Be Your Own Watson

by

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1.

They would have looked quite the pair, if you could actually see both of them. On one side, the scruffy little man, back hunched by time, hair and beard all scraggly and grey, but with childlike eyes in his worn face. This man, the one you could see, was stopping and marvelling at everything as he meandered along, as if he was just seeing every little trivial thing along the way for the first time. Whether it was a clump of leaves, or a dog taking a wee, or a particular shape in the clouds, he seemed invariably struck by how wonderful and strange it all was. The other fellow, in stark contrast, was perfectly clean-shaven and without a single feature out of place. This man didn't look like he would tolerate a single unkempt hair. He walked tall and straight - in fact, he looked as if nothing in the world could ever bend him. This man didn't walk, he marched as he went, and his eyes took in every little detail around him, but in a very different fashion from his companion. When the severe man looked about him, it was to assess and weigh and pick apart all that he saw, with no particular pleasure in any of it.

"It's a lovely day, isn't it, Leo?" said the scruffy little man as they walked along the river.

"Don't be ridiculous, Norwich," scoffed the marching one, his lips curling in sour distaste, "You are an old fool, and the worst sub-variety of the old fool, a dribbling sentimental old fool." He jabbed an angry finger at the dark woollen clouds, "It's grey and ghastly today, and the weather has achieved an especially remarkable level of unpleasantness, outdoing even the normal standards of this traditionally dire slice of the season. By my count, we've only had somewhere in the region of five or six hours of sunshine thus far this week, and that was pathetic feeble stuff at best."

Philip Norwich nodded politely to the other fellow.

"You know best, of course, Leo," the shabby man mumbled happily to his companion, "You're much better than me at remembering that sort of thing. But I don't mind that it's grey and a bit drizzly. It's nice and quiet on our walk, and this sort of wet weather seems to make the ducks happy."

Leonidas snorted.

"Should we feed the ducks some bread?" said Philip, patting at the pockets of his ill-fitting puffy coat, "I can't remember if I brought any or not."

Leo sighed through his teeth.

"For god's sake, man, I already told you. The bread is no good for the greedy beasts. It swells up inside them and makes them sick. Not that they don't deserve

it, the filthy bloody creatures."
"Oh, I didn't know that, Leo, " Philip said with a good-natured bobbing of his head.
Leonidas frowned.
"Don't look now, but there's that dreadful Polk woman sitting out the front of the café. If we're careful, we should be able to avoid her."
"Don't be silly, Leo," said Philip, squinting into the distance, "That'd be rude, wouldn't it? Look, she seems to have a friend down to visit her."
"And what a friend," Leonidas declared sourly, "She looks as bad a gossiping holy battle-axe as Mrs. Polk herself."
"Hullo, Mrs. Polk!" Philip shouted over at the pair of old ladies, waving pleasantly.
"Stop that, you fool!" hissed Leonidas, "Don't attract her attention. Come on, let's go look at your horrible ducks."
"As you like Leo, as you like," Philip said pleasantly.

Mrs. Polk did indeed have a friend over to visit, her acquaintance of many years, one Mrs. Wick. Whatever they had looked like in the past, the indifference of time had rendered them into two variations on a silver-haired old woman with heavy glasses. They met every week or so for a chat, and Mrs. Polk and Mrs. Wick could make a coffee last for several hours, as neither of them was particularly fussy about coffee having to be too hot, or even particularly nice-tasting. The coffee, after all, was just a prop, an excuse, something to keep the hands busy and to give moments of pause to their little meetings when they would take simultaneous dainty sips. If there was any variation between the two women, Mrs. Wick was perhaps a touch more roly-poly than her friend Mrs. Polk, and had a tendency to peer distantly at everything, as if her black-framed ultra-strength glasses were not quite heavy-duty enough to provide the required clarity. Mrs. Wick was now squinting over towards the ducks. She waved her head in that general direction.
"Is that fellow talking to himself?" she asked.
Mrs. Polk nodded.
"I've told you all about him before, Iris, I'm sure."
"Have you?" Mrs. Wick said dubiously.
"Oh yes, I'm certain I must have. That's one of our local characters. That's Mr. Norwich."
Mrs. Wick rolled the name thoughtfully around her mouth, repeating it a few times, but couldn't find any familiarity in it. It'd be just like Mary Polk to be certain she knew about this fellow when she'd never said a bloody word.

"Oh, come on now," Mrs. Polk said with pursed lips, "I'm sure I've mentioned him. Mr. Norwich? You remember. Mr. Norwich was a very bright young fellow, once upon a time. Quite the clever-clogs. One of those properly marvellous smart-alec brains. He ended up doing something for the army, I think it was, or perhaps the government. You know, some of that hush-hush intelligence sort of thing."
Mrs. Wick made an appropriate ooing noise. Mrs. Polk accepted it with dignity and continued.
"Well, when Mr. Norwich was off doing his spying or some such in foreign parts, (he was a Major then, or a Brigadier, I believe), he was wounded in the head in some way, although nobody knows the details of what happened, what with his work being all very top-secret and that sort of thing."
"My, my," said Mrs. Wick, shaking her head.
"The end of the whole affair was that Mr. Norwich wasn't himself after the injury."
"The great brain was cracked, was it?"
Mrs. Polk nodded wisely.
"Cracked right in two. The poor fellow thinks he's two fellows now."
"D'you mean he thinks he's Napoleon or Genghis Khan or someone like that?"
Mrs. Polk shook her head.
"No, the poor fellow thinks he's two people. That is to say, he thinks he's Mr. Norwich, which he is now, but he also talks to himself, himself as he used to be back when he was young and clever. He thinks that the younger him, the one he calls 'Leo', is actually someone else who follows him about, when it's really just part of Mr. Norwich's poor cracked noggin remembering how he used to be. Terrible, really."
Mrs. Wick tried to puzzle this out in her head for a moment.
"Dear, dear," she tutted in the end, "Still, it must be nice that's he's always got himself for company, I suppose."
The pair of them sat in silence with their coffee cups, smiling indulgently at poor split-brained Mr. Norwich.
"D'you fancy sharing a bit of ginger cake?" said Mrs. Wick, when she felt that they'd devoted enough time to being sympathetic to Mr. Norwich.

Leo looked over at the coffee-drinking chorus with disdain.
"Look at those harridans talking about us," spat Leonidas, "Although, I supposed I should thank Christ and all his damn little angels that they're too wrapped up in their tedious gossiping to corner us."

On the way into the centre of town, Philip Norwich stopped and smiled at everyone he passed, even when he couldn't remember their names. Leo found this exasperating.
"It's a bloody wonder you get anywhere, man," he growled.
"There's no hurry, is there, Leo? It's very pleasant just to stretch your legs and go for a little walk."
"Do you even remember why we went for a walk?" Leo said.
Philip took a moment to think about this.
"Of course I do, Leo. We're off to get a newspaper, aren't we?"
The taller man snorted.
"At this rate we won't get to the damned shop before the news goes out of date."

2.

Philip nodded happily at the short man behind the counter as he pushed open the door to the newsagent's. The bell jingled while the door squeezed itself closed behind them with a 'humph'.
"Good day, Mr. V.," said Philip, rubbing his hands and blowing on them to get some warmth back into the joints, "Brisk today, isn't it? We hope you are well."
Mr. V. looked up from under his bushy eyebrows.
"Hm," replied Mr. V. uncertainly.
Philip Norwich walked up and down the aisles, inspecting the covers of the magazines like they were paintings in a minor art gallery.
"For god's sake, man, let's just do what we came here for," Leo muttered into his ear, "Get the blasted paper and let's go. I can't stand the cigarette smell coming off that gnome. He reeks of fumes. It's inconceivable that they still make cigarettes that noxious. I knew a horrible little gunrunner who smoked cigarettes like that once. It's the same stench coming off this fellow here in bloody waves. He smells like someone wrapped a rotten cabbage in foil and set it on fire."
"Shush, Leo," hissed Philip, shaking his head, "Don't talk about Mr. V. that way."

Mr. V. continued to watch Norwich carefully as he went up and down the magazine racks, whispering to himself. The proprietor's eyebrows bristled and his eyes never left the shuffling figure. Eventually, much to Leo's relief, Philip had decided that he had surveyed the magazine covers satisfactorily. The hunched man shuffled to pick up a newspaper, which he placed on Mr. V.'s counter.
"Leonidas enjoys the logic puzzles in this one," Norwich explained to Mr. V. as he dug in his pockets for change.
"Enjoy is a strong word, Norwich," objected Leo, "They employ slightly less moronic setters than the other rags in this place."
"Don't you mind Leo," said Philip apologetically as he counted coins carefully onto the counter.
"Hrm," said Mr. V.
"Is that the right change?" Philip said, "I just get a bit confused sometimes, you see."
"Satan's sulphurous backside!" Leonidas grumbled at Philip, "Can't you count worth a damn? A peasant child could see you're still short."
With some difficulty, Philip found a few more coins in his pocket and laid them out in line with their cohort. He looked around the newsagent's.

"Did we need anything else while we were here, Leo? Some milk or something?"
"We have precisely the right amount of change for one newspaper and not a single unnecessary item more," Leo said, "As you very well know. In any case, I want nothing more than to leave this particular dismal place and to return to the other dismal place where we happen to live, so that I can distract myself from the miserable boredom of my narrow little existence with a delightful, if all too brief bit of mental stimulation."
"All right, all right, don't rush me," frowned Philip, "I think that's the right amount now."
Mr. V. didn't move from his spot.
Philip put the newspaper under his arm and waved goodbye.
"Well, goodbye Mr. V. See you later."
"And goodbye to you," said the little man whose distrusting bushy eyebrows followed to make sure that Norwich was definitely leaving.

3.

Norwich whistled to himself tunelessly as he jimmied his key in the lock of the front door.
"Come on now, Leo, you know the tune!" Philip said, eyeing the keyhole and trying to work out why his keys didn't seem to be working properly. It was a shabby front door - an uncheery faded plasticy yellow that made you think of a frozen faded yolk. All the small cheap houses in the row looked almost exactly the same. They called them care-home bungalows, and Leo always went into short clipped bursts of laughter whenever he heard someone call them bungalows. Occasionally one of the residents might have tried to exhibit some little spark of individuality by putting a lonely little garden gnome by their own pale yellow door. Naturally, Philip thought such little touches brightened up the street. Leo thought they were rare, if futile and ultimately pathetic attempts to pretend that the street, houses, and entranceways weren't inherently poor and depressing. Philip kept meaning to pick up something for their front door - perhaps some flowers from the hedgerows where they walked. Even Leo couldn't complain too much about that. Philip was so busy daydreaming about how nice and cheery some flowers would look and thinking about whether he or Leo knew how to make one of those wreath things, that he accidentally dropped his keys on the tatty welcome mat.
Leo sighed and crossed his arms. He looked about to say something disparaging when some movement a few doors down caught his attention, and his eyes darted and narrowed intently like a bird of prey noticing something it might want to tear apart. There was a little concrete path that broke up the row of houses before the next matching series of bungalows started again a short distance from Philip. One of the pale yellow doors was creaking back and forth slightly behind a man standing at his entrance. Leo stared evenly at the lean figure in the frame and at the light of his cigarette burning. The man in the doorway scraped one foot on the edge of the doorway. He was wearing translucent plastic blue sandals. There was a loud, rumbling, murky noise coming from somewhere in the room behind the man in the sandals.
"Oh, it's Mr. Cray, I suppose" said Philip nervously, "Uh, hello there Mr. Cray!" Cray turned his weathered old face slightly towards Norwich. Whenever Norwich saw Mr. Cray, he always remembered that children's idea that if you made a face and the wind changed, you could get stuck looking very unpleasant. Mr. Cray, Philip suspected, had not made much use of his face for smiling or any light expressions of contentment. Or, as Leo put it, the man was a bastard with a

nasty old hatchet bastard face. Mr. Cray didn't respond to Norwich. Instead, he sucked at his cigarette, cleared his throat, and spat a mucous glob contemptuously onto the concrete path.
Leo scowled at the smoking man.
"Look at that," he muttered to Philip, "That rusty-edged creature has collected such a pile of filthy cigarette butts it looks like he's making himself a disgusting ashy nest."
A twitchy little man ran uncertainly up to Cray's door and muttered something. Mr. Cray's visitor was a lean fellow with sickly skin that was pockmarked and veined, a nose that looked like it had been broken several times, and hair cut short enough that you could see the occasional scar about his nut. This man was wearing a bright blue tracksuit with a white speed stripe that went up both legs and along both arms, making him look a bit like a sort of honorary Mini car. Cray's visitor appeared uncomfortable, and although Norwich couldn't overhear the conversation, by the way the man in the blue tracksuit ducked his head repeatedly, it looked as if he was making some sort of request of the impassive smoker at the doorway. The entire time the man in the tracksuit was squirming beneath Cray's contemptuous gaze, Tracksuit looked as if at any moment he was on the verge of sprinting off in a panic, yet somehow never got around to it. Cray took another wheeze on his smoke, and blew a dismissive spray of exhaust at his visitor, saying a few words low and crackling, like his visitor wasn't worth wasting anything better. The man in the blue tracksuit waited for a moment, nodded his head a few times, lowered his eyes, and slunk off.
"See?" said Leonidas with distaste, "Look at the sort of company Cray keeps. That fellow in the tracksuit has been around a few times this week, and you only need to take one look at him to see that he missed the whole 'body is a temple' idea, because he looks to be treating his repugnant frame as something more like a filth-encrusted squatter's flat."
Philip mumbled meaninglessly and turned to have another go at getting his key into the lock. Even with his back turned Norwich could sense Mr. Cray smoking and detesting in his direction, which made him fumble even more, but much to their delight eventually there was a scraping sound from the rusty lock and they tumbled inside.
"Where is that light switch?" said Philip, groping blindly about the place.
"For spew's sake, you eyeless deformity!" said Leo, "The switch is where it always is. Two steps forward and then three to your left."
Philip nodded and counted out his way to the switch. When he flicked it on he blinked around at the bungalow.
"Good to be home, ey, Leo?" said Philip and settled with a satisfied grunt into

his chequered green and yellow chair, which looked like it had been covered in off-cuts from a failed carpet company. Leo had a sort of Spartan little stool that he rarely used, as he preferred standing, or pacing about the room. There were only a few personal touches to their little home. There was a cheap bookshelf overflowing with old newspapers, puzzle books, out-of-date encyclopedias and library books Philip had forgotten to return. There was a chunky mobile phone left forgotten on a box and plugged into the mains, and a record player with a little built-in speaker with chips and scratches in the brown faux-wood casing. There was also a faded red armchair in the corner that was kept for guests, and in the other room was a haunted-looking wardrobe and a structurally unsound bed. That was the sum total of the furniture in the bungalow. The cheap carpet had been worn bare in places by previous occupants, and besides a fresh bright touch from a recent coat of paint on the walls, there was little else to recommend the tired coop. Philip, who, unlike the cynical Leonidas, was keen to try and find something positive even in this spiritless box, was quick to point out to Leo that they had a lovely kitchenette built over into the wall and that there was even an old mantelpiece in the living-room proper, above where there had probably once been a real fireplace before they bricked it up. Leo was fond of leaning on that mantelpiece.

Philip shivered and tried to make the heating work.

"Could do with a blanket," he suggested. Leo tutted at this feebleness, but Philip ignored him and pulled out a new-looking woollen blanket, which he placed carefully over his knees.

"Lovely," he declared.

Leo snorted, and then got to scraping his nails against the paint, which was always a bad sign, because it indicated that he was getting restless.

"I tell you what," Leo said suddenly jerking his thumb towards the wall, "That Cray's a rotten turd if ever I saw one. Suspicious looking visitors at odd hours. Bad body language. Don't trust him an inch."

Philip yawned.

"Best to let people be, Leo. No need to assume the worst."

Leo bristled.

"I can bloody well assure you that I do not assume anything, Mr. Luverly Blanket. I watch, and I read, and I note. All the details are there, Philip, everybody's little flaws and lies and selfish little plots are right in plain sight, and it's dense and pathetic to pretend otherwise. Not only are people generally terrible shits, but they hardly even know how to hide it - you can see exactly what they're up to with just a bit of diligence."

Now pleasantly warm under his blanket, Philip Norwich shrugged sleepily.

"Might be dense and whatever you said, old man, but it's much better to work hard on being nice rather than being cleverer than everybody else. Let's leave Mr. Cray be, shall we?"
Leo narrowed his eyes.
"If you'd just help me go through his mail," he said in a conspiratorial tone, "We could ferret out some details about what that untrustworthy bastard is up to."
"I told you before that we weren't going to do that, Leo," said Philip firmly, "Now let's have a nice quiet look at this newspaper, shall we?"

4.

The next day when Philip stepped out of the front door his shoes crunched on something underfoot. He peered down, and saw fragments of smashed glass. Leaning against the wall, Philip gingerly picked the shards out of his sole.
"Oh blast," he said sadly, "I think the bits have cut through my shoe. They'll leak now if it rains."
Leo squinted at the glass fragments.
"Someone's smashed a few bottles worth here to decorate your doorstep, Norwich," Leo said. Philip shook his head and swept the glass fragments to one side carefully with the side of his shoe.
"What would they want to do that for?" he said.
Leo pointed out one of the blue and white labels in the pile of smashed bottles.
"That is one of the cheapest and nastiest poisonous lagers available from our local supermarket. I have also noted in the past that it is the preferred bottled piss for our dear neighbour, that scrawny and unpleasant bastard, Mister Cray. This would appear to be his mess, old man, although whether he has smashed his leftovers up against us due to his roaming natural spite for the whole world, or as an intentional petty act of hostility, I couldn't say."
Philip tutted.
"Well, I don't doubt it was some sort of accident. No point in worrying about it now, Leo. Let's get some fresh air. Go walk down to the wood. Hopefully we'll see a good few birds. We always enjoy that."
Leo grunted and bowed.
"Lead the way, then, old man."

It wasn't too far to the wood from the bungalow. The local council had always been mad on preserving large chunks of the natural landscape, which was one reason, Leo argued, that they had only enough room to squeeze in such piddly little houses like their cluster of bungalows. Philip didn't mind so much. What did it matter if where he lived was a touch small, if there was all this peaceful forest to walk through whenever they wanted? He liked to amble along the long gravel path that was lined with gentle drooping trees. Best of all, at this time of year they mostly had the entire walk to themselves, as it was too cold for the giggling pairings of teenagers and the families on outings with their excitable dogs. Occasionally, they caught sight of a tatty tent deep in the undergrowth - sleeping spots for the transients and homeless. As the pair went, they strained to listen to the sudden crisp notes of birdsong and then to spy out the rustling forms

hidden in the leaves and branches. Leo was much better at spotting the birds, and he could remember their names when they were stubbornly just on the tip of Philip's tongue.

Leo had just informed Philip of the number of robins they had seen this month in total when they both noted an uncharacteristically loud chorus of squawks in the distance.
"That's strange," said Philip, "It sounds like a lot more birds than usual."
"It sounds like too many birds," agreed Leo thoughtfully, "Let's go and see why."
They left the path and weaved their way through the thick, hardy bushes that survived in the shade of the wood. Philip found himself scratched by wooden tendrils all about the place and slowed down, picking his way carefully to avoid getting entangled. Leo tapped his foot on the ground impatiently. They followed the sound of the birds down to where the earth turned a rich black and dipped down to a furrow. Into this little furrow a side trickle of the river had seeped, prompting a sprouting of deep wild grass. The sound was coming from a great mass of birds swirling and screaming above the dip in the earth. Philip bent forward carefully, trying to get a better look without slipping down the smooth black slope into the grassy ditch.
"What on earth has got them riled up like that?" Philip wondered.
Leo's eyes gleamed with interest.
"We need to get down there and have a closer look."
Indeed, Philip was curious too. He wished that he'd remembered to bring his walking stick with him, but he'd have to make do. Philip looked about him and eventually found a sturdy-enough branch that he could snap off and use as a stick to support himself as he shuffled clumsily but cautiously down the slope towards a little flat clearing that was just big enough to hold him and was right by the commotion.
"There's something in the grass," Leo declared. He sounded delighted. This sudden little mystery had made their walk all the more interesting.
"I think I can see something blue," Philip said slowly, "Do you think it's some sort of rubbish that's attracted the birds?"
Leo shook his head and grinned coldly.
"No, old man. I recognise that blue. It's the blue of Cray's cheap, disgusting sandals."
Philip swallowed. He leaned against the slope and tried to shoo the birds away by waving his stick and making some noises to frighten them. They flapped up a few feet away, beating a temporary retreat, which gave Philip the chance to use his stick to part the thick grass near the sandal. There, lying half under the

stagnant water was a scrawny form. Philip's face sunk.
"Oh no, Leo. I can see a body there. That's horrible. I think it might be Mr. Cray."
Leo nodded in agreement.
"You look to be right this time, old man, but where's his head?"

5.

There was a knock at the yellow plastic door when Philip was reading the article in the local rag about their finding the body.
"Local Man," Philip read for the fifth time, "Discovers Headless Body! I'm rather thankful they didn't mention our names. I'd rather not have all that attention."
The knock at the door sounded again. Philip looked up, only just now noticing someone was outside.
"Who on earth could that be? Hopefully not the newspaper people again."
Leo shook his head.
"No, you fathead. It's that time of the week again. She always visits at the same time. At least she learnt a bit of punctuality."
Philip went to open the door and smiled at the young woman at his doorstep. She had her hair cut short and she stood very straight, with that sort of excellent posture that takes years of childhood training. She returned Philip's smile, although with just a hint of reluctance. The young woman was carrying a shopping bag.
"Hello, Philip, how are you?" she said.
"How lovely to see you, Miss Rachael," Philip said opening the door wide, "Come on in, won't you? It's very cold outside today. Come in, come in! I'll have another go at getting the heating to go up, since you're here."
Philip poked at the buttons on the thermostat on the wall without any visible success while Rachael came in and closed the door behind her.
"An old dog like me doesn't notice the cold so much, these days," Philip said apologetically, "And it doesn't bother Leo much one way or the other." Rachael's cheek twitched for a second, but Philip didn't notice. He scratched his head.
"Perhaps you should have a go at this heating. You're a clever lass, and I can't make head or tail of the thing, to be honest."
Rachael put the plastic bag down and inspected the thermostat.
"I'm not sure it's working properly, Philip," she concluded, "I promise I'll have a word with them about coming over to check it."
"No need to go to all that trouble," said Philip as he ambled over to the kitchenette corner of the room. "Leo, for goodness sake, couldn't you say something civil to Miss Rachael just this once?" he hissed. But Leo stood silently in the corner staring at nothing. He always retreated into a resentful quiet when Miss Rachael came to visit, which confused Philip no end.
"Never mind about Leo," Rachael said.

"Please, take the guest's seat, Miss," Philip said, "And I'll get some nice strong tea on. On a day like this there's nothing like-"
"A good, strong, fortifying cup of tea," Rachael said, finishing what was clearly a well-worn phrase.
Philip's eyes twinkled.
"That's right."
Rachael took the good seat. She knew from experience that Philip would protest endlessly if she tried to make him take it. There were still streaks of stubbornness in him, no matter how much he had changed when he had come back. There were streaks of stubbornness in her too, for that matter, and that reminded her to always keep an eye out and try not to repeat the mistakes of the past. He hadn't been able to unbend an inch, but she'd force herself to compromise, even if it killed her. She'd take the good seat.
"The paint looks okay," she called over to Philip, who was fiddling about in the kitchen, "Brightens the place up a bit."
"Well, Leo complains that it reminds him of hospital paint, but I think it's very nice," said Philip.
Rachael watched the grey-haired man as he hummed to himself while the tea bags floated in the unmatched mugs, one blue (for her) and one chipped and bright green (for him).
"I've got you a few things to eat," she said, swinging the plastic bag in his direction, "You know you always forget to feed yourself properly. Just some easy tinned things, meat and veg and that kind of thing. Some noodles too, simple enough to stick in boiling water. Oh, and those plain crackers you like."
Philip beamed at her.
"You're very kind to look after a silly old fellow like me, Miss Rachael."
She twisted her shoulders like she had something she was thinking of saying, but in the end she decided against it.
Philip found the UHT carton of milk, something else that Rachael had brought a case of on one visit because he either forgot to buy milk at all, or he forgot that he had bought it for so long that it went off and became a putrid stew of white flecks and old cream chunks. The UHT milk tasted a little feeble to Philip (although he only ever told Leo that, and would never mention it to that nice Miss Rachael), but she had explained that it was safer to have in the cupboard - it lasted for ages all sealed away, and it came in small enough cartons that if he forgot about it once opened, it wasn't the end of the world. Once he'd wrestled the carton open, he plopped the thin milk carefully into the two mugs.
"Here we are!" Philip declared, handing her one mug and taking his seat next to her. He looked happily around the barely furnished room. "I enjoy your visits. I

just wish we'd remembered to get some biscuits. Leo never reminds me about that sort of thing."
Rachael tilted her head.
"I'll get you some digestives next time. They've always been your favourite."
Philip nodded in agreement.
"Yes. Good solid biscuit, the digestive. Goes very well with a nice fortifying cup of tea. Leo and I love a nice digestive biscuit."
"And you are looking after yourself? Keeping up your walking? The doctors said it was important for you to stay active, didn't they?"
Philip nodded.
"Leo says it's too grey and miserable, but I enjoy our walks. Oh! I don't think we've shown you the paper!" He handed it over and pointed to the lurid headline about the headless corpse, "That's how we came across this. They don't mention us, thank goodness, but Leo and I found the body, and you wouldn't believe it, but it was the poor remains of that Mr. Cray down the road."
Rachael blanched.
"A corpse? Geezus." She sipped thoughtfully at her tea. "Cray - was he that horrible one down the road who had that creepy way of staring at me when I went past? He always standing there with a smoke and drink, and he was always leering wasn't he? Once or twice he said some pretty unpleasant things to me."
"Well, he was a difficult fellow to like, I grant you," Norwich said, "But I'm not sure he deserved to have his head cut off and to be dumped in a ditch in the wood."
"And it didn't freak you out, finding a headless body?"
Philip thought about this and shook his head.
Rachael stared into her mug like she could see something in the little brown islands of tea stains on the ceramic at the bottom. She twisted her mouth.
"No, I guess a dead body wouldn't spook you, would it, Philip? I suppose you've seen nastier crap than that in the past. I guess you aren't even too worried that there must be some crazy bastard out there who killed Cray."
Suddenly remembering his own tea, Philip took a big lukewarm gulp.
Rachael got up and inspected the lock on the front door, clicking it back and forth a few times and making a clucking noise. When she was satisfied that it offered some modicum of security, she returned to the guest seat and leaned over towards Philip.
"Listen," she said slowly and patiently, "Just be careful, will you? A headless body may not ruffle you, but remember this guy only lived a few doors down. Whoever did that might still be around. Don't go wandering about at night, and always check you've locked the front door."

He smiled at her like he didn't have a worry in the world, but tried to look like he'd taken that all in.
"You don't need to trouble yourself about us," Philip said, patting her hand, "Leo never misses a thing. He'll let me know if there are any dangerous-looking sorts around. Anyway, I can't imagine anyone wants to cut off my head."
"Maybe, but I can imagine someone wanting to cut off Leonidas' head," Rachael muttered to herself.
She took the empty mugs into the kitchenette and washed them, despite his protests, scrubbing at the stains until the mugs were as clean as you could get them without using sandpaper.
"I need to get back," she said apologetically, "Don't forgot to keep yourself fed. And look after yourself. Don't listen to Leo too much if you can help it. If I can, I'll try to pop past in a few days to make sure you're okay."
He nodded thankfully and walked her the few steps to the front door with comical formality.
"You are very kind to me, Miss Rachael, but you don't need to bother so much about a silly old fellow like me."
She frowned at him as she looked back, said her goodbyes and was gone.

6.

Leo was very twitchy. Not a single one of the puzzles they had in the house could keep him occupied. When he became bored, he became agitated, and he paced constantly backwards and forward in front of Norwich, like an animal testing the limits of his cage.
"Be a good fellow and try to relax, Leo, will you?" said Philip disapprovingly. But the clean-shaven man kept pacing back and forth, shaking his head, like he had something troublesome caught in his jaws.
"It won't do, at all, old-man," Leonidas growled, "You might be happy to sag there into a great lump, but I'm not. Here we have something interesting happen right in our front yard, and you want to just sit here yawning stupidly with your hands folded?"
Philip frowned at this. His hands weren't folded. In fact, one of his hands was drumming uncontrollably on his left leg in furious time to Leo's frustrated marching up and down. He couldn't remember the last time Leo had been this worked up over something. It was really quite unsettling for Philip, who had mostly learned to embrace the quiet routine of their little place and was perfectly happy to go on with his days without worrying about where Mr. Cray's head had got to. He made another futile attempt to return Leo's attention to one of the puzzle books, but Leo only sneered and waved the thing away.
"We've got a real puzzle just out there, you old duffer. Who killed Cray, and why?"
Philip shrugged.
"As you've said many times, Leo, Mr. Cray could be a not entirely pleasant fellow. Perhaps he had enemies?"
Leo flapped his hands in the air.
"I don't doubt he had an entire gallery of enemies, but where does that get us? No, no, if you hate someone, maybe in an unguarded moment you find yourself shooting them or stabbing or bashing their head in, but it takes work to saw someone's head off. That's not the work of an emotional outburst. That's hacking at bone, and blood everywhere, and mess. Why bother with it all?"
Philip sucked at his cheek thoughtfully.
"P'rhaps because they bashed his head in, like you said? Easier to get rid of it? Perhaps just to neaten things up a bit?"
Leo hardly seemed to be listening.
"You'd presume they wanted to try and prevent identifying him for as long as possible? But what on earth was in the mind of whoever did the hatchet face in?

That's what I want to know!"
Philip poked at the latest paper on the floor with his foot.
"The newspaper says it might be one of those fellows that live in the tents out the woods. A violent drifter."
Leo snorted in disdain.
"A lunatic? That's a moronic theory. A random lunatic happens to stray out of the woods to find this one particular individual, or lures him back to their grotty tent with the promise of smokes and sweeties or something, and then not only murders him, but goes to the unnecessary trouble of chopping off his head?"
Leo's jaw set, which Philip knew was a bad sign for his peace and quiet.
"No," Leo said, cracking his knuckles methodically, "Someone killed him because they had a reason to kill him, and then they had a reason to try to hide the murder. There's a pattern in all this, old man. Can't you feel it? It's on the edge of the mind, just tingling away there and waiting for us to find it all out."
Leo turned to Philip and grinned evilly.
"A murder! It's the most exciting thing to happen around here in some time. What good luck!"

***

The only way to get Leonidas to leave him alone for five minutes was for Philip to agree that they'd see if they could find out anything about the murder. It was clear to Philip that Leo only cared about the murder in so far as it provided a puzzle to keep him occupied. Leo, while pacing about, retorted that it was imperative that they investigate the death for the following reasons:
1. Because the murder had occurred not far from where they lived and the victim was known to them, indicating that helping find the perpetrator would not only ensure their own safety,
1. b. but also the safety of those around them, who could not possibly sleep safe in their little beds while such a dangerous individual or individuals were at large.
2. Given the poor funding of the local constabulary and the sad truth that up to twenty-five percent of local crimes over the last ten years had remained unsolved, they would only be doing their small civic duty in investigating the crime.
3. They had a particular insight into the crime, since they not only found the body (or at least, most of the body), but had even known the hatchet-faced bastard when he'd been alive and terrible.
4. In addition, they knew the area.
5. Finally, they had nothing better to do, and even if they did end up getting

murdered themselves, at least they wouldn't die of mouldering boredom, rotting in their cold room until someone came around to check on them.

Philip disagreed very strongly with that last point, but he did feel that the two of them had an obligation to help their community in any way they could.

Leo insisted that they needed to do more research, so first of all they returned to Mr. V.'s shop to collect all the reports on the incident.
They came upon Mr. V. in much the same position he was ever in, joined at the waist to his countertop. He had a pile of pistachios to his left on the counter, and he was daintily and carefully picking up nuts one-by-one, shelling them, swallowing the insides, and making a neat arrangement of the shells on his right. The eating of the nuts seemed to give Mr. V. no particular pleasure, and he looked as if the main point of the exercise was the creation of the circle of half shells on the right. He didn't pause a beat in the construction of his little pistachio garden as the bell jingled, but his eyes and bushy eyebrows followed Philip Norwich around the room with even more suspicion than usual.
"Hello, Mr. V.," said Philip weakly. He was met by the stony and irresistible bushy stare. The silence was broken only by the rhythmic crack of Mr. V. splitting nut shells. It was too much for Philip to take. He swallowed.
"Um, I suppose you've read about the murder?" he croaked out, since he felt like he had to say something. Leo rolled his eyes and groaned in despair at this lack of subtlety.
"I'm sure you read about it, Mr. V.," Philip repeated nervously, waving his hands in arcs back and forth in the shop to indicate that no doubt most of the publications on the racks in Mr. V.'s newsagency were discussing the local murder, up to and including the international business magazines and the dirty books in the half wrappers in the upper left corner.
Mr. V.'s eyebrows seemed, if anything, to have become larger and wilder as he stared.
"Don't read the papers," the man under the eyebrows muttered. This so threw Philip that for some moments, he made stuttering uhming and ahing noises.
"Actually, the body was found-" Philip eventually croaked out, but was cut off by Leonidas hissing in his ear.
"Quiet, you cretin!" Leo whispered, "The man already thinks you're some sort of untrustworthy lunatic, which, parenthetically I can understand from the look of you, you shambling heap, but don't encourage him by saying anything about how we found Cray's corpse! Just buy the bloody papers so we can start researching the case!"

Philip nodded. Leo pointed out the papers most likely to contain something relevant, and Philip gathered them clumsily and piled them in front of Mr. V., who stopped piling pistachio shells long enough to take money.
Philip tucked the papers under his arm and made a dash for it.

Back home, Philip had the papers spread out to the relevant articles while Leo stalked angrily between them. Philip held a freshly sharpened pencil in one hand and a small notepad open on his lap, ready to take notes as and when Leo thought of relevant points. So far, Philip had written down "Mr. Cray - No Head" and underlined it three times.
Leonidas spat with disgust. As far as he was concerned, the lack of anything intelligent from either reporters or from the local constabulary only emphasised how much they needed Leo's help. He declared that trying to find anything out from these articles was like trying to wring a drop of sense from a big fruit bowl of idiots. Philip was just about to say something about how he thought that lady from the Herald Green wrote very well and at least seemed to know something about the murder, but before he could fully articulate this, he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Philip opened the door to a short woman holding a clipboard. Her entire face looked like it had been made for professional smiling, from her chubby innocent cheeks, to her wide dark eyes, and the vaguely shining quality of her skin. Leo swore loudly at the intrusion.
"Hello?" said Philip.
"Hello and Bonjour, sir!" she said with all the saccharine radiance of Christmas lights made out of fairy floss, "My name is Marie, and it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir!"
Philip found himself shaking her hand.
"We're in the area at the moment, sir, because we represent a group working together with the local government to help people just like you, sir."
"Um," said Philip, but before he had the chance to expand on this, the lady had rushed on with her patter.
"I'd like to take a moment to explain what our scheme does for those locals who are eligible, sir. We work to help those individuals who need help with applying for government assistance, pensions, and grants, and we understand that you are receiving some such assistance at this address, and we'd like to offer our services to make sure you are getting all the appropriate help you need."
"Actually, it's me and Leo who live here," said Philip, gesturing back at the angry figure. The door-knocker was thrown off her speech, and her big cartoon

eyes stared at the empty space where Philip was pointing before some understanding dawned.
"Oh, right, you're the guy with the personality thing," she said carelessly, but saved it from this brief moment of unprofessional clipboardism with an immediate return to the bright scripted tone of the previous speech. "Which is to say that we think we can certainly help you, sir. Almost eighty percent of our clients see a substantial increase in their benefits when they work together with us."
Leonidas couldn't stand any more of this time-wasting by this point. People were always knocking on their plastic yellow door to bother them about irrelevant nonsense. This week alone they'd already had an earnest young man at the doorstep asking whether they wanted to save on their heating bill by upgrading their double-glazing, and a pair of girls asking if they'd like to contribute to the charitable cause that was somehow going to work on stopping people from dying so much from heart disease or brain cancer or something. The best thing to do to avoid these time-wasters, as far as Leo was concerned, would be to never ever answer the accursed door.
"Tell her to just bloody go away!" he shouted to Philip.
"I'm trying to find a way to do so, thank you, Leo, in a manner that isn't quite that rude!" Philip responded, which further unsettled the lady with the clipboard. Norwich smiled sweetly at her.
"I'm terribly sorry about him, but I'm afraid this isn't a good time. We're a bit busy thinking about a corpse at the moment, you see."
"Don't tell her that, you twit!" Leo said in the distance.
Marie with the clipboard seemed to have decided that there were lots of other doors she should be knocking on right now instead.
"Right, okay," she said, her smile getting more strained, "I'll just leave our material, shall I? You, uh, get in contact with us, and let us help you."
Norwich took the pamphlet offered as Marie and her clipboard walked off quickly to any other door on the street.

Norwich gathered up the sprawled newspapers and stacked them in the middle of the room. He stood back and looked at the stack admiringly.
"Well, I can't say I feel like I'm any wiser for reading through that lot," Philip said.
Leo rotated his hands in little circles on either side of his head.
"It's good background material, old man. We just leave it there to churn and ferment away, adding information to the whole brew until it's ready."
Philip suddenly felt very thirsty. What had the doctors said about having a drink?

Both he and Leo were partial to the occasional refreshing snifter.
Leo snapped his fingers in front of Norwich's face, bringing him back from thoughts of enticing balloon-shaped glasses.
"Come on, man," Leonidas declared, "No time for ovine wool-gathering now. We're starting to build up momentum. We can't let distractions like that irritant at the door slow us down now! We have to get out there while we can still smell the trail!"
Philip gave an experimental sniff.
"Where to now, then, Leo?"
"I've got a good map in my mind now of the surrounding areas. We're going to methodically scour the locale near where we came across headless Cray."
Philip assumed that the police had probably already done that, or that it was at least on their list of things to do. On the other hand, it was good to see Leo excited about something besides how much the local people annoyed him, so that seemed to him to be worth encouraging.
"Get some bloody sturdy trousers on, old man," Leo insisted, "And let's get back out there."

7.

Since Leo had decided that they were going to wander over some less well-trodden parts of the woods in search of clues, Philip had decided to equip himself not just with his toughest, most waterproof trousers, but this time he'd remembered to bring his walking stick, in case he had to navigate any more uneven terrain again, or in case he needed to bash a bit of obstructionist foliage. It was a good stick, a chunky wooden stick that Philip had bought back when he was doing a bit of physical recovery when they first moved him into the little bungalow with the yellow plastic door. They had given him a metal crutch, but he'd left it somewhere when he'd gone out walking and then couldn't find it again, so Philip had then found this sturdy stick for cheap at a place that mostly sold old furniture. This stick was comfortingly thick, knobbly, and a dark red colour. Leo said it made Philip look like a wizard who had fallen on hard times. Right now, however, Philip found it was useful to give him some support as they wended their way over slippery beds of decomposing wet leaves.

Leo calculated that they'd have an hour or two of decent light, or at least as decent as it got in this grey season. In case they got hungry, Philip had brought along a box of sultanas. Miss Rachael kept going on about him remembering to eat properly, so he'd bought about ten boxes of sultanas which meant that he wouldn't have to think about snacks. Every now and then as they walked into the forest, Norwich chewed a few of these sweet little things. They had abandoned the trail and were back in the unkempt woods. Philip followed Leo, who with his eyes darting from spot to spot, rushed along, occasionally letting out a "Hm!" or a "Hell!" as he took note of things. Philip found the going much more difficult, and had already been tangled up in several bushes. He had also been hit in the face by many branches that came out of nowhere and aimed straight for his face. Every time he was scratched in the cheek or poked sharply in the head by a point of wood, Leo would tell him off for not noticing these perfectly obvious obstacles. Philip wondered aloud if, since they were perfectly obvious to Leo, he wouldn't mind pointing them out to him before a tree decided to wound him in the eye, but Leo growled and insisted that he had his hands full looking for murder clues about the forest.

The light was dimming and the shapes of the wood were beginning to look like flat cut-out silhouettes. From the corner of his eye, Norwich saw movement. He twisted his head and suddenly felt light-headed as an object he couldn't see

clubbed him hard in the face. Confusingly, his hands were up against something damp and crumbly and there his face felt wet. He couldn't work out where exactly he was, but it certainly didn't feel right. His head swam. It took him some time to realise that this was because he was no longer standing upright, but was sprawled on what was probably the ground. Norwich tried to move, but something was holding his leg tight. His heart started to beat faster. Maybe Miss Rachael had been right about being more careful. Here he was, out in the woods in the dying light, stomping around like a fool in a forest that had been the site of at least one corpse lately. Not only had he lost his stick, but Leonidas was nowhere to be seen. He groaned and propped himself up on an elbow, gently probing the swelling pain around his mouth. Whatever had hit him had split his lip and he could feel some blood getting about the place. Philip took slow, measured breaths of clean air and his head started to feel better. He tried to look about him to find whatever he had seen shift in his peripheral vision.
"Leo!" he whispered.
Leonidas crawled alongside, cursing.
"Leo, someone got me. Took a swing at my face, and now another one's got my leg," Philip said quietly.
They both turned to look down at said leg.
"You silly bloody fool," Leo said with exasperation, "You've got your stupid damn clomping leg twisted in some vines."
"Ah," said Norwich, bashfully.
"And the only one who bashed your silly mug was that log you threw your face at when you tripped in those damn vines."
To one side, a pair of little glinting eyes was looking at him with disapproval. It was a particularly bold and judgemental squirrel. The squirrel made a tsk-tsk sort of noise, twitched its nose, then was gone. When Norwich turned his head, he saw a similar look in Leonidas' face.
Norwich started to explain how he'd wound up on the ground, but Leo cut off with a series of rapid shushs. He pointed at a tree not far ahead of them.
"Quiet, dunce," he whispered, "You might have stumbled on something interesting. Look. The branches over there are bent too heavily for any ordinary forest inhabitant. Somebody is hiding in that tree."
Norwich nodded and picked himself silently off the ground. He located his wizard stick and crept as quietly as he could towards the tree. There was definitely someone up among the leaves. Leo took up a stance like he was ready to pounce. Norwich tried to imitate the way he was standing. He looked up at the half-concealed figure, a little bit at a loss about what to do next.
"Hello up there!" Philip called out suddenly. Leonidas groaned in exasperation.

Well, Norwich reasoned, if he'd wanted him to do something else, he should have told him what the plan was beforehand.
The branches stirred.
"Would you mind if we had a quick chat with you?"
"Police?" a voice rasped from the branches. Norwich shook his head emphatically and smiled comfortingly up at the leaves. The figure up the tree seemed to consider for a while, then the branches shook and dislodged a pile of leaves and a compact figure with long matted hair.
"Whatchya want?" the man from the tree said. Leonidas' eyes narrowed as he looked this person over, reading all the little details. Male, over thirty, but looked much older, no doubt due to terrible living conditions, such as living in a wood. Wearing a thick but stained and torn peacoat. In desperate need of a haircut. Also smelled very strongly of the sort of spirits that are supposed to go into a machine rather than into a person.
"I'm Philip Norwich and this is Leo," Philip said. The autumnal man blinked at the empty space where Leo was supposed to be, but said nothing. Philip beamed some more and held out his box of sultanas, giving it an enticing shake.
"Help yourself," he offered. The treeman took the box cautiously and poured some into his mouth, chewing with the care of someone who had to avoid using several rotten teeth.
"Keep the rest, if you like," Philip said, "I've got another box at home."
"Whad'ya want?" muttered the treeman.
"You seem a fellow who has seen a thing or two in his time. We're interested to find out if you've heard anything strange a few nights ago. We found a fellow without his head around these woods, you see."
The ragged man stared and carefully chewed sultanas for half a minute.
"Y'ain't police?" he repeated. Norwich and Leo shook their heads.
Crouching down on the ground, the ragged man sniffed and pointed off into the woods.
"Strange noises t'other night," he said, looking meaningfully at Norwich, "Down that way. Noise travels through the forest in the night. Sounds of breakin' an' rippin'. Strange moans an' howls." The ragged man gave some more meaningful looks and raised his hands menacingly above his head in a sort of dance impression of what sort of violent thing might have made noise like that.
"Could have been the murder," Philip muttered out of the side of his mouth to Leo.
"Maybe," Leo muttered back, "Although this vagrant looks like he's fallen out of a lot of trees in his time and he seems to think that the murder might have been committed by some roving woodland beast, so I wouldn't rely on him too much

as a credible witness."
"Still, he might be able to show us where the noises came from," Philip said, and Leo nodded in agreement.

It took some time to get the ragged man to lead them to the place where he had heard the violent noises. Leo strode behind him close at his heels, and Norwich brought up the rear, gripping his staff like a weapon on the off chance that there were other threats unseen in the darkening woods. Eventually the ragged man brought them to a spot where the mighty struggle between forest undergrowth had left the upper branches victorious and the ground reasonably clear. Leo walked slowly around the place, measuring out every step, then dropped to his haunches. Philip blinked inquiringly.
"Look at this," Leo said waving his fingers over a squarish area, "The grass and vegetation have been crushed by a spread weight here, and not that long ago." He stood up and pointed away from the flattened patch. "Dragged tracks lead from here back to one of the farm paths."
"Someone might have been here?" Philip ventured.
"Not just someone, old facesmacker, but a definite someone. A murdering someone." Leo motioned at some crud-encrusted low-growing leafy plants. It was hard to tell in this light, but when Philip squinted, he was pretty sure that wasn't the natural colour of this variety of plant at this time of year. That was the natural colour of blood.
Leo grinned wolfishly and his eyes gleamed.
"I told you it was worth coming out here! Our little unwashed friend has brought us right to the very spot where Mr. Cray had his head sawn off." He stood up and shook his head critically. "And from the spray and mess everywhere, a right shambles of a job I'd say they did, too."

8.

"Bloody hell, Philip, you need to take more care of yourself," Rachael said as she dabbed a wodge of toilet paper soaked in some medical alcohol onto his split lip and cleaned the blood and forest grime from his face. The alcohol tingled on Philip's face. Rachael had shown up unexpectedly to check on Norwich and wouldn't stop fussing over him. As it happened, Leonidas had spent the evening after their trip to the wood convincing Norwich that they shouldn't tell anyone what they'd been up to until they had a better of idea about who had done that hack job on Cray out in the forest. Philip had wanted to tell young Miss Rachael about their investigation, but Leo had worked long and hard to persuade him that she'd just worry about the shambling beardy fool, and she might try to keep them from going about their business. Besides, Leo insisted, they didn't need any interfering busybodies getting in their way just when the case was starting to be diverting. In the end, Philip had told Miss Rachael that he'd taken a bit of a spill when he and Leo were out walking in the woods, which was true enough.
Rachael sighed as she threw the grubby paper into the bin. She turned and inspected Norwich's face.
"Well, it looks slightly less bad now, anyway. That unkempt beard of yours at least hides some of the cuts and scrapes on your face."
"Oh, I don't mind. It doesn't hurt," he said gently.
Rachael looked sceptical and stood with her hands on her hips.
"You never could admit if something was painful, could you, you tough old dog?" Leonidas stood in the corner silently. Rachael sighed. "Look, I can't be around all the time keeping an eye on you, Philip. You don't want to end up back in hospital, do you? Or doing yourself some proper injury?"
Norwich smoothed back the long grey strands of his hair.
"There's no need to worry about us, Miss Rachael. Leo and I will keep an eye on each other."
Rachael ground her teeth, and looked like she was about to say something angry when the window started vibrating in time to a regular bass beat passing outside. The bungalows were not built for sound insulation, which was perhaps not the fault of the designers, because they could never have predicted that technology would advance to the point where assault-power acoustic equipment would be available for purchase by any noisy cretin. The thump of the music coming in from the street was so loud that it wasn't an entirely sure thing that Norwich's front window wouldn't shake itself out of its frame, shimmy a few steps off the sill and smash itself to bits to a pumping beat.

Striding over to the window, Rachael put her fingers on the pane as if to stop it dancing off its perch. She peered outside.
"It's that idiot Bad Brad and his noisemobile again," she muttered. Brad was the main individual employed, at least ostensibly, to stop the government-owned bungalows from falling into total ruin. Brad drove a sporty little red hatchback that was essentially a transport system for loudness. The car had a whiny growl of an engine that actually sounded a bit like Brad himself, and besides a small token area for his tools, the majority of the red hot hatchback was set aside for unnecessarily gigantic speakers. Leonidas was convinced that Brad's music was not in fact music at all, but some sort of skull-grinding experiment in sonic torture that had accidentally been leaked to the public, where it had been embraced by listeners like Brad with incomprehensibly masochistic verve. Between the sound of his motor and the music being excreted out of the giant speakers, you could tell when Brad was driving down the street. He was always one for self-promotion, was that lad. He had a sticker of his own name surrounded in flames on the back window of his car.
Philip joined Rachael by the window. Outside, Bad Brad was leaning out the window of his car to shout at one of Norwich's neighbours. Brad had his hair peaked at an angle with gel, was wearing gold-tinted aviator sunglasses and was displaying a selection of his self-branded jewellery. One of Brad's favourite things, besides his car, was a gigantic ring he wore on his left hand that spelled out BAD-BRAD in gold letters that spanned the knuckles of that hand.
Rachael grimaced.
"Jeezus," she said, "The sight of him makes my skin want to make a run for it. That manboy is living proof that being a self-involved moron is a wildly successful evolutionary strategy." She scowled in the direction of Brad and shook her head. "You know, he was supposed to do the painting here in your place, Philip? I rang him over and over again, and in the end he wore me down and I decided to just do it myself. Maybe that's his genius strategy. Have you ever noticed that he's always thumping up and down here so bloody often in that stupid little car of his, yet he never actually seems to be doing any damn maintenance on these places?"
Rachael decided that she was going to talk to Brad about improving the lock on Norwich's door. She ran out and stood by his car, shouting at him over the noise of the music and waving her arms furiously. He shook his head uncomprehendingly, made a few gestures that told her nothing clear, and then roared off down the street. Rachael stood there scowling into the distance.
Leonidas became more animated now that Rachael was out of the room, and started tapping out a pensive rhythm. Philip thought it was surprisingly close to

the window-shaking beat that had come out of Bad Brad's car.
"I can only hope that the clarion call of Brad's amplified noise-spew indicates that we've almost done wasting time here, old man," Leo said with his lips pursed, "We've done the woods, but our next step has to be to scour the local area to suck out whatever information we can find in these depressing surrounds. A bit of vapid chit-chat would be, I fancy, a task completely up your alley. We need to have a little talk to the neighbours."

Rachael didn't stay much longer, as she said she had work to be getting back to. She did, however, refuse to depart without giving Philip a further stern talking-to about taking care of himself. Norwich mumbled about doing his best on that front, and although Rachael raised a distrustful eyebrow at this and again told him not to listen to Leonidas too much, she didn't have the time to work out if her instructions had penetrated the foggy good-natured smile of Philip.
As soon as the door closed behind her, Leo clapped his hands together and rubbed them gleefully, a hungry grin playing about his face.
"Righto, old man," he declared, "Let's go find out what the neighbours heard about that dead old bastard then, shall we?"
Norwich started to talk about how Miss Rachael told them to be careful, but Leonidas cut him off.
"I don't want to hear that guff!" Leo said firmly, "What else do you have to do that's so important? Stay there until you reach a perfect state of zen dullness and then start working on decomposing? Up and at them, old man!"
As it happened, Philip quite liked the idea of talking to the neighbours. He reasoned that it was always a fine thing to know the people who lived about you and to learn about how they lived. When a local tragedy like this happened, he mused aloud, talking to people in the area was just the neighbourly thing to do.
"Yes, yes, fine," agreed Leonidas impatiently, "Shall we?"

Cray's house was two to the right of the concrete path that divided his row from the mirror image of bungalows where Norwich lived. Crossing over the path, Philip and Leo knocked on the first door, which was slowly opened by a tiny wizened figure. This elderly individual either was unable to communicate with Norwich, or had no interest in doing so, and after a few cheerful conversational gambits from Philip were met either with the little figure staring blankly or mumbling something esoteric, the door was closed in their face. Leo swore in disgust and said some very unkind things about that particular neighbour.
Soldiering on, the pair of them went past the former doorstep of Mr. Cray, pausing only for a moment to look upon all that remained as a memorial of his

life - a scattering of cigarette butts and some empty beer bottles and cans. Presumably it would be Bad Brad's job to clear all that up, which explained why it hadn't been done.
"I wonder who will tidy up after us when we go?" Philip wondered.
"I don't imagine there'll be all that much to take care of, old man," Leo grunted, "Come on, let's try Cray's other neighbour."
They knocked on another door and heard a woman's voice screaming at someone. When the door opened, there was a lady with an almost perfectly round face with blonde streaks in her hair, which was pulled back and tied up behind her head into a sharp point of follicles. Her moon-shaped face gave an outer appearance of youth, but as you travelled inwards, you came to the dark lined and sunken interior of her bloodshot eyes.
"Yes?" she said angrily, which was fair enough, as Philip suspected that he and Leo had been staring at her most rudely. Behind the lady, two girls, two smaller versions of the woman at the door were using rainbow-coloured toy horses to have a violent sword fight. One of the little girls smacked the smallest one on the knuckles with her pony and the littlest one screamed at a pitch too high and scraping for human ears to deal with. Leo gritted his teeth. He wasn't very fond of children. While Philip smiled stupidly and introduced themselves in a bumbling fashion, Leonidas glanced down. To one side by the front door was pile of mail, kicked to one side, presumably by the sunken-eyed mother who had a long schedule of things to worry about before she got to sorting through the mail. Leo read her name from the address printed on the topmost catalogue.
"Her name is Cheryl Lamb," Leo whispered to Philip.
"Hello, Mrs. Lamb," Philip said cheerily, unsure if he should offer a hand to shake or not. In the end, since Cheryl didn't look keen, he dropped his half-raised-arm back to his side.
"We're, um, here-" Norwich stumbled, feeling rather uncomfortable at the angry way those crater eyes were staring at him.
"Here as part of a neighbourhood watch scheme," prompted Leo.
"Yes, that's right, we're here to try and make the neighbourhood a bit safer for all of us. Terrible what happened to Mr. Cray next door, wasn't it?"
"Yes, terrible," Leo said mockingly. From the way Mrs. Lamb twitched her head and gave a little snort, it was clear that she didn't miss Cray much either.
"We need to know what that sneaky bastard Cray got up to," Leo said.
"Which is to say," Philip said hurriedly, "Did you notice anything odd about Mr. Cray, um..." Norwich looked over at the two screaming girls now trying to bludgeon each other to death with their equine weapons, worried about mentioning the delicate topic of death in their innocent ears, "Before, um, Mr.

Cray had his...incident."
Mrs. Lamb snorted.
"I can't pretend he was good people, Mister. Some people aren't missed by anyone. I've got enough bloody troubles of my own, and all I really want, mister, is a simple goddamn thing. I just want some peace and quiet. Just a few moments of rest. And I ain't greedy or unrealistic either, mister, I don't expect to be given a bloody three week holiday lying on a beach sipping margaritas in the sun. I just want a few minutes of quiet, so I can rest. Maybe, if I'm lucky, even sleep through for a little while without being woken up. But some people, like your bloody Mr. Cray, are too goddamn selfish for that."
Mrs. Lamb glared suspiciously at Norwich, like he might be one of these selfish individuals whose only pleasure was to torture her by denying her even sixty seconds of uninterrupted quiet. Leonidas rolled his eyes, already frustrated by the whole conversation and irritated by the mere proximity of screaming children. Norwich spread his hands apologetically, and tried to convey that he would never try to pettily deny a busy individual like Mrs. Lamb her duly appointed share of rest. Inside, the bigger sister had defeated her littler sister, and in victory was now trying to make her sibling eat her plastic horsey. Littlest sister was fighting back by exploring even higher frequencies of screeching. Mrs. Lamb sagged and told her darling little infants to Please Shut The Hell Up for five minutes, Or Else They'd Better Bloody Watch It.
"You see what I've got to put up with? I never gets a moment of quiet. There's them stupid little boys always racing up and down in their cars, there's the people having their arguments out on the street at all hours, and then there was that Mr. Cray. He couldn't let a night go past without his drinking and playing his music loud. Always having people over, too, and smashing bottles and leaving a mess all over the footpath. I've got kids, you know? They could have got hurt with all the crap he'd leave around."
At Leonidas' promptings, Norwich tried to steer Mrs. Lamb towards more relevant rantings, and again asked her if she had seen anyone unusual visiting Mr. Cray. She shrugged.
"He had people all hours of the night. Never gave a crap about anyone else trying to get their head down, the selfish prick." This particular expletive made the younger Lamblets stop in their combat long enough to cackle. Mrs. Lamb told them in no uncertain terms to Shut It.
"All that mess he made, his place was a bloody shambles. I wouldn't wonder that'd be why he always had to get repairs done. Didn't show any respect for his place or for anyone else neither. And you know how hard it is to get them to fix anything around here? It's always the undeserving pricks like Cray who get more

than they deserve, isn't it? Mr. Cray was the sort of guy who always manages to squeeze out more than he deserves. I saw that he had that fast-talking little government lady around all the time, too, probably getting more benefits than he had any right to."
Mrs. Lamb went on in this vein for some time. Leo muttered in Norwich's ear that he suspected that she would say anything to prevent having to close the door and return to the work of raising the Lamblings. Possibly, even stream-of-conscious babbling to someone at the door was as good as a holiday for the hard-working Mrs. Lamb.
Norwich nodded along to everything Mrs. Lamb said like a novelty bobble-headed toy until his neck was starting to feel stiff and uncomfortable.
"I think Cheryl here has told us anything important she knows," said Leo, impatiently, "She's also told us anything unimportant she knows, as well as several things she clearly doesn't know about. If we stand here any longer, she might just start repeating things from the beginning."
Norwich scowled at Leonidas.
"Pardon us, if you will, Mrs. Lamb," Philip said gallantly, "And thank you for your time. We all need to keep an eye out for each other if there's a murderer on the loose, don't we? If you hear anything at all, don't hesitate to come over and talk to us." Norwich pointed at his own faded yellow door. "We're just over there, most of the time."
Mrs. Lamb snapped out of her autospeaking reverie, sighed, and turned back to the task of wrangling her offspring, who by this stage were now both wailing piteously and accusing each other of every crime against humanity their young minds could conjure up. Norwich said a cheery goodbye to Mrs. Lamb, waved to the bawling children, and hurried after Leonidas, who was striding off in a bit of huff.
"Why on earth did you tell her where we live?" grumbled Leo.
"Why? In case she wanted to come and talk to us."
Leonidas looked repulsed at the very idea. They had quite enough irrelevant disturbances, as far as he was concerned, without any need to encourage more tedious company.
"I need some peace and quiet to think, and there's no way to get it in our dreary little shack," insisted Leo, turning down the concrete path that split the two matching rows of houses. This led to a wobbly network of thin dark passages that wended their way behind the secret backs of the estate blocks. Due to the arcane wisdom and strange art of the architects and builders who produced this stamped-out neighbourhood, while the streets echoed and bounced sound off the front faces of the repetitive cheaply constructed buildings, for some reason, the

cramped barely-planned pathways between the clumps of bungalows were eerily quiet, as if they silently sponged up every last footstep and shout. These back ways were mostly popular with the local cats as a means of getting about town quickly and conveniently. The gloomy silence of these alleys tended to put off the bipedal traffic. At certain points these paths branched back to the busy streets, and as the pair walked along, they got a framed flash of noise and movement over in the outside world of the suburb. Leonidas was deep in thought. Norwich listened to the sound of their footsteps and talked puss-nonsense to the moggies commuting warily down the alleyway. They did several laps of the lane circuit, until Leonidas snapped his fingers suddenly and shook his head. He blanched as if something unpalatable and nauseating was lodged in the top of his throat.

"There's no help for it, old man, we're going to have to go to the library."

9.

A visit to the local library was no hardship to Norwich. He liked the fact that there were always a few people milling around. He also liked that the industrial beige carpet looked comfortingly like the stuff they had in their bungalow, and also that it made an oddly satisfying rough sound when he lightly scraped his heel back and forth on the ground, as he was doing now. Leonidas told him to stop. Leo hated the library, or rather, he disliked this particular library. For one thing, he was adamant that a proper library should have more books. Thick books. Ancient books. Books piled up to the roof. Books spilling all about the place so you have to clamber through an obstacle course of stacks to reach your goal. Books creeping so high up over the windows that all but a crack of light was blocked out. The local library, Leo complained, had a couple of crappy much-borrowed best-sellers on display for people too cheap or poor to buy their junk-food reading, as well as a few thin volumes of poems by local bores, and a hodgepodge of reference material that was just about useful enough for a high school kid to produce an inadequate report on a limited range of topics. Norwich mused that it was mostly about computers now, he supposed, which made Leo bristle defensively and declare that computers were grand systems for distributing pictures of puppies and keeping a beady eye on the populace, but computers weren't what made a bloody library a proper bloody library. This library, Leonidas said with a dismissive wave of his hand, was an open-plan office the council had dumped some shoddy metal shelves in, along with some crappy chairs, a few outdated old computers, and a photocopier.

Norwich nodded pleasantly at the three regular librarians. Philip couldn't remember the names of these three women, but they didn't seem to mind much. As the three librarians had written on some leaflet or another, one of the roles of the community library was to provide a safe and encouraging space. Clearly, they thought Norwich looked to be the sort of fellow who needed safety and encouragement. Philip said hello to the librarians, and the trio said hello back in slightly slow tones, as if they didn't want to scare him off. Leonidas made a tsking sound. He claimed that he could remember the librarian's names, but he peevishly refused to tell Philip, and insisted on calling them Maiden, Mother, and Crone. There weren't many other people around at the moment, besides a few over at the photocopier, where a little grey-haired old lady was holding up a short queue of people. She was becoming increasingly flustered because she was trying to make the machine copy some photographs of her grandchildren, but the

whole process was a mystery to her. With laborious slowness, Norwich booked himself a half-hour block in front of one of the chunky computers, and Leonidas whispered several things he wanted to look up. The pair of them read through anything they could find on the late Mr. Cray. Once they'd gone through the articles written on his death, all of which unhelpfully repeated identical phrases as if they'd been written by the same person, Norwich felt none the wiser about the whole case. They then decided to investigate the claims of the neighbourly Mrs. Lamb that Cray had been sneaking undeserved support from the government. Leonidas steered Norwich to all sorts of boring-looking websites on government benefits that had spreadsheets of information that almost meant something to Norwich, but when he tried to focus on the crashingly dull stuff, it all sort of went fuzzy.

Norwich typed very slowly, as if he had to remember where the keys were every time he looked down from the screen. Storytime had started over in the far corner by this time, and since the library was just one big beige-carpeted room, Norwich was now finding himself increasingly distracted by one of the librarians reading aloud about a brave elephant to a small group of restless children.

"This is why a proper library has walls!" Leo hissed, "I can't stand another moment here, and we've got all I think we are going to get out of this bland purgatory. Let's escape, immediately."

Norwich stood up and scratched his ear.

"You know, Leo, I think I might just have a little browse first through the shelves and borrow a couple of books."

"If you must," said Leo through gritted teeth, "Even if you always forgot to bring the damn things back, and always insist on getting mush to read."

Philip ambled over to a section of local history, bending his neck to read the titles on the spines as he went along.

"I wonder what sort of thing Mr. Cray read?" he said, "You can tell quite a bit about a person by having a look through their bookcase. P'rhaps if we could see Mr. Cray's bookcase we'd understand him better, and make some progress on finding out who might want to do him harm?"

"Cray didn't look the sort of person who went in for books, old man," said Leo, trailing sulkily behind. Both he and Norwich stopped. Leo's eyes grew wide and shone and his eyebrows arched.

"What is it?" said Philip.

"Forget your books, you well-disguised scruffy little inspiration, you've given me a brilliant idea," said Leo, delighted with himself, "We're going to just go and see if Mr. Cray had any bookshelves at all."

"How's that?" asked Philip.

Leonidas licked his lips with delight.
"We're going to break into his house."

***

They argued over this burglary plan the whole way back to the yellow plastic door. A gaggle of jostling schoolchildren in uniform took one look at the slouched, wild-haired, and wiry-bearded figure of Norwich stomping along and talking loudly to nobody they could see, and, with the same sort of instinctive collective motion you see in schools of fish and murmurations of starlings, the uniformed kids silently shifted en masse over to the other side of the road. Philip explained repeatedly that he was reluctant to force entry into Cray's house. Leonidas, however, was insistent. Was such a project even feasible, Philip wondered?
"If I had the right tools about me," Leo assured Philip, "I could show you how to get us through that pathetic door in thirty-three seconds. That was my standard, back in the day."
"But you don't have any lock-picking tools," Philip pointed out insistently.
Leonidas was reluctantly forced to accept that this was true. He creased his brow.
"How about we make some tools, then?"
"I don't think I'm keen to help out with that sort of thing," Philip said.
Leonidas waved the idea aside.
"No, you're quite right, old sack, it'd take too long in any case, and I don't want to delay. We need to slip in as soon as we can, and no messing about. I've a feeling I'm so damn close to getting my teeth into someone for this little murder that I can almost taste it. Damnit!" Leo kicked at the ground.
"Steady on there," Philip said soothingly.
"Never mind!" Leo shouted with a triumphant snap of his fingers, "I've bloody got it! We won't break in. Force is for fools. We'll use brains. We'll make 'em let us in!"

Leonidas plan was simple and relied on both the well-established hopelessness of Norwich, the incompetence of others, and on the poor design choices of the rows of mass-produced houses.
"I'm still not sure about this, Leo," said Norwich, fidgeting nervously on Cray's front step.
"Stop worrying, you wreck," Leo hissed, then rubbed his chin thoughtfully "Actually, on second thoughts, do more of that mournful worrying. It adds an excellent authenticity to your performance."

"And what if we get found out?"
"Simple. Just tell them that you are a pathetic confused simpleton who has no idea what he's doing. There's not a person alive who wouldn't immediately accept that to be crushingly plausible."
The rattle of windows to a beat and the roar of a motor heralded the coming of Bad Brad and his noisemobile. They craned their necks to see the maintenance manboy screeching down the road at an inadvisable speed. Leonidas grinned horribly. For the first time ever, he was actually pleased to see Brad arrive.
Leonidas' plan was simple. He reasoned that:
a) all the doors and house fronts in the street looked the same.
b) most of the houses were maintained by the same company.
c) Brad was in charge of the day-to-day aspects of said maintenance.
d) Brad was a self-involved cretin.
e) Norwich looked like someone who could lose his own shoelaces.
Therefore, Norwich had phoned up Brad and explained in halting terms that he had lost his keys and locked himself out of his house. Leonidas encouraged Philip to really lay on the patheticness with the lies, miming for Philip to exaggerate his imagined distress, and to mention how cold it was out here, how he might drop dead from exposure, not to mention the fact that there was a murderer somewhere out there, and being outside was just encouraging someone to come and kill him. This was all very distracting for Philip, and he was unsure how much of it he had ended up saying to Brad over the phone. When Philip had exhausted his pleading, Bad Brad grunted distractedly, and agreed in principle to come and let him in with the master set of keys at some point in the future.

As Brad leapt out of the car, he spat to one side, and pulled a puffy golden jacket tight about him. He had his baseball cap pulled down low. The cap had a giant B on it, on a background of an explosion. Leonidas looked at Brad scornfully, and noted that he didn't seem to be wearing his favourite jewellery - his big gaudy BAD-BRAD ring. Leo wondered if Brad had sent it off for a weekly polishing or something.
Brad swaggered over to them, squinting at the big collection of keys that jingled musically as he went. It was getting dark, which was part of Leo's plan. Hopefully, the lack of light would make it even less obvious which house Norwich was actually standing in front of.
"Orright," said Brad with an intolerant sniff, "Locked yerself out, have ya? That's pretty stupid, yeah? You oughta be more careful, chum. I've got more important things to do than this, right, mate?"
Norwich apologised profusely, while Bad Brad sucked his teeth and shook his

head, still searching for the key.
"It says 2745 on the lock, if that helps," Norwich said, trying to sound like he just wanted to make it up to Brad. Norwich then repeated the number of Cray's house a few times. Brad held up his hand impatiently.
"Orright, orright, mate. Settle down. Here we go."
Norwich held his breath and stepped to one side while Brad fiddled with the key. Cray's door swung open. Leonidas almost giggled with delight. He gave the hand signal to Philip that was supposed to indicate that he should scuffle into action and block the doorway, in case Bad Brad might notice this was not where Norwich lived.
"Thank you so much, Mr. Brad," Norwich burbled to add to the distraction, "That's very kind of you, helping out a silly old fellow. It's very much appreciated."
Norwich took a big, relieved gulp of air. They needn't have worried too much about Brad noticing where he was. He'd turned his back on them and jumped back into the noisemobile without so much as a backwards glance before Norwich had gotten halfway through his little thank-you. Even now the music had started up again and Brad had roared impatiently off to his next mission.
"See," Leo said with a half-smile, "Easy." He bowed and waved in the direction of Cray's door, "After you, old man. Let's go and see what there is to see, shall we?"

Norwich closed the door gently behind them. It was the exact same layout as their own place - small living room with kitchenette straight off the front door, and a pokey bedroom and cupboard-sized bathroom. Norwich walked around gingerly, nervous not just because he and Leo had broken into the dead man's house, but because it looked so much like their own familiar surroundings, just with a few details different and wrong. It felt like he had unknowingly slipped through dimensions into an alternate night-universe version of his own familiar living room. It even had the same carpet, although there were a lot more burnt patches in Cray's version. Also, his walls were a lot less bright than theirs, which was fair enough, since Cray didn't have someone like Miss Rachael who would come around to fix up that sort of thing. Instead, Cray's walls were stained a depressing yellow-brown. Leonidas sniffed the air and remarked that it smelled of stale smoke in here, and that just when he thought nobody could have a place to live that was more depressing than Norwich's, the universe had proved him wrong.
There weren't any bookshelves in Mr Cray's place, as it turned out. There wasn't a lot of anything, besides further empty cans of beer and drained bottles of spirits

with fancy labels, about three solid ugly ash-trays that looked like they had been stolen from pubs in the prehistoric era, and a couple of stacks of magazines. Norwich flicked through one stack, and found the magazines were mostly either about expensive cars or naked women. One particular magazine 'HOT CHASSIS!' seemed to combine both interests. There was also a sagging orange couch pointed directly at a sinister -looking monolith set up at the opposite end of the room. On closer inspection, this shining black monolith turned out to be a very large and powerful-looking entertainment system, with a television screen bigger than the window and speakers that might crush you if they toppled over. This must have been the source of much of that offending noise that kept Mrs. Lamb next door from sleeping. While Norwich was wandering about the place, Leo measured out paces, examining every inch and angle of Cray's former home with intense concentration. The bedroom also looked exactly like theirs, and told them nothing except that Cray had slept on sheets with a racing car motif that looked very much like they were aimed at a much younger market. The little bathroom told Philip and Leo that Cray had preferred to use lime-scented shower gel and had clearly been accustomed to smoke and drink while sitting on the toilet, based on the arrangement of further ash and cans. There was nothing whatsoever on the shelf above the sink, and Cray's fraying toothbrush and razor had at some point tumbled into the sink itself, never to be retrieved by Mr. Cray, who no longer had the need for such things.

"Well, Leo?" said Philip in hushed tones as they walked back into the living room and towards the front door, worried that Mrs. Lamb might be able to hear them stomping about Cray's house.

Leonidas frowned and flexed his fingers.

"There's something about this place that puts my hackles up."

"Yes. It's like ours, but not," said Philip.

"I find that particularly interesting," said Leonidas, arm outstretched and pointing to a patch of unremarkable carpet just in front of the mail slot.

Philip stared at the spot and concentrated, but eventually had to give up.

"I can't see anything there, Leo," he confessed.

"Exactly," said Leo. He continued to point, but now was radiating a triumphant air. Philip continued to look confused. Leonidas sighed and shook his head despairingly.

"Remember how messy it was inside the front door of Mrs. Lamb's house?"

"Well, she did have two children. We shouldn't judge."

Leonidas snorted and rolled his eyes.

"The specific mess I am referring to, you pathetic wet rag, was the pile of letters addressed to Mrs. Lamb."

Philip looked back down at the blank patch of carpet at which Leonidas was jabbing his finger insistently, his eyes bulging slightly.
"No mail," Philip said quietly.
"Correct."
"Well, he is dead," said Philip with a shrug, "And perhaps he didn't know many people?"
"Ah," said Leonidas with index finger up, "But Mr. Cray has not yet been dead so long that there should be no mail. There is not even a flyer for discount pizza or a menu for takeaway Chinese and Misc. Food, and as you know we get such a bulk of that sort of post through our door that it is all we can do to stem the tide of constant advertising rubbish pouring in. And yet, here..." Leo gestured meaningfully at the blank patch in front of the door again.
Philip scratched his head.
"P'rhaps somebody or other came in and cleared up all the mail?"
Leonidas shook his head.
"There are some incongruous empty spots in this place of Cray's, it is true, but you can see that the main thing left behind, besides his Television-Stereo monstrosity, is a substantial mess of bottles and cigarettes. If you were going to tidy here, that would be the logical place to start. The only reason the mail has been cleared away, I suspect, is because there was something in that pile of post that was interesting and incriminating to another party."
"The murderer?" whispered Philip.
Leonidas bared his teeth in something like a smile.
"Well, let's find out, shall we?"

10.

Back behind their own yellow door, it took a while for Philip and Leo to scour through some scraps of paper to find one particular phone number. Leo gave a cry of triumph when they came across it. Philip put the piece of paper onto the arm of his chair and smoothed it flat. Then he turned to the box where the phone was kept. The phone had been bought by Miss Rachael, as she said, for emergencies, but he and Leo never used it. They had nobody in particular to call, and besides, Philip very much preferred to say hello face to face. The other issue with the phone had been that neither Philip nor Leo ever remembered to charge the thing, which Rachael had found exasperating. She had grumpily demanded to know what the point of having a phone was if nobody could call it because the bloody thing was always flat, or lost, or just plain forgotten. In the end, to keep Miss Rachael happy, Philip had decided to leave the phone plugged in (which essentially negated its portableness) and placed it squarely on the pedestal of the fancy box it came in, just to one side of the mantelpiece. Leo would often glare at it, and refer to it as a bloody infiltrator, or an electronic information tick, or a flashing idiot's bleep machine. In any case, the pair hardly ever used it. It was mostly just part of the furnishings of the room - a small feature that kept Rachael happy when she caught sight of it during her visits.
Philip gingerly pulled the still plugged-in mobile phone over towards his chair, squinted at the screen, and with his tongue out, poked at the numbers as Leo read them off. There was a brief conversation. Then Philip sat and Leo stood and they ate a Chicken Tikka meal-in-a-bag they had found in the fridge, and they waited.

Some time later, there was a knock at the door. Leonidas rubbed his hands together and licked his lips. Philip walked over to the door and opened it.
"Come in, come in, won't you?" he said to the short figure outside. It was the cartoon-eyed and dark-haired lady who had knocked on the door the other day.
"Um, bienvenue and that," Philip said
"Hello and Bonjour to you Mr. Norwich," Marie with the clipboard said brightly.
Leonidas sniffed.
"Take a seat, will you? This one here is for guests," Philip declared, "Would you like a digestive biscuit?"
"That's super kind, Mr. Norwich, but I just ate. Thank you so much!" she said with so much manufactured sincerity that it made Leo's teeth ache. "I'm so pleased you decided to give us a call after meeting you the other day! I just had a feeling about it. A super good feeling. And our company can do you so much

good, Mr. Norwich! We've helped so many people with their pensions and benefits in this neighborhood!"
"Like perhaps Mr. Cray?" said Philip, who had realised he had some chicken tikka sauce in his beard, and was now trying to clean it with the sleeve of his jumper.
Marie the door-botherer's eyes got just slightly bigger at his question, which made Leo's own set of peepers narrow with interest.
"Well, I don't think I know any Mr. Cray, but I meet ever so many people," she said sweetly, "It's one of the great things about this job!"
"But he only lived a few doors down," Norwich said, confused, "And you knocked on our door, so you must surely have knocked on his?"
"Don't forget what Mrs. Lamb said about Cray's visitors, too," put in Leonidas.
"Yes, that's right. Mrs. Lamb was complaining that Mr. Cray always had government visitors around."
"In fact, old man," Leo said, scraping his teeth with a fingernail, "Mrs. Lamb mentioned a 'fast-talking little government lady', to be precise."
Norwich shook his head, as if he was trying to dislodge something uncomfortable.
"Was she talking about you? Don't you work with all the people around here to help them with their payments and pensions?"
"Oh, of course, of course! But, we work with so many people. Maybe I did meet Mr. Cray," Marie with the clipboard said, giving a flustered laugh, "Why, I meet so many interesting people!"
"Why don't you take her to Mrs. Lamb to see if the poor dear sleepless mother recognises her?" suggested Leo with a cruel smirk.
Philip nodded, and asked Marie if she would mind popping over to talk to Mrs. Lamb, as it might jog her memory and help clear things up. This was too much for Marie, who started to back towards the door.
"Well, I wouldn't have time, I'm afraid," Marie said, "I have so many other people to work with here, to help - so many people who need our help with their benefits."
"It's strange, that certainly sounds like the sort of help Mr. Cray would have been interested in," insisted a befuddled Philip, "Leo, why does the government lady look so nervous?"
"Because," Leonidas boomed, "She is not a government lady and she is not here to help. I couldn't uncover the slightest legitimate record of her pension-assistance organisation when we had our little trip to the library, because there isn't anything legitimate about her fictitious group."
Philip looked shocked. Surely not this kindly-voiced young lady?

"Christ, stop staring at me, will you? He should have told me how crazy you were," Marie spluttered, her sugary shell now apparently cracked. Without taking her eyes off Norwich, she felt for the lock behind her.
"You and Cray were up to something together?" Philip said slowly.
"There have been a rash of pension and benefit frauds across the county over the last several months," Leonidas said, assuming a lecturing air, and pacing smartly about with his hands behind his back, "It's actually rather obvious if you take the time to read the data properly. The bothersome lady here would sign up jellyheads like yourself who were too thick to know that the charge of this nonexistent help for managing their pensions would be a healthy skimming of money from the helpless dolts who let her in the door and signed right there on her infernal clipboard. They were rather lazy fraudsters, to be honest, preying on those too weak-minded to know they were even being robbed by signing over a few pieces of paper."
"And Cray was helping to trick people around here out of their money," Philip said, shaking his head sadly, "Well, I never."
"Now, wait a minute, perhaps you are confused, Mr. Norwich," Marie said soothingly, like she was talking to a child who had just fallen awake out of bed, "You don't want to be saying that sort of thing out loud now, do you? It's all just something you've imagined, isn't it? You know you aren't well, after all!"
Leonidas drew himself up to his full height and looked like he was going to erupt with rage.
"How dare you!" Leo roared, "It is one thing to be a thief, and not a very creative thief at that, but how dare you impugn my mental faculties!"
Philip nodded in agreement.
"That's right! There's nothing wrong with me and Leo!"
Marie gave a little half-suppressed nervous giggle.
"That's how she knew who you were, old man," Leo muttered, "Remember that look on her face when she first came in? A moment of realisation. She'd heard about you before. Cray must have been a spotter for her, a finder of soft touches."
"And the mail? Did she take it?" said Philip.
Leonidas stared thoughtfully at the ceiling.
"There must have been a bit of incriminating information in Cray's mail, so the sweet little swindler here just grabbed the lot. I'd imagine it was a tasty menu of people they were planning to defraud of their pensions that Mr. Cray had ordered up from one his grubby little contacts."
"And she broke into Cray's place to get back the list of people they were planning to trick?"

Leonidas strode over to Marie the robber of pensions and inspected her closely. Her big eyes were blinking far too rapidly, uncertain about what she should do next. Make a run for it? Try to convince this nutter in front of her that it was all in his head?
"You know, old man," Leo said, crouching down, "It's possible that she didn't even break in. Look at these tiny hands she's got. She could've made a decent honest career as a good old traditional pickpocket and avoided all this distasteful paper-crime stuff."
"Miss Marie!" Philip said shocked, for, after all, he tried to think the best of people, "Did you stick your hands through poor dead Mr. Cray's letter box to get hold of some of your incriminating papers?"
"Look," Leo declared gleefully, "You can see where she scratched her knuckles."
This was all becoming too much for Marie.
"Look here, just a moment, sir-" she spluttered.
Leonidas bared his teeth and a dark expression came over Philip's face, making him look like a small, frizzy, grey-haired thundercloud.
"Miss Marie," Philip said haltingly, "If you stole Mr. Cray's mail - did you, did you kill him and cut off his head? Was he planning to double-cross you, expose your swindle to the police?"
Marie had now downgraded from spluttering to being able to get nothing out but meaningless gasps of air. Leonidas thought this was wonderful.
"Don't be dim, scarecrow, she's all for fake smiles and sleight of hand, not bashing people to death. And why would she knock off a fellow who was so good at weaselling out poor prey for the pair of them? She'd be giving up all the gullible fools Cray found, all those prime-grade dupes who might sign over their life savings because they weren't up to understanding a few forms."
With supreme effort, little Marie managed to get back to producing words, and was now blithering about how she had nothing to do with Cray's death, the tempo of babble increasing from moment to moment.
"Not to mention," said Leonidas, who was enjoying Marie's terrified meltdown far too much, "Why would she need to lop off that bastard Cray's head anyway, even if she had killed him?"
"Look, sir, Mr. Norwich," she squeaked, "I had nothing to do with his murder, of course not, I swear to you!"
Leo snorted at the idea that her word was worth much. Philip, despite his better nature, was starting to agree with him.
"And cheating people?" Philip asked sadly, "Is Leo right about that?"
She licked her lips uncertainly but it was obvious even to Philip that much as she might protest and squirm, she had indeed run her scam with Cray as assistant

and she'd indeed been the one to clear out his mail.
"Look - look, now sir," she said, talking much too fast, "Cray was into lots of things, he was the criminal, I had nothing to do with it really, not truly, and anyway, nobody would believe you, and none of that is true... it was Cray - he'd try and do anything to make money - did you ever see how much he drank? He drank it all up, and spent it on drugs, too. Did you know he had a side-line selling drugs too? He had a source for prescription medication as a sideline, he'd get them from the benefits people, but I had nothing to do with his death and nothing to do with him, really, sir, Mr. Norwich."
Philip and Leo argued back and forth about what they should do with the guilty Marie, but the sight of Norwich standing there in deep conversation with thin air finally proved to be too much for her. She shrieked fiercely, threw her clipboard at Norwich's head, and fumbled the lock open. Without taking her eyes off Norwich, she backed out the door, mumbled something about how none of that stuff was legally admissible, and scurried off into the night.
Philip took a few tentative steps to apprehend the speedy little criminal, but Leonidas called him back.
"Forget about her, you keen old rope," he said, "She didn't kill Cray." He waved away Philip's protests. "She doesn't matter a damn. If it makes you feel better, we can use The Phone to report her." It was apparent that, now that he'd made Marie squirm a bit, Leonidas had exhausted any interest he had in her and her schemes. "The murder's the thing. We aren't going to settle for second-rate crimes here!"
Slumping into his chair, Philip sighed.
"I don't like it, Leo, but I suppose catching the killer is more important." He squeezed his eyes closed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to shift a mild headache that had suddenly developed.
Philip went to fetch the phone from on top of its box, and spent some time untangling the power cord before spending even longer trying to explain himself to Constable Someone or Other about the pension skimming scheme. This took some time because Norwich often got the details confused. He was currently explaining for the third time that the lady involved had said her name was Marie, rather than Mary, a distinction that was lost on the crackly line of the rarely-used phone. While Philip was grateful that Miss Rachael had been concerned enough about them to buy the Phone, even he had to admit that the shiny plastic bar only allowed you to hear the other person clearly about half of the time. Leonidas perched against the mantelpiece and yawned, insisting that Marie probably wasn't even really the clipboard lady's name, which made it hard for Philip to concentrate, and made him lose the thread of what Constable Thingummy was

saying. By the time he felt he'd done his citizenly duty, Norwich was exhausted. The authorities had promised to look into the matter, in a tone that sounded both final and uninterested. Philip carefully put the Phone onto its small box pedestal, and put the kettle on to make himself some noodles to eat. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten anything, and when he asked Leonidas, he shrugged and ignored Philip, drumming his fingers in complicated martial rhythms on the mantelpiece and chewing his lip, entirely absorbed, as Philip could see, in the question of who had killed Cray. In the meantime, Philip put a record on the little all-in-one player to give a bit of comforting background noise to the room, since Leo was being so silent and furiously contemplative. They didn't have a particularly wide selection of records, and in fact only owned three vinyl discs - a tatty old scratched copy of Schubert's 'Winterreise', a 'Greatest Hits of Jelly Roll Morton', and a collection of poppy surf rock songs from old Bollywood films. Philip put the Jelly Roll Morton on at random and slurped his noodles. Leo was pacing around the room and muttering to himself and shaking his head, but seemed to be getting nowhere, while Philip felt himself getting drowsy. He stood up and yawned.

"Let's take a bit of rest, Leo. A good sleep will clear our heads."

Leonidas frowned.

"Nothing could clear your fusty mop of a head, old man," he growled, "But you go on and do some snoring if you must. That amusing little diversion with the lady of door-to-door fraud must not throw me off course. I am not about to let our true quarry escape!"

Philip nodded pleasantly, changed into his chequered red-and-white flannel pyjamas, lay down, and soon was indeed doing some fine snoring.

11.

When Philip woke up, he yawned and shuffled through to the kitchenette to brew himself a cup of coffee to try to help with the morning haziness in his head. He went to stand in front of the bathroom mirror and brush his teeth, then remembered the half-drunk coffee, and alternated between toothpaste and cheap brown caffeine, resulting in a very unsatisfactory combination. In the meantime, Leonidas was already in full flight, noisily striding around the place and grinding his teeth in frustration, insisting that he could almost sense the right way to the murderer, and if only he could reach just a little bit further, he'd be able to get his fangs right into the evasive amateur butcher. Philip nodded encouragingly and spat out the last of the toothpaste-coffee combination into the bathroom sink. He changed out of his pyjamas, vaguely wondering if he had worn the same shabby but warm clothes the day before and whether they might need a bit of a wash at some point. He then went to open the front door a crack to let in some fresh air, as the bungalow was not particularly well-ventilated, and, without a little help, the place could get somewhat stuffy. As he opened the door, he caught sight of the ill-looking shaved-head fellow in the blue tracksuit with the white stripes.
"There's that chap," Philip declared, a little fuzzy on precisely where he had seen him before.
Leonidas peered over Philip's shoulder. His eyes widened with interest.
"Ah! He visited headless Cray around about when he still had a head, didn't he?"
Leonidas stared at Philip.
"Well, don't just stand there, man! That sorry sight of a human being may well turn out to be part of our hunt!"
"Perhaps he's Cray's killer?" Philip said doubtfully, scratching his messy greying hair.
Leonidas stomped.
"Well, we won't bloody find out just standing here, will we, you dry weed? Get your skates on, and let's follow Mr. Tracksuit to see what he can show us!"

They walked behind the sickly man in the tracksuit at a discrete distance. Philip followed Leonidas' lead to stay out of sight, but by and large, his own natural ambling speed turned out to be ideal for trailing somebody. As Leonidas put it, Philip was such a shaggy grey slouching piece of background, it was unlikely that the man in the blue tracksuit would notice him even if Norwich was standing right in front of him.

They followed the man in the tracksuit for some time. He went past Mr. V.'s shop, where he bought several packets of chewing gum and a bottle of chocolate-banana milk, which Tracksuit gulped down right outside Mr. V.'s front door without taking a single breath, the large lump of cartilage in his skinny veined neck bobbing up and down hypnotically with each swallow. Next, Blue and White Tracksuit shouted at someone he knew at a bus stop, although it wasn't clear whether they were friends or enemies. He then spent some time colourfully abusing a cash machine without making any attempt to actually use it. After that, he bobbed his head and talked sweetly to a fat white cat sitting imperially on the warm red bonnet of a car. The cat did not seem to be visibly won over by being called Pusspusspuss. After all this, it was something of a relief to Norwich that the man in the tracksuit went into the door of a pub called the Wreck and Ruin. As it happened, this was a drinkery that he and Leo would sometimes frequent themselves. It opened early enough for people who had nothing better to do in the a.m. than drink, and it was a dark and crusty pub where, although it wasn't especially welcoming, Norwich could sit for a while in quiet meditation and nobody would bother him. The exterior of the pub was painted an uninviting black, and the paint was peeling in several places, because the Wreck and Ruin was not the sort of establishment that bothered with maintenance and cleaning. There was a faded picture of a ship crashing into some rocks above the door, but it was so faint that you really had to squint and use your imagination to make it out. Locally, it was just called 'The Wreck'. Leonidas said that as far things went, it was most appropriately named.

They went in and ordered a drink from the corpse-like barman with a minimum of words exchanged. Philip tended to get spiced rum. He like the warmth and the sweetness and the distant half-memory of somewhere else. They only had one spiced rum at the Wreck. It came in gigantic bottles and must have been a most rare spirit, since they had never seen it at any other pub or bar, nor had they ever heard of the name printed in red flouncy calligraphy on the oversized label - 'Callado Carricerin' - anywhere else. Philip had it poured in a short glass over a couple of grubby icecubes that had hints of plastic and rubber in the taste of their surface until they were worn down by the strong stuff of the rum. Because he held that glass on the table gently between his fingers and very rarely remembered to drink it, diminishing the rum was a slow process for Norwich.

Philip fumbled with money while the near-undead barman waited patiently, then picked up his glass and trotted over towards a particularly dim corner where they preferred to sit when they visited the Wreck. The first great advantage of this

corner was that they were hidden from the main bar by a chunk of old dark wooden wall and the spot was not in anybody's eye-line, so Philip could sit there gently holding his rum with his eyes half-closed in a doze and generally nobody even noticed him, anymore than you might notice one of the faded old advertisements on the walls of the Wreck that were for types of beer that had gone out of business decades ago. The second advantage to this spot was that Leonidas could hear almost everything that was gossiped about in the bar without being disturbed, an exercise in information collection that usually kept him from getting too bored and restless before Philip had finished his long relaxing rum. On this particular morning, Leo noted that besides the barman, there was an elderly woman doing a crossword, a handful of old men who looked like they were just killing time until they went outside for their next cigarette, and a few younger men in waterproof jackets who were muttering about matters of local sporting import. The man in the tracksuit talked mostly to this last group, and one of those who greeted him looked to have done himself an injury in the recent past, as he was leaning on a plastic and metal crutch with his non-drinking hand. The man with the crutch was not so injured that he couldn't hit Tracksuit in the arm when he noticed him. By close monitoring of how the early drinkers at the Wreck addressed the man they had trailed, Leo soon ascertained that the man in the tracksuit was called George, or possibly Georgie, or Yorj, or perhaps 'Streaky'. The tracksuited Streaky George took these names, along with a few worse, in reasonably good humour. He ordered a pint of the cheapest lager the pub had, then drained the top half of the beer in the same breathless hypnotic glugging way they had watched him drink the chocolate milk earlier.

Over the next twenty minutes, George sipped much more slowly down to the soapy bottom of the glass, muttering in short bursts to the group who knew him at the bar. At one point, George made like he was going to steal the injured man's crutch, but then decided that he wouldn't take the prank in good humour. Streaky George smacked his lips thirstily and stared sadly at his pint glass when it was empty with such consummate professionalism that he could have given hungry brown-eyed puppies a tip or two, but the drinkers of the Wreck and Ruin were a hardened bunch, and their stone hearts and sealed wallets could not be loosened by even these tricks. George accepted defeat, and with a shower of unfriendly goodbyes from his acquaintances and another clip on the arm from the injured man's crutch, he bobbed his head towards the door.
"Quick, you dazed turtle," Leo hissed as their quarry wandered outside,"Finish your endless bloody drink, and let's get after him!"

Philip looked at his glass of spiced rum. He had taken so long at it, as usual, that the ice had all but melted and the tide level of his drink, although diluted, was now almost higher than when it started. Leonidas grumbled impatiently and flexed his fingers, making the bones crack. Philip downed the whole lot of his rum in one go and grunted with displeasure at having his nice slow drink ruined.
"Come on, come on, march, old man, march!" Leo shouted, "We can't lose him now!"

Norwich loped after Streaky George, and was thankful that the pristine blue and white tracksuit made him so easy to follow against the backdrop of the grey winter day. George stared blankly into the window of a shop selling mobile phones for a moment, and then wandered aimlessly around the corner into an alleyway where the shops of that block kept their bins and employees on smoke breaks. Norwich had decided that this looked like a good place and time to confront the man in the tracksuit, and he bore down on him, blocking his exit.
"Hold your step, your repulsive waxy stain!" Leo shouted at him.
"If we could just have a moment of your time, Mr. George," Philip added.
Streaky George, startled, gave out a little yip-burp of surprise, and walked into one the giant black-green bins.
"Nah, mate, nah," George said in a feeble gurgling voice, "I dunno anything, I dunno you, mate, nah."
"Don't give us any of that mumbling, you walking specimen-case of disease and failure!"
"We'd like to know about what you were working on with Mr. Cray, Mr. George. We know Mr. Cray was running a swindling business. What was his business with you, Mr. George?"
"Look at him twitch. He's like a human runny nose. See his eyes and that mess of his skin and the way he can't stop his fingers from vibrating? It's drugs he's into."
"Did you and Mr. Cray sell drugs, Mr. George?"
Streaky George waved his hands in panic.
"Nah, mate, nah, I didn't sell nuffing! Let me be, mate, I done nuffing wrong, mate - I don't sell drugs, no way, man, no way. I buy drugs. I mean, I bought drugs off of Cray."
"Told you, old man," Leo said with a self-satisfied air.
"And you killed Cray over these drugs?"
It didn't look like it would be possible, but Streaky George looked even more sick now.
"Kill?" he whimpered, "Nah mate, I didn't kill nobody! Y'see it's like this, I got

this condition, I do, and I'm in a lot of pain, but the doctors, those bastards, you know what they're like - they won't help me no more. I've got a condition, y'see? Cray always had a supply of, um, prescription pills, proper medical stuff, and I need 'em, y'see? Cray got me what I needed for me condition. He was the guy to go to around here. He was *the* guy. He was selling stuff all over town and further, like. I think he got 'em off of people who had proper prescriptions, an' he bought them from them or something? It wasn't that illegal, anyways, man, it were hardly illegal at all, really, and it didn't hurt anybody none, I swear, man."
"And you didn't kill him for drugs, then, Mr. George?"
Streaky George scratched fearfully at his throat.
"Nah, mate, nah! I'm not that sort of guy, I ain't! You just ask anybody!"
"And do you have an alibi for the other night when Mr. Cray was murdered?" Philip asked sternly.
"Yeah, man, yeah," George said eagerly, "I were down at the pub, just ask anyone you like. I wouldn't have done it, honest I wouldn't!"
"Just look at the snotty bastard, old saw," Leonidas said dismissively, "He folded in two seconds flat when faced with the cuddly sight of you. If he's our killer, he hides it well, and I'm very good at reading people. In any case, if he did prune Cray's top, he'd have lost a source of whatever pills he was chewing on."
"Well," Philip said thoughtfully, scratching his head, "That leaves us in a bit of fog, doesn't it?"
At this point, something occurred to Leonidas, and he started to pace out a square in the back alley, muttering to himself. Philip stared curiously at him, and George looked nervously at the empty space where Philip was looking, just in case he was missing something.
"Look here, Leo, if Mr. George here was buying rather than selling from Mr. Cray, then p'rhaps he had someone else he worked with? Come to think of it, I never saw Mr. Cray go far from his house, so he must have had some help if he was selling drugs up and down the county."
At this point, Leonidas stopped his pacing, drew a small box in the air with his finger, then shouted 'Aha!'.
"You old pile of rags, I do think you might accidentally have something there, and after all, even a broken clock is right twice a day! Come on then, let's get home, old man!"
Norwich said a polite goodbye to Streaky George and trotted after Leonidas. George, for his part, remained frozen backed up against the rubbish bin for a good while, and had to stuff almost a full pack of chewing gum into his mouth in order to get his poor system back into working order from the jaws down.

12.

Norwich stared for some time at the broken lock on their plastic yellow door.
"H'm. Well, I do think that's a pity."
"Don't worry about that," Leonidas said crossly, "Just be ready and stay focussed, old dustbin, or at least try to get as close to ready and focussed as you are able."
Philip gave a single confident nod. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Leo so excited about something.
"Here we go," Leo said, grinning hungrily.
The street quaked and the Bradmobile squealed into a parking space that was almost too small. Philip was rather impressed by the carefree style of driving, as it appeared that Bad Brad had the uncanny ability to park his car without ever taking his eyes off his phone.
Brad hoisted a bag of tools out of the back of his car, adjusted his baseball cap and swaggered up to Norwich's door. He stared at the shaggy-haired man in front of him for a moment.
"Hey, didn't I have to let you into your place just the other day?"
"I'm surprised he remembers," sniffed Leonidas.
Philip shrugged apologetically.
"I'm afraid that our lock is broken now, you see," and he gestured sadly at the smashed section of the door. Brad gave an annoyed grunt. With exaggerated and almost childish movements, he got a drill and a few screwdrivers out of his tool box.
"Geezus, if it isn't one bloody thing, it's another with you lot around here. I dunno why they let you live here if you're going to make all this goddamn trouble."
"Well, we just thought we'd better get it fixed," Philip explained, "What with what happened to Mr. Cray down the road."
Leonidas sidled up to Philip.
"I don't know what he's whining incessantly for. It's his job to zoom all around the place like an excited imbecile."
"Don't be like that, Leo. Ignore him, Mr. Brad. We appreciate how far you have to travel to fix things like this all over town."
Brad sighed.
"And it hardly pays worth a bloody damn to babysit all these properties, you know? They got me up and down the goddamn place for this kind of bullshit, and for what?"

"I'm sure an enterprising fellow like yourself can find ways to make ends meet," said Philip.
"In fact," said Leo through bared teeth, "A fellow like Brad here would be a very handy little helper for moving small quantities of, say stolen prescription drugs to people all over the place, people with a desperate desire to spend money on said drugs, perhaps people just like Mr. Streaky George, Esquire."
Philip looked aghast.
"You know, old eyeless stump," Leo continued, "I'm sure you failed to notice that when we were in Cray's house I measured the space out. The construction of his house is the same as ours - two-thirds of the buildings on this street oozed out of the same dreary mould. But here's the rub - did you know that we, and presumably all the other houses have a small recess under our mantelpiece? A sort of pathetic reminder that we can't afford a proper fire nor can we be trusted with a fireplace, and thus it was not worth the designers going to the trouble of providing one. You surely also failed to notice that Cray's house lacked that little recess below the mantelpiece, almost as if someone had made up a little false front for hiding things - things like, oh, say, ill-gotten gains from fraud and a few bottles of pills they planned to flog here and there?"
Philip looked like he was struggling with the idea.
"You don't think that Brad here built that fake compartment for Mr. Cray, Leo?"
Leo sighed.
"Well, of course he bloody did."
"But why would he kill Mr. Cray?"
Leonidas shrugged.
"Oh, who knows. Some cretinous reason, I suppose. Knowing Cray to have been such an intolerable prick, I'd suspect that he was demanding Bradley here hand over a bigger share of their earnings, or else face exposure. A sordid and dreary bit of pointless criminality like that, I'd imagine. That's usually what causes these things. A couple of terrible shits arguing about money."
Brad was angry, but also lost.
"What are you on about, man? Who are you even talking to? You shouldn't make up shit like that about people, man."
Norwich ignored him.
"And why did Brad cut Mr. Cray's head off?"
"I didn't - what? What are you on about?" Brad spluttered, and swore at Norwich in a dribbly fashion.
Leonidas put his hands behind his back and paced back and forth, licking his teeth from time to time.
"Obviously, there was something about the head that had to go, old sack.

Something on that ugly hatchet of a face would have made it immediately obvious to the most sleepy of authorities that Brad here was responsible for the death of Mr. Cray."
"Like what?" said Philip thoughtfully.
"What what?" echoed Brad.
Leonidas waved a hand magisterially in the air, tracing out imaginary circles and paths.
"Imagine, if you will - and do try to follow this, it isn't too hard - imagine that there was something Brad owned that was involved in the clobbering to death of Cray that would have left an obvious impression on the head of the dead man. Rack your tired old neurons, what has our dear handy Brad been missing lately?"
Norwich rubbed his chin, then his eyes lit up.
"His ring! He hasn't been wearing his ring for a while!"
Leo gave some patronising delicate applause. Brad looked like a little bolt of lightning had just knocked him right in the jaw.
"I just lost it, is all, I just lost it!"
"It had his nickname on it!"
"Exactly, Bad Brad is, as it turns out, very bad not just at maintenance, timeliness, and music appreciation, but is also very bad at murder. He punched someone to death with a ring that had his name on it."
"So, he had to get rid of the head, because he had left his name imprinted on Mr. Cray's head?"
"And he had the power tools to remove the offending branded head in the back of his car."
"Oh!" Norwich said suddenly, "The strange noises that homeless fellow heard in the forest!"
"I wonder," Leo mused, "Whether they were the wails of a power saw, or the equally pathetic noise produced by this incompetent murderer."
Brad stared uncomprehendingly at Norwich.
"Who told you that about my ring? It ain't bloody true, it ain't!" but he was shaking as he tried to speak.
Norwich scratched his head and gestured.
"Leo here worked it out. He's good at working things out like that."
Leo raised his head with proud dignity.
Brad goggled uncomprehendingly.
"Who the hell is Leo? There ain't anyone here you stupid old nutter-" he shook his head and muttered his own name to himself several times like a mantra, "You know what, bloody forget it, you ain't gonna go and tell anyone about what you think you know."

Norwich shrugged his shoulders apologetically.
"I'm sorry Mr. Brad, but I'm afraid we must. You did kill Mr. Cray, after all, and even though he wasn't a terribly nice person, you probably shouldn't be allowed to just kill anyone you like."
Leonidas looked wistfully into the distance and said "Still, a fellow can dream, can't he?"
"Hush, Leo. Of course we can't have random murders all over the place. It's not a very polite way to behave."
Brad was still unclear what this unseen Leo had to do with anything, but he had decided that the man with the grey hair wasn't going to be allowed to tell people about him and Cray and his ring. He snatched up a drill in one hand and a chisel in the other.
"Nobody is gonna listen to you anyways, you crazy old bastard," Brad announced threateningly, advancing on Norwich. Brad's finger twitched and the drill growled.
Norwich waved his hand in an attempt to placate the desperate maintenance man/drug dealer.
"Now, Mr. Brad, there's no need to get excited and unpleasant."
"He punched a guy to death and had to cut off his head," Leonidas said, "I think he's already had far too much unpleasant excitement in his stupid little life."
Brad was hyperventilating and waving the whirring drill and chisel in frantic circles above his head. He had also started to dribble a bit from the left side of his mouth.
"You're just another nutter," Brad croaked, "They - they'll assume you just got confused or forgot to take your stupid pills and fell and bashed your own head in or something."
Norwich frowned. The idea that anyone would assume he was so hopeless that he had brained himself was just a little bit insulting.
"That's rather unfair, Brad, and there's no call to be bad-mannered as well as threatening me and Leo."
Leonidas cricked his neck.
"Actually, old sack, I think the young lunatic's plan, crude and pathetic as it is, might just fly."
Philip scowled at his companion.
"I'd thank you not to be rude at this stressful time as well, if you don't mind, Leo. It isn't helping at all."
Brad howled wildly.
"There's nobody there, you loony prick! There's no goddamn Leo! Stop talking to nobody, you stupid bastard!"

This primal rage against Norwich apparently gave Brad the work-up to make an attempt at convincingly smashing in that annoying grey head. Drill whirring in a constant whine now, Brad dashed at Norwich, and swung the chisel at his face.
"Careful now, old lump," Leo said, sweeping his hands to one side like a laconic bullfighter. Philip found himself hazily following the motion of Leonidas' hands, and Brad's chisel grazed past his cheek. The howling young man then went to club Norwich in the head with the butt of his drill, but again Leo directed Philip out of the way just in time. Brad followed through with wild alternating swings at Norwich with the points of the chisel and drill, like a man using a ridiculous exercise machine.
"Steady on now!" said Norwich.
Leonidas shook his head sadly.
"You know, if this is all he's capable of in a murderous rage, I have to assume that Cray must have been very easy to kill. In fact, Cray must have been positively suicidal."
Norwich huffed and dodged another blow, but found he had backed into the wall with nowhere to escape.
"Honestly, Leo," Norwich huffed, "There's no reason to snip. Mr. Brad hasn't done this a lot before. He's only killed Mr. Cray so far."
"It was an accident!" Brad roared, and plunged the drill into a spot where Norwich's neck had been just a moment ago.
Leonidas rolled his eyes.
"Oh for hell's sake, you flailing scarecrow, we've caught him now, let's finish this embarrassing tomfoolery."
"How do you propose we do that?"
The chisel edge slashed at Norwich's hand.
"Give him a bit of stick, old lad," Leonidas said encouragingly.
At that moment, Norwich's head felt very light. He could see Leo reaching for the thick walking stick in the corner, but he was also reaching for it at the same time. It was like he could exactly imitate Leo's movements, his spine felt the same and shoulders tightened in the same way, fingers gripped in matching positions, and Norwich spun the stick just the once and neatly, and as Brad stood there confused, the stick was jabbed a short distance into Brad's throat, and then with careful precision, the same end thwacked at a precise spot on Brad's temple where a tuft of his hair poked out from his baseball cap.
Brad made some choking sounds, hacked up a little bit of vomit, then collapsed to the ground.
The drill continued to spin erratically for a moment or two as Brad's fingers unconsciously twitched.

"Finally!" said Leo with a sigh.

13.

It took a very long time for Rachael to stop shouting at Norwich. He sat there in his chair, looking sheepish, too embarrassed to even finish his mug of tea. Rachael called him irresponsible, imbecilic, and incapable of behaving sensibly. Leonidas was silently perched in his corner as he was whenever she came around to visit, although he did display more signs of life than usual in Rachael's presence, raising an eyebrow at certain more eloquently expressed parts of the exasperated rant. At one point, he even nodded in admiring agreement.

"And the worst part is that I have to find you're chasing down murderers from the bloody police! Do you have any idea how irresponsible that is? You have to be more careful than other people! You are not well, you silly old bastard, although whatever scrambled your brains clearly didn't make you any less stubborn! Geezus!" She exhaled and ran her fingers through her hair. "Of all the people, you should have told me what you were up to! I'm the only one who still bothers to come and see you, for Christ's sake! I had an entire bloody childhood of your silent, judgemental, secretive nonsense, Philip. I haven't the slightest interest in putting up with that sort of bullshit again, thanks."

Norwich lowered his head and looked so pathetic that Rachael felt like she'd just kicked a kitten in the face and stolen its new sparkly collar to boot.

"We just didn't want you to worry," Philip said contritely. Leo's sneer indicated that in fact he didn't give a rat's arse about who was worrying about things.

"Anyway, we caught the fellow, didn't we? And uncovered that lady who had been working with Cray to trick people out of their money?"

Rachael scowled and her face flushed with anger.

"And you think that justifies almost getting remodelled by some thug? Bloody hell, Philip!"

Norwich crossed his arms defiantly.

"We caught them, Leo and I, that's the main thing! We didn't let them get away with it. And you know what, for the first time in a long while, Leo wasn't horribly bored, and I felt just a little bit useful for once!"

Rachael drew herself up.

"You aren't bloody useful-" she cut herself short at Norwich's wounded look and shook her head and ground her teeth. "I'm sorry, Philip, I'm sorry about that. I sound just like you used to. I don't want to act like that. I need to watch that. Look, I'm sorry I lost my temper." She gingerly patted his arm and Norwich looked pathetically delighted. "It's just, I suppose, despite everything, I worry about you."

Norwich smiled up at Rachael.
"You needn't have worried, Miss Rachael, I always had Leo with me."
She snorted.
"I was never that fond of Leonidas, actually, Philip, but as bizarre and sad as it is that it took your brains getting messed up, you aren't entirely unlikable now."
Leo rolled his eyes, but Philip ignored him. He smiled as something occurred to him.
"I think we've still got some digestives in the cupboard," he said, "Why don't we make some fresh fortifying mugs of tea and we can all have a few biscuits?"
Rachael gave a weak smile, watched Norwich saying something to Leo in the corner, and went to put the kettle on.