

The Icing Man

by

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Chapter 1

Pervert

Here I stand, a man approaching his fifty-second year some twelve months into semi-retirement. An illustrious career spanning over two decades to my credit: the last five as a respected and stalwart corporate mover/shaker. By all accounts, although not always liked, I am acknowledged as being an honest individual; and, by some, a man of impeccable moral standing. Alas not so, for I, Dr Jeremiah Orville Clock, have come to realise an abhorrent truth. My character is not only flawed, but corrupt, perverse and riddled with lasciviousness. Sounds overly pompous, I know. A little over-the-top perhaps. Should I be repentant, contrite? Definitely not. In my defence I can justifiably cite my current status as a gainfully self-employed servant of society. As a part-time forensic adviser-cum-volunteer magistrate and an active member of the local Neighbourhood Watch scheme, my eminent credentials surely outweigh my faults as listed, and by most definitions are certainly the attributes of a model citizen. Yet at this precise moment in time my base character is on open display for all to observe and ridicule. Ashamed as I am, I just can't help it. So, clinging furtively to a half-filled trolley of groceries, I dodge suspiciously between the aisles of my local supermarket while the roaming pack of store detectives salivate at the prospect of another new catch. Little do they know that the only pickings they'll savour this crisp autumn day will be the taste of bitter disappointment.

'And the reason for my unseemly behaviour?' I hear the chorus asking.

Well that, as they say, is a complicated story. To be honest, though, my primary motivation is nothing more sinister than a little voyeurism. In common with the majority of my fellow man, the fascination of watching others go about their lives is irresistible. The domestic, dramatic, tragic, even the mundane: whatever the activity, it doesn't really matter. The thrill, the undiluted excitement, of invading someone's privacy shrouded by a veil of secrecy is guaranteed to fire up the old adrenal glands every time.

For the third time in as many months I find myself transfixed by the antics of my nearest neighbours, Julian Stammers and Kathy Murkett: an odd and ill-matched couple if ever there was one. In general they keep themselves to themselves, which is perhaps just as well since their primary occupation involves scouting for young and sometimes naive young girls to appear in so-called soft-porno movies.

Details of this shady although admittedly intriguing profession were revealed to me quite openly by Julian shortly after I first made his acquaintance. It's sometimes hard to believe that that was less than a year ago after I'd finally chucked in my sparkling career as Vice President, Scenario Planning and Corporate Communications at Van der Heijden Pharmaceuticals.

I'd become well and truly 'ratted off', as Julian would say, with the corporate ant's nest. The life of a high-flyer had cost me dearly: a cold marriage, a messy divorce and the development of numerous character defects I was still trying desperately to shed. And then one miserable fog-laden morning, my Guardian Angel, whom I'd thought long since cast down into the fiery bowels of hell for underachievement, decided to throw me a lifeline. As if a collection of blocks and bypass wires had been flushed out of my commercial brain, the truth was revealed. My life had been in the shithouse where I, as chief shithead, had made life for those unfortunate enough to be around me equally shitty. I was approaching the magical tax-friendly age of fifty and my least favourite aunt had recently passed away, leaving me the

astounded but proud owner of a large albeit run-down property in a small village just outside Haverhill, Suffolk. What further prompting did I need? To the horror, or delight, of my colleagues, off I went to start my new life as rural landowner, DIY devotee and master decorator of cakes. Yes, I can still see their faces at my retirement ‘do’ when I revealed my secret passion.

‘Oh my God, Tick-tock’s into icing cakes. Silly old bugger. D’you think he’s always been that way inclined, if you know what I mean – Sweetie?’

I didn’t want to bother setting the sarcastic bastards right, but for my long-suffering secretary, who’d overheard the comment and had seemed overly concerned by it, I had. Yes, I’d long held an interest in the fine art of cake decorating; but no, I was still old-fashioned and preferred female sexual partners. My clarification had seemed to please her. I preferred not to speculate as to the reason why.

Unshackled and freed from my self-constructed straightjacket, I’d set about working on the fixer-upper with gusto, and it was on my second day as I was hurling abuse at some tool or other that Julian came sauntering up the narrow private road towards me.

Being an old village, most houses had, over the centuries, grown up Heath-Robinson fashion on either side of the main thoroughfare connecting Cambridge with Colchester. My residence, however, was an exception, having been constructed a hundred metres or so back from the road. Nobody seemed to know the reason for this anomaly, but I for one was glad of it. No traffic noise, no prying eyes and, more often than not, no visitors, as the place was impossible to spot from that distance.

‘Howdy partner, I’m Julian,’ my new neighbour had greeted me. ‘Julian Stammers,’ he drawled. ‘Me and the brains of the outfit live at the end of yer track. Thought I’d mosey along and make yer acquaintance.’

It transpired that Julian actually hailed from Sheffield, but there was no doubting the good Lord had made the tiniest of screw-ups in choosing such a location. Mr J. Stammers was definitely created for the American prairie-lands, but somewhere along the line a heavenly admin wallah had mistaken Yorkshire for Montana. The error, once discovered, apparently couldn’t be rectified, but Julian had still developed as his maker had originally intended.

Despite his affectation with all things ‘Western’, I’d taken to my new neighbour straight away. Always a friendly, amiable character, Julian was a touch over thirty years old, five feet eight inches tall, well built, with jet-black hair greased back to emulate his singular hero, Elvis Presley. Even now I can’t help but admire his striking facial appearance: large, smiling blue eyes – the right one affected by a slight glide – and complementary pair of equally smiling, ‘Mick Jagger’ lips. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him wearing anything other than a combination of blue jeans, white T-shirt and leather jacket, yet this choice suits him perfectly. His clean-shaven features create an impression of smartness; and his relaxed, methodical, almost robotic way of moving betrays years of studying US and Italian cowboy movies.

A week or so after our first encounter, Julian returned one evening to ask if I needed any help with my DIY endeavours. At the time I was pretty tired so I’d declined his offer and invited him in for a drink instead. One or four whiskies later and Julian was well into the story of his life.

Much of what he described was vague and difficult to follow, but three points were clear enough. Number one: he’d had a hard time as a child due to his surname and the fact that, when agitated, he did actually have a slight stammer. Number two: since leaving school at sixteen he’d held various jobs including car and motorbike mechanic; and number three: the brains of the outfit, a.k.a. his partner, Kathy Murkett, was the love of his life. Interestingly, Julian had gone on to explain that it was Kathy who’d introduced him to his current part-time career as a video talent scout when they met some five years earlier. At first I found it odd

how easily he'd accepted this new role and been absorbed into a business which didn't at all seem to fit with his character. By the end of our male-bonding session, however, I was left in no doubt: Ms Murkett's influence over him was absolute. If she even hinted it would please her if he stood in front of a bus, he wouldn't hesitate.

From time to time – never allowing too long an interval to pass – Julian wanders round to my place. We drink, talk a lot of nonsense, and have slowly but surely got to know each other. So far, no return invites, though, and, strangest of all, he has shown no inclination to formally introduce me to the enigmatic and largely invisible Kathy. It's true she sometimes passes the bottom of the lane when I'm working on the hedgerows, and if our eyes meet, she nods and I wave, but that's as far as it goes. One night I thought of going round uninvited – take a bottle, 'break the ice' sort of thing – but, as if my intention had been telepathically intercepted, Julian miraculously turned up on one of his impromptu visits. Definitely weird! But then, who am I to label anyone as weird given my present performance alongside the endless shelves of tins, bottles and jars?

I think the root of my enchantment is the way in which Julian and his mate operate in perfect harmony, almost as if they're acting out a well-rehearsed play or ballet. Kathy does indeed come across as the 'brains of the outfit'. Like a graceful bird of prey she hovers from aisle to aisle, surreptitiously identifying potential targets; and once a candidate's been located Julian skilfully makes an approach. The pattern is always the same. A casual remark about some product or other, a brief introduction, then somehow the switch to the business at hand.

This part of the operation still remains a mystery to me. There's always a critical moment when the unsuspecting victim may take offence, lash out and storm off, but I've yet to witness such an event. Invariably, the negotiation is successful or at least in part. Failure, when it happens, is perhaps the most remarkable and entertaining part of the process. Julian, smiling throughout, deftly quells any alarm or anger and within seconds departs from 'the mark' as you might expect an old friend to.

It's now less than five minutes since the last campaign and I already sense that Ms Murkett has identified the next contender.

Correct: Julian's on the move! Basket in hand, he sidles up to what appears to be a young mother in her late teens. She has two children in tow – one toddling beside her; the other a baby propped up in her trolley. She's a pretty girl – tall, dyed-blond unkempt shoulder-length hair and trim figure teetering on the voluptuous. Her make-up is a bit overdone and less than skilfully applied. Julian seems to be passing her by, but then suddenly bends down to retrieve something the toddler has dropped. The harassed girl is grateful. Julian smiles, picks up the child and points to an item on a nearby shelf.

The vivid image of a 1960's encyclopaedia salesman with his foot well and truly in the door skips through my mind. This is indeed an unsung art form.

But wait! All is not well. The girl seems agitated. She hastily retrieves the toddler. A crisis is developing... But my friend shows no sign of concern. His smile broadens; he picks a jar from a nearby shelf and shows it to the flustered woman. Words tumble from him and in a moment her face relaxes. She blushes. A further brief exchange and she accepts Julian's card. They smile; nod to each other and, following a US-style military salute, the master takes his leave.

Another triumph. Truly amazing. At this juncture if I were watching with a female partner, I'd be tempted to say something clichéd like, 'Was that as good for you as it was for me?' As things stand, though, several fellow shoppers are eyeing me with a mixture of suspicion and concern. Time to end the excitement for today, collect my shopping and head home.

Idling my time away while waiting at the checkout, reading about this week's special offers, a characteristic voice gave me an unwelcome start.

'Hi, Doc. How's it goin'?' Looks like you're stockin' up for a bit of a siege there. Guests comin'?'

I turned to discover that Julian had joined the back of my queue. The three ladies separating us looked at me expectantly, their interest in my expected response clearly spellbinding.

'Hello Julian,' I replied a little sheepishly. 'Yes, a trifle more than usual. I'm expecting a Work Experience candidate tomorrow.'

'Oh right,' he beamed with enthusiasm. 'Great! Teach the kids a trade. Wish I'd had the chance. By the way, did ya catch today's show? Not bad, eh?'

I knew full well what he meant, but the thought that Julian was aware of my role as voyeur both robbed me of speech and delivered an acute injection of embarrassment.

At this point the trio of shoppers, if seated, would certainly have been perched on the edge of same, hardly able to contain themselves; desperate to discover the topic of discussion. Unfortunately, my prolonged silence prompted Julian to answer for me.

'Of course ya did. Daft question. A fair selection for a Tuesday, if I do say so myself. And what about that girl with the legs up to the Mississippi and 747 upper deck? Definitely a star in the makin'. What d'ya think?'

If it was anyone other than Julian you'd be forgiven for concluding that he was either playing to the gallery or deliberately trying to embarrass me. This, however, *was* Julian; and I'd come to appreciate that malevolence was not in his nature. Also, the assumption that I would, without doubt, have witnessed his efforts was interesting. Probably it stemmed from a misunderstanding of my role as part-time, or more correctly these days, very occasional, forensic consultant to the 'boys in blue'. For most people, the mention of forensics conjures up images of Sherlock Holmes and more modern TV investigative marvels. In fact my area of expertise was restricted to esoteric poisons, and although I'm by nature an observant individual, I lack the star qualities of Mr Holmes or his contemporaries.

In response I smiled and nodded my agreement. The ladies frowned and shook their heads in disgust, still none the wiser regarding the topic. As for Mr Stammers, he just carried on beaming, oblivious that anything might be amiss.

Thankfully it was at last my turn for the mind-numbing barcode scanning ritual, and ten minutes later I was more than relieved to signal a fond farewell to my enthusiastic neighbour.

As I pulled out of the car park in my newly restored pride and joy – a red 1970 Triumph TR6 – I caught a glimpse of Kathy re-arranging the contents of the Stammers/Murkett VW bus. In time-honoured fashion we exchanged nods, but my supplementary gesture – in this case a smile – went unacknowledged.

If Julian qualified as a trifle eccentric, then Kathy had to be pigeonholed as 'really strange'. Her general appearance, like that of her partner, never really varied. A throwback to the hippie days, she matched the old-fashioned description of a 'drink of water' perfectly. Basically, there was nothing about her at all: almost as if she'd been squeezed out of a tube and was constantly on the verge of succumbing to gravity by reverting to a blob on the floor. About five and a half feet tall, she had long, straggly, light-brown hair parted in the centre, and her face, somewhat gaunt, almost corpse-like, was dominated by frameless hexagonal glasses. Distance precluded me from peering into the windows of her soul, but her aura spoke volumes: a woman of hidden depths and wisdom. A strange impression. This observation interested me greatly, since on superficial inspection Kathy's practice of rarely speaking and never smiling afforded her a somewhat gormless look. Nothing, I'd come to appreciate, was further from the truth, however. Older than Julian by a decade, she seemed much younger

than her age; an impression aided in part by the flowing early Seventies-style dresses she favoured and the tiny flowers she used to decorate her hair. Never having conversed with her, I knew nothing of her background or if she had any other work than the pornography trade. This aspect of my neighbours' life still didn't sit at all well with my vision of the order of things. If you ignored their seedy cottage industry, Kathy and Julian were your average odd but cute village couple. But then you couldn't ignore what they did or the completely open and unselfconscious way in which they did it.

As I joined the main road heading for Haverhill I recalled one of my more entertaining drinking sessions with Julian. I'd inwardly vowed to discover more about Kathy and the 'why's' and 'wherefore's' of her involvement with cheesecake porn, but my plan seemed destined to fail miserably. I discovered nothing of interest about Ms Murkett, but instead wound up reeling off a fairly detailed account of the life and times of Doctor J.O. Clock. To my surprise, Julian regarded a lengthy scientific and corporate career as ideal training for setting up a cake-decorating business. His interest seemed, as always, genuine, so I'd kept on going. Of the hobbies I went on to describe, collecting antique tarot cards, herbal medicines and car/motorbike restoration attracted the greatest attention. When it came to motorbikes our relationship jumped from 'buddy' status to 'kindred spirit' in an instant; the only 'fly in the ointment' being that I favoured old British bikes – Francis Barnett, Norton, Royal Enfield and the like – while Julian, surprise, surprise, was a staunch Harley man. Then I had my first real breakthrough. Joy of joys, Mr Stammers revealed that Kathy was a keen herbalist: food, cosmetics, medicine: the lot. Before parting that evening I gave Julian a sample of my patent cold/flu snake oil as a gift for her and the next day a small floral card fluttered through the letterbox. A thank-you note from Ms Murkett. Game on, at last.

The light was slowly fading as I turned into my narrow lane-cum-surrogate driveway, and by the time I'd unloaded the car the eyelids of day were flickering closed, their toil and labour of the past ten hours or so finally complete. Before unlocking the front door I took a few moments to stand back and survey the Clock 'estate'.

'Still a long way to go,' I groaned.

A year of backbreaking effort, injury and expense, not to mention several volumes of abuse, expletives and cursing already sunk into the place and I'd barely scratched the surface of the restoration work needed.

My problem stemmed from the fact that over four centuries two separate cottages and a barn had been systematically cobbled together. By all accounts the last major 'cobbling' had been attempted in 1895, just after my aunt's parents took possession of the place. Grandfather Clock, a name the old boy understandably hated, was a reasonably successful solicitor on my mother's side. Not unlike me, he'd become disenchanted with his chosen career and decided that life as a farmer would suit him best in retirement. Fate, however, had disagreed. No sooner had he completed annexing the barn to the already coupled pair of cottages to generate a relatively pleasing T-shaped plan than a dose of typhoid fever carried him away. Luckily, sufficient funds were available for the family to live reasonably well following his death, but proposals for the creation of a working farm were scrapped, along with the construction of a new barn. Instead, Widow Clock invested in making the place comfortable. She installed electricity, did away with the thatched roof in favour of tiles and three splendid chimneys, and landscaped part of the garden. This period had unquestionably been the property's heyday. In subsequent years little was spent on maintenance, and by the time my aunt took possession during the Second World War, the place was already in need of much love and attention.

‘Well,’ I sighed to myself, ‘don’t worry, old girl. Somehow or other I’ll raise you back to your former glory. For now, though, I’m just about drained and tomorrow’s a big day. We’re expecting a young visitor.’

After putting the car to bed I stumbled into the hallway trailing my cache of shopping behind me. Yes, tomorrow would be a big day and in more ways than one. To my amazement the Clock one-man cake-decorating business had proved remarkably successful. Orders, sporadic at first, had swelled to a trickle, progressed rapidly into a stream and had recently merited flood status. Prompted by my newly acquired community conscience, I’d decided to create a Work Experience position rather than cut back on the business itself. Initially the local Job Centre seemed to regard cake decorating as a less than attractive opportunity. Nevertheless my years as a senior exec stood me in good stead when it came to not accepting ‘no’ for an answer; and once in the system, it had taken less time than anyone expected for a candidate to be found. So, tomorrow I’d be taking on yet another new challenge – that of trainer.

I’d almost completed stowing supplies when an acute sense of anxiety poked its head above the parapet. For several seconds I stood motionless, listening for what I’d no idea; but I was sure something was wrong. The problem with old houses, particularly those in a state of poor repair, is that they possess a constant chorus of their own. If it’s not the creaks and groans of the long-suffering structure then it’s the scratches and scuffles of the little furry squatters roaming around in the roof space or in between the floor joists. On this occasion, however, it was beginning to sound as if at least one of the visitors was wearing size ten boots. Before moving in I’d been told burglary was rare in this part of the country. Later, when the contents insurance turned out to be an order of magnitude less than expected, I accepted the claim unequivocally. As of right now, though, unnatural noises were definitely coming from the bedroom directly above me, so it looked as if I was experiencing the exception that proves the rule.

Meat cleaver in hand, I gingerly moved towards the stairs. A cursory scan of the area around the front door and adjoining rooms gave no indication of breaking and entering. This observation was, however, of little value, as in reality any of the fifteen or so windows would present little challenge for even the least accomplished thief. On the bottom step of the staircase, two points of logic rudely questioned my current course of action. Whoever it was must have heard me arrive and therefore know that I was now inside, and whatever Kung Fu abilities I could call upon would hardly prevent at least half a dozen stairs from whining and moaning the moment I set foot on them. There was nothing for it. An SAS rush-and-surprise attack was called for if Jeremiah Clock was to win the day. Two deep breaths and I scrambled up the stairs.

The initial ascent went well, but then I missed my footing, lurched backwards, slipped and crumpled to the bottom step. Undeterred, I mounted a repeat attack; this time accompanied by a roaring battle cry. The assault was a success. I reached the top stair; heart pounding, eyes flashing. Then I realised – no meat cleaver. As I stood frozen, torn between pushing on unarmed or affecting a tactical retreat to recover my weapon, a loud crash echoed from the target bedroom. Without thinking, I raced along the landing and ploughed into the room. At that instant a figure leapt from the window. I vaulted over the bed, sure of catching a glimpse of the intruder, but luck was still playing hide and seek. Dusk had fallen, and with so many ledges and outhouses within easy reach, they had evaporated like a phantom.

I made to scuttle back downstairs and out into the yard, but promptly realised that would be no more than a futile gesture. By the time I’d unlocked doors and uncovered a torch even a burglar on crutches would be halfway to Colchester.

A little shaken, out of breath, but most of all frustrated, I flopped onto the bed. For several minutes I just lay there, trying to decide the next and best course of action. Logically this was a police matter and, given my connection with the forensic boys at Scotland Yard and my role as a magistrate, I'd have expected to be already clutching the phone. For some inexplicable reason, though, I felt a strong reluctance to involve outsiders. Possibly in my semi-retired state I'd become a hermit without realising it. Or perhaps it was just another case of fearing embarrassment. Without doubt once a particular group of colleagues found out about the break-in, there'd be more than a few jokes at my expense. Two years ago such a prospect would have had zero impact on me. But today? Could be I was actually turning into a sensitive and complex human being after all.

By degrees I calmed down and began to receive the messages of pain transmitting from my knees and right shin. Not surprisingly, my tumble on the stairs had been harder than I'd realised. Okay, I decided, first order of business, a double brandy to bolster the nerves and dull the pain followed by an inspection of the premises to determine the extent of any damage: see if anything's missing.

I headed for the main downstairs living room, on the way collecting the meat cleaver from the bottom step, which reminded me that my few knocks and bumps could have been much worse. The brandy, although not as effective as adrenalin at masking pain, provided the boost I needed, so I embarked on my tour of inspection.

As I systematically meandered from room to room, I began to feel relieved. So far nothing appeared to be damaged or missing. I checked upstairs, and apart from an old wristwatch that hadn't kept time for years and, of all things, my new electric razor, I seemed to have got off lightly. As far as I could tell, the intruder had gained entry through the window by which they'd departed; and to my annoyance, I found several other open windows, all of which I'd intended to close before my shopping expedition. So now the list was growing – decrepit, over-sensitive, misanthropic and senile. Great! Looking on the bright side, at least I wasn't faced with a hefty bill to replace broken glass or, worse still, a smashed window frame. All in all, I was pleased that my uncharacteristic aversion to involve the police had surfaced when it had. The only remaining puzzle was why the burglar had settled for such a limited haul. The majority of my valuables were still in storage, but I'd at least have expected anything containing a circuit board to have taken a walk. It seemed inconceivable that the person had been searching for something specific. It had to be an opportunistic venture, surely.

It was late and I still hadn't eaten or prepared for the following day. Given the hour, I therefore, settled for a microwaved marvel, leftover apple pie and another couple of drinks. Fortunately the living room fire was laid from the previous evening so with my one and only remaining aliquot of energy I cranked it up to dispel the evening's chill; and as the logs finally caught light I sat staring into the flames. A series of whisky-promoted images pirouetted through my mind and, cloaked in a haze of crackling warmth, I drifted.

No! A particularly nasty spectre unceremoniously rose up, kicking away my malaise and dragging me back to full alert.

'Bugger!' I exclaimed. 'That's all I need, nightmares.'

Just gone eleven, I discovered, and I still hadn't made the necessary preparations for the morrow.

Reluctantly I sloped off to my icing room like an old hedgehog heading for its hibernation bed. I flicked on the light switch, yawned... Then almost screamed.

'Oh no, Jesus Christ, not the cakes... Shit and to hell.'

Greeting me was a scene of utter carnage. My delicate and painstaking masterpieces were battered, flattened, squashed – utterly destroyed. Pieces of cake and icing were strewn everywhere. The walls had been daubed with colouring agents then pelted with bags of icing sugar. Individual mouldings carved from royal icing had been drenched with water and were now just a congealing mass. Nothing had been left intact. Now I knew the reason behind the visit. But in God's name why? Who on earth would want to unleash such a degree of fury on a handful of cakes? Was it an attack on me: some kind of threat or a warning? As I struggled to absorb the full extent of this mindless act of destruction, the most horrific of consequences hit me like a hammer blow. The majority of my current work was for events at some time in the future. With a determined effort I'd probably have enough time to order new cakes and repeat the work. One project, however – a particularly spectacular three-tier wedding cake – had a deadline of less than two weeks. The bride and groom were, for some reason, fascinated by the Royal Armoury, so, needless to say, the order was for a cake adorned with a selection of elaborate coats-of-arms belonging to local militia units and aristocracy. Even if it were possible to work thirty-hour days, I wouldn't be able to recreate the same level of detail in that timeframe. I held my head in my hands and cried out in frustration. But as I did so I had a premonition – somewhere lay one final insult to add to that already sustained.

I wasn't disappointed. On the back of the icing room door my nemesis had painted the word 'WaNKER' in cochineal. In comparison to the rest of the handiwork, it wasn't a particularly exceptional effort – that is until I followed the trail of red leading from the letter R. The line crossed to the adjacent wall then descended to the floor, where it ran along until it reached the table on which most of the ruined cakes rested. At that point the red streak ascended one of the table legs, traversed the surface of the table and ended in a large circle drawn on the base layer of the mutilated wedding cake. In the centre of the circle, I'd been left a little present – a small amount of opaque viscous liquid... Of human origin, I suspected... Spread out on a piece of cling film.

'Very nice,' I exhaled. 'Very nice indeed.'

The only question was whether the term 'wanker' referred to my visitor or to me.

Now I had no choice. I'd have to call the police. In terms of cost, the damage wasn't that great, but the nature of the attack posed a number of serious questions about the perpetrator's state of mind. I could have been a random target and, if so, others may be at risk. I made straight for the phone.

I'd barely begun dialling when an almighty thumping sound echoed from the front door.

'This can't be happening,' I seethed. 'Who the hell's that at this time of night?'

I replaced the receiver and approached the door. Once again my tardiness in the DIY stakes returned to haunt me. For months I'd been meaning to install a security inspection glass but had always managed to justify a postponement. Mark up another 'screw-up' notch for Clock the Flop. The pounding, which was probably someone kicking the door rather than knocking, continued with ever-increasing urgency.

Charged with curiosity, too tired to care, I threw caution to the wind and flung open the door. I was fully prepared to hurl abuse if it turned out to be kids messing about – a real possibility with Guy Fawkes Night just around the corner. But it wasn't kids or anything remotely close to it. Teetering in the porch, trembling, his face covered in blood, was Julian: Kathy cradled in his arms. His eyes were glazed and wild, an effect which markedly accentuated his glide. I opened my mouth to speak, but Julian beat me to it.

'D-Doc. Thank God!' he stuttered, completely devoid of his Western accent. 'You've got to help my Kathy. The bastards've killed her. Please, please bring her back. You can do something, I know you can.'

Any verbal response from me was clearly redundant. Julian needed help not words. I jammed open the door and ushered him into the living room. I pointed to the couch near the window – as good a bed as any. Julian resisted, clearly traumatised: terrified that once released from his arms his beloved would be lost to him forever.

I insisted. I needed to examine her: know the truth, for good or ill...

Superficially, the signs weren't good. Kathy was completely lifeless with no evidence of a heartbeat or breathing. Her head, ghostly pale face and upper torso were soaked in blood: the source far from obvious. Although not medically qualified, my career had afforded me an extensive knowledge of medicine. As a result, rightly or wrongly, I was usually able to comment on most conditions. Trauma on this scale, however, was way out of my league.

Already convinced she was beyond hope, I set about ministering to her as best I could, while Julian stood motionless at her side like an ancient guardian of some regal tomb. As I did so, however, I discovered several remarkable if not incredible findings that had at first escaped my notice. They were of such import that it was unfair to delay sharing my conclusions any longer.

'Well, Julian,' I said finally, patting him on the back, 'good news. Not only is this young lady not dead but, unless I'm seriously mistaken, she's not your Kathy either.'