the racing live from Munich and through all the ITNs (which were showing maps and charts and little blue and yellow arrows and parliamentary figures jumping up and down and shouting and interviews with high-ups from the DOS) and by now he was developing a headache and at last he found the off-switch and with a kind of sigh the screen went dark and Harold was alone with just his thoughts for company once more.

'Communications', Harold thought, as he dusted round the maids' room. The age of information, the age of universal contact, the world a pulsating, electronic spider's web, with Tokyo as near as Tottenham. Yet somehow he felt, himself, that his horizons had grown narrower and narrower. You couldn't even move about as much as you'd been able to before. They'd stopped running third class on the daytime trains entirely (the executive class passengers had protested at the 'louts and hooligans' who used to shout and play loud music in the cocktail bars), and since Spaghetti Junction had been declared unsafe for traffic the motor coach network had become restricted to a limited area of the south-east and south-west. And even telephones were less efficient than they had been: the 'basic service' (reluctantly provided by ITT, as a condition for their exclusive Government communications franchise) provided only local calls, and the long-distance option, once again, was on the DOF list of 'inessential luxuries' that relief recipients were not entitled to possess.

So Harold felt quite isolated from the world around him, and the sense of all that information on the VDU, just beyond his fingertips, provoked a spasm of impatient anger. Yet, really, if he thought about it, why did *he* need to know what was happening in Singapore, or Spain? Why indeed should *he* feel he had the right (on transport systems paid for by the taxpayers) to bomb around the country as and when he pleased? And was there not indeed an argument that the explosion

of communications, into every home, had contributed to the moral atrophy that led ill-educated youths to loot and riot? (To see something on the VDU was to feel entitled to it, as the Parent Power Groups so often pointed out). Was it *not* better for the masses not to know about the riches heaped behind the window-meshes and beyond the locked and power-bolted doors?

The quiet, discreet buzz once again broke through his reverie. Good God, he thought. It was already 9 pm in Sydney. Time for lunch.



'Lunch' was a peeling sandwich in a grimy wine bar. (The place had not been decorated since the early 80s: the art deco lampshades were all grey with grime, and sad remains of ferns lay wilted in the jardinières). The VDU was (oddly) tuned not to the ITS but to the news — those little blue and yellow arrows once again — but the hubbub was too great for him to hear the news-host's words. He sipped the cheap, keg reising (wine was much cheaper than beer now, after pressure from the European Agricultural Community). In one corner sat three FEZ-workers, looking nervously around them (they'd just received their fat pay-packets, and this was a high-crime area). In another was a group of young men in NNP uniform, who'd been celebrating (or drowning sorrows) with a jug of Heineken.

Harold's son was in the NNP. The New Nation Programme was a compulsory scheme for the nation's youth, which ran from the school leaving age (whether 14 or above) until the age of 20. In theory, military conscription was a voluntary option, and indeed, if you showed an electronic aptitude, or could prove your 'social skills', it was easy to avoid the army. But most kids from places like round here ended up in uniform, as indeed had Harold's son, who had gained a place at the North East London Polytechnic's bright new Faculty of Imperial Studies (he wished to specialise in the achievements of the British Raj), until the crisis of Harold's marriage had made the payment of the fees impossible.

It had all been most unfortunate, but it was really no one's fault. Harold's wife had been born in the West Indies, and during his long early 90s period of unemployment, she had taken on responsibility for the

household bills (although fiscal policy was intended to encourage women to fulfill their primary responsibilities as wives and mothers, the repeal of Equal Pay Acts and the abolition of the wages councils had made them peculiarly attractive to employers in the retail trade). Unfortunately, things had got quite out of hand (commitments had been entered into foolishly while Harold was in work) and she was eventually faced — as so many had been — with the choice of prison for default, or applying to the VRP. (The Voluntary Repatriation Programme, set up under what was usually called the Proctor/Winterton amendment, was intended to assist the passage home of immigrants who found it hard to adapt themselves to British ways). And so, to use the jargon, Harold's wife was volrepped to Jamaica, and he was faced with a level of backpayments which made his fantasies about his son seem the most grandiose of delusions.

For two years, Harold had lived alone, in considerable privation (to discourage fickle attitudes to having children out of wedlock, the rules relating to relief entitlements for the single unemployed with children were peculiarly stringent). Then, somewhat to his own surprise, he took what he could only call a mistress. His natural instinct was to marry (like the Government, he took a dim view of adultery), but under the Divorce Law 1989 (which sought to reaffirm the full solemnity of the marriage vows), there were no provisions for annulment unless adultery or cruelty were proved by one party against the other (for blame must lie somewhere) and although Harold did suspect, deep in his bones, that cruelty had been involved, somewhere along the line, he could not see that it applied to him or to his wife, and so the marriage was, at least until the five year separation clause came into play, irrevocable.

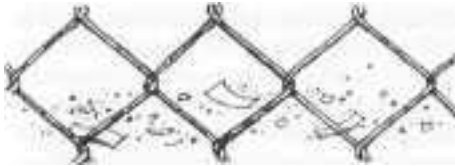
Harold's mistress was called Jane. She'd been a 'social worker' (a group of state employees whose job had been to encourage the inadequate to consider that they were 'entitled' to be paid for doing nothing) and a 'feminist' (a political persuasion which held that women were 'oppressed' by the people who looked after them). She had been rationalised in 1994, as part of the DOF's 'Stand On Your Own Feet' policy (or the 'Stew In Your Own Juice' scheme, as Jane had put it, but then, after all, she would).

Before that, however, she'd met Harold. He'd got a little drunk one evening, as he was the first to admit, and she'd been called out to the police station after he'd been

picked up sprawling in the street. It had been the night his daughter died, but of course that was no excuse for his behaviour.

Harold looked around him. He was not an emotional man, but thoughts of his daughter always brought a tear into his eye, and he was fearful that it would be noticed. It had been his fault of course: the point of the abolition of all that irksome red tape governing small shopkeepers (who found it hard enough to make ends meet) was quite precisely so the forces of the market rather than interfering busybodies from the ministries could weed out those whose services were inadequate in any way.

It had been a can of meat, from the corner grocer. He'd been 'in a hurry', and he wasn't well, so he hadn't eaten any of it himself. There had been scares about tin cans before, but you never thought that this could happen to you or to your family. But somehow, it was not sufficient — really not *sufficient* — that in protest at the killing of his daughter he could henceforth shop elsewhere.



But despite their unpropitious meeting, Jane had liked him (he'd been — she said still was — a handsome man). And one of those strange unexpected likings started, and led on to one of those even more unexpected loves. And although her views were at best eccentric and at worst downright dangerous, their affection grew and deepened.

It was inevitably clandestine. Jane had not found a new position, and she relied on state relief, and the rules against cohabitation were if anything more strict than they had been in the 70s and 80s (and the FPG was everywhere, of course, aided and abetted by those helpful citizens, the Checkers). And even if they did risk a night together, with much sneaking in and out, then there was still the danger of conception, to take the edge of ease and pleasure off their union. (The Government was particularly concerned about the birthrate among those classes of population generally agreed to be least competent to bring up children, and having failed to introduce legislation making it mandatory on doctors to put 'high-risk' young women on the pill, had developed a whole network of prescriptions which at the least made pregnancy a major crisis, for anyone who had at any time been wholly or partly dependent on relief, which meant, now, almost

two thirds of the population. Thus, for such people, 'family aid' — once called 'child benefit' — *reduced* with each new child, the parish housing lists were weighted against the 'irresponsibly fertile', and even midwifery insurance rates were set artificially high. But all of these mild irritations could be instantly removed — one might say, at a stroke — if you participated in the DOF's magnanimous STORC programme, which provided generous, low-interest and long-term loans for 'Surgical Termination of the Reproductive Capability').

So their love-life was at best a nervy business. But he enjoyed their time together, he loved listening to her as she lectured him about the world, and even (on occasions) felt there was something in the things she had to say. For Jane, it had all begun with the development of 'the multinational corporations' (how she could use the jargon with a straight face was a mystery!) and their understanding that all the tiresome controls which so bedevilled business in the West could be avoided by the simple project of moving processes and plant elsewhere. At first, this happened *within* countries, (the move from Michigan and Indiana to the sun-belt, the flight from Lancashire and Yorkshire to East Anglia). But then, the corporations realised that this scheme could be internationally applied, by moving plant to southern Europe or to Mexico, and then indeed half-way across the world, to wherever labour was cheapest and most plentiful and pliable, which was why the fastest growing economies were no longer the oil-states, or even South Korea and Taiwan, but Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

This was not to say, of course, that no wealth remained within the 'first world', indeed that's where the *wealth* was, but it did mean that the numbers who had access to it had become geographically as well as socially reduced, to the south and western USA (Phoenix was now larger than Chicago), to Japan and South Korea (Seoul was now richer than Toronto), and to a rough quadrangle in the middle of North-West Europe, bounded by Bristol, Bordeaux, Milan and Cologne (the fate of cities like Hamburg and Vienna had been similar to that of Glasgow and New York). And while the new breed of new technologist, his family and friends, required a growing army of retailers, bankers, nannies, real estate developers, doctors, hairdressers, tutors, decorators, governesses, entertainers, lawyers, gardeners and maids, they required them where they

where, in bright new garden cities in attractive countryside, not in Belfast, Rotterdam or even Portugal or Spain. And so, for those left out in the cold, there was decay, and a sullen and resigned despair: and even within the golden parallelogram, there was a permanent and aching sense of insecurity, an insecurity which grew out of the awareness that your livelihood depended not on the provision of a human need, but on the servicing of appetites that were defined in large part by the vicissitudes of taste and fashion. And thus it was, Jane said, that a technology that could have liberated humankind, that (for the first time) could have granted men and women the long-prayed-for means to plan their own societies (indeed, to plan how old technologies should give way to the new), had instead turned those very men and women into random particles, forever zipping round a constantly mutating universe, in search of nuclei that having welcomed them could just as simply cannon them away into the outer darkness once again. It flew, and she would say it with a bitter little smile, in the face of human nature.

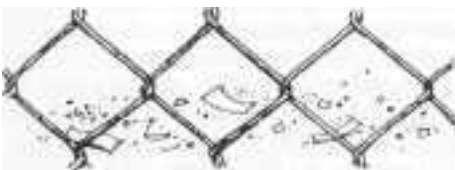
And that was indeed the problem. It was not so much that the new, thrusting Britain was a frosty place for the young, unskilled and unemployed, who unless rigidly controlled would take out their frustration on the general populace (though that, of course, was what the Kindred Volunteers were for). Nor was it, entirely, that a system based on the pursuit of individual gain raised expectations among the less thrusting and innovative classes that could not be fulfilled (which was why the Checkers had been so keen to pressurise the cable companies to keep advertisements for luxuries like VDUs and quadreos off all but the most exclusive channels). Nor even was it (absolutely) that, denied so much else, the masses had at least the right to feel part of a nation, with traditions and a heritage, which should be protected both from literal invasion by the dregs of the third world and from the constant sniping of self-styled 'progressive intellectuals' (which is why the Parents Unions' campaign to exclude all patriotic material from school curricula was such a popular initiative). No, it was above all that while individual and collective selfishness were excellent motivations for the strong and powerful (who set up businesses or ran the army), these instincts did appear to have a deleterious psychological effect on those whose temperaments were less mature (who broke shop windows and rioted at

football matches), which observation had eventually led the Government to the paradoxical but (if you thought about it) logical conclusion that the freer your economy became, the greater were the limits and controls that must be placed on individual actions in the social sphere.

Which was why (Jane would conclude) a Government that every five years claimed exclusive franchise on the freedom of the individual . . .

But there he stopped remembering the things she said, and indeed felt a kind of chill run through him, as he sat there in the bar, because today Jane was expected to report to the local branch headquarters of the DOF for what was described in the official letter as a 'routine assessment' of Jane's relief position. And as he had told her, begged her, pleaded with her: it might well be just that, so why on earth did she refuse to go?

Good heavens, Harold thought, as he saw a timecheck flash up on the VDU. It was 4.15 in Cape Town. Quickly, he drained his reising, and hurried back towards San Carlos Square. In such a rush was he, indeed, that he hardly noticed (though he would remember it, it would come back to him), the queues outside the meagre food shops, lines of people dressed in cashmere tracksuits or designer dungarees, people with even, milk-white teeth and fitted spectacles and solarified complexions, people (in short) who were as out of place here as he would have been at a Covent Garden juice-bar or in the grains department of a Sainsbury's.



He apologised profusely, but she didn't seem to hear. (She would be back at sixteen GMT, she'd said, and here it was, not five am in Anchorage). Surrounded by bags and boxes, hampers and rucksacks, stuffed with food (but not *her* food: there was white bread, tinned fruit, processed cheese), she drummed her fingers, stood, paced about, sat down again; until finally she asked him to assist her, she and Bryan were leaving now, their plans had changed, they needed to get all this to the lift, down to the garage, to await his imminent arrival. And of course Harold did as he was told, and they were standing in the garage, with the bags and sacks and boxes, when Bryan screeched in through the jaw-like doors, and the two of them humped all the food

into the boot, and were indeed about to go, when Madam turned to him, with an expression on her face which seemed to be half-way between embarrassment, and a kind of inappropriate contrition.

And she explained, that obviously, they'd decided to get out (out? out of where?), and he might wish to get out too (out of what? whatever for?), and he mustn't feel, that if he didn't want to stay, he should (why shouldn't he?) but perhaps he had the best idea, why should Merionethshire be any different (different from what?) and anyway. . .

And she slipped a banknote — worth more than his week's salary — into his hand, and they were gone.

And as he stepped into the lift, he realised that, after all, he knew.

It had been Jane, of course, who had explained it all. She'd been a 'peace campaigner', naturally (they all were, all that sort: it was an outrage, as the Great Aunt said, that they'd appropriated the word 'peace' when what they were really advocating was surrender). But unlike her friends, she'd never really thought that all those little proxy wars (she called them 'pox wars') would really escalate; for her, it wasn't really about territory, or the principles of international law, or even national pride, or any of the reasons trotted out by the spokesmen of the DOS, but more a kind of circus, an entertainment to take people's minds off what was happening at home.

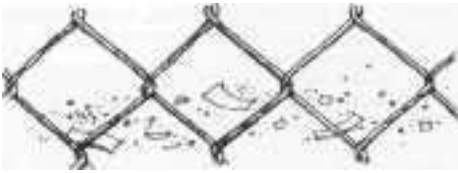
She'd argued it quite forcibly, in fact, and it had sounded plausible (it always did, of course, at the time). The liberation of 'Zimbabwe' in the early 90s (in response to the appeals of persecuted opposition groups within the country): had not that followed on the disturbances in Newcastle and Glasgow in August 1991? And the rescue mission to Belize in October 1987 (in collaboration with American and Guatemalan troops loyal to the Government-in-Exile of Air Marshal President Juan Martinez): had that not effectively cleared everybody's mind of the uprisings in Birmingham and Coventry the month before? And indeed, what about the 'Falklands' (now renamed 'New Bedfordshire') and the naval task force that had sailed just nine months after Brixton, Liverpool and Manchester had burned?

But she had admitted, always, that it could get out of hand, that one of these 'adventures' would prove to be unstoppable; and he knew, because he'd heard it talked of, seen it flashing on the VDUs, of the Sino-Soviet rapprochement, and the

Russian/Chinese mutual defence pact, and the growing tension as the Chinese government prepared to repossess Hong Kong at the ending of the British lease on June 30, 1997. . .

The lift had reached the 16th floor, and Harold hurried down the corridor. He must find out, now, what was going on. He fumbled for the keycard, slipped it in the lock, and the door slid open, just in time for him to hear the tail-end of a sentence, spoken by a voice he knew.

She'd switched their answering machine on, but in the rush, she'd obviously clocked the receiver on to 'monitor' (by this device, you could hear the voice of whoever it was who was calling, and then decide if you were 'in'). The voice was asking if this was the number of place where a steward of the name of Harold was presently engaged. And if this was so, could he please drop everything, at once, and come. The voice was Jane's.



Harold ran through streets that if he'd stopped to think, would have seemed strange: either empty, or filled with knots of people, arguing and shouting (or other knots standing silent and resigned), or groups of running men and women, their possessions clutched in plastic bags, their children pulled along behind. And finally he arrived at Jane's address, and the FPG was there already, dragging her across the pavement, from the front door to the wagon and he knew it was too late.

What was she saying? He could hardly hear the words. 'Why now?' — yes, that was it, she was screaming out: 'Why now?'

And as she was pushed into the wagon, her faced turned, and she saw him, standing on the corner, and she had just time enough to call:

'Harold, you know what's happening? Do you do know where they're taking me?' And she was crying, but laughing too, as if at something infinitely ludicrous, inappropriate and absurd:

'And can you believe it, Harold? That the bastards could be bothered to arrest me now?'

The streets were empty, for the little knots had melted, and the running families had reached — or not — their destinations. Harold stumbled over an old toy, left lying in the street. He bumped into someone's open door.

(The VDU was still on, in the front room. Three days ago, the British government had undertaken what was called an 'anticipatory defensive thrust' into mainland Chinese territory).

Why had no one noticed, when it had begun? The process which had brought Jane to the wagon and — no doubt — would now transfer her to a general utility? It had all been for the very best of motives. It was right that the police should demand the assistance of the populace (who after all, knew their own neighbourhoods). It was correct that education should bear its share of the responsibility for the violence and amorality that reached such epidemic proportions among them young. It was surely obvious that among all those millions of people on relief there were scroungers and deceivers (or, put plainly, cheats), and it was the right of the community to insist that the state's generosity (well, after all, the generosity of the taxpayer) was not abused. And it was clearly just that those who *wouldn't* work (as opposed to those who *couldn't*) should at the very least be obliged to undergo some form of training, to instill into them the basic disciplines they would require on their release.

The Neighbourhood Watch Groups came first (they were set up in the early 80s, on the recommendation of the then Chief Constable of London, after whom the DOS domestic complex — Newman House — was named). At about this time, too, the retraining centres (originally intended just for tramps and vagrants) extended their purview to wider groups of workshy, including those with homes and families. The Parent Power Groups were started in the wake of calls, for a reassertion of traditional British values in the schools (the name was a kind of in-joke, in the way that in the 60s the word 'revolution' had been used to advertise cosmetics, or the slogan 'power to the people' to promote electrical equipment) but soon they were retitled 'Parents Unions' (For a Responsible Curriculum, Against the Tide of Patriotism in Our Schools).

And the 'Checkers' had begun as unpaid auxiliaries to the Family Patrol Group, to assist those overstretched investigators of relief abuse (the slogan: 'Check Up On The Cheaters'); and the Kindred Volunteers, who grew out of the Neighbourhood Watch Groups, ran patrols throughout the cities in defence of our old people and the children against vandals, muggers, rapists, layabouts and anarchists.

(And Harold passed a hardware store, its wire mesh torn, where eight VDUs were

ghostly explaining how, as a diversionary tactic to assist their British allies, the USA had undertaken a 'retaliatory pre-emptive action' from bases in North Turkey, and had already taken Odessa and Donetsk).

And thus it had been that the Checkers, in collaboration with the General Parents Unions (for did these things not start off in the home), had finally combined with the National Kindred Volunteer Detachments (now combatting the distressing rise in pre-teen crime) to form the Kindred Groups of Britain, who had generously taken on the task of administering the growing network of retraining and re-education centres, now re-named the General Utilities for the Location of all Anti-social Groups, in one of which was Jane.

(And he passed the gaping window of a junk shop, in which appeared to be a kind of strange, brown, box-like object, which was obviously some form of visionless receiver, from which a voice emerged, which explained how, in response to the liberation of the South Ukraine, the forces of the Warsaw Pact — in a 'protectively offensive operation' — had taken Braunschweig and Hanover and were half-way to the Rhine).

But perhaps it had all been inevitable. And perhaps there had been no alternative. And Harold stopped in the middle of the empty square, and looked up to the sky, which was full of the most majestic white and grey and silver clouds, and he heard the rumble of what he supposed was thunder, and he saw the dazzling flashes of what must be lightning, and he told himself (and for the thousandth time) that once all this was over he would really get his life in order, he would start that little business, he would take advantage of his openings and seize his opportunities, and make something of himself at last.

He clicked his tongue. What *was* he thinking of? To stand here, day-dreaming, in the middle of the afternoon!

The sky was black, the skyline laced with fire. Harold set his shoulders, marched across the square, and pressed the buzzer on the entry-phone. He had responsibilities: he had a job to do.

All the rest was in the future.

