

# **FIREWORKS**

**a novel by**

***portersteve***

*(10k sampler)*

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# **FIREWORKS**

## **PART ONE**

### **1**

#### **The Birthday**

The universe began when an old woman accidentally dropped a lighted match into an open fireworks tin. Just before the big bang occurred, an old man whispered *let there be light* into the darkness. And there was light, and the explosion that created everything.

After the intense fury of the blast, the old man looked unhelpfully around for the old woman, but she had vanished. Inside the silver tin where the fireworks had been, he could see there was a tiny baby, wrapped up in the blue dress that the old woman had been wearing. The old man, Dennis, bent down and scooped the baby up from the metallic crib and swaddled her into his arms.

The stage that held the Father and the Daughter was in the centre of a sports field, in an Olympic stadium filled to the brim with frightened and confused spectators. As the smoke and dust cleared at this ground zero, there were shocked screams and the sounds of people crying. Thousands of awe-struck faces, turned dumbly to their new neighbours for comfort, only to find faces as awe-struck as their own, streaked with tears running from bright

red eyes.

Dennis meanwhile, looked lovingly into his baby's beautiful face, torn between the grief of his losing the old woman, and the joy of this incredible new arrival. What would he call her this time? She had had so many names already.

I'll call you Melissa, he thought, this time.

Because Melissa was not a *new* arrival, exactly. Because the old woman had not *vanished*, exactly. The old woman had simply reverted back to infancy in an inexplicable trick of the light. She was a baby again, *born* again, somehow. And here she was, in his arms, gurgling. Looking very similar to when she had been born back from old age the time before, and the time before that.

Dennis spent a moment contemplating his Daughter's fate. Over millions of years he would watch her grow up and become mature and age and grow old while he stayed the same. And then, like so many times before, there would be some irresistible reason for them to have a celebratory firework display. During the firework display she would be distracted by a tiny Morse wink out in the blackness of space. At the moment of distraction, her wrinkled fingers would loosen their grip upon the match and gravity would (once again) work it free.

Visible beyond the stadium, the explosion was still creating a universe full of stars and planets and matter and antimatter. From its staggering enormity to its miniscule particulates. It was completely beautiful, like a child, wandering out, exploring the boundaries. Assuming that there were boundaries out there to explore.

Dennis mounted the small step up to the wooden lectern located to the edge of the stage. There was the microphone, pointed up and ready for him to speak. He made sure that Melissa was secure in the crook of his left arm before using his free index finger to tap twice upon the microphone's head. He cleared his throat. The crowd waited. He looked at the small pile of notes that he had made over the more recent repeats, laid out in a neat pile below the demanding point of the microphone. He shuffled through the papers, speed-reading the spidery runs of his fountain pen. What could he tell them?

“It’s good,” he mumbled, “the light is *good*.”

He received a round of applause for this announcement, but the clapping was stilted and unsure. The crowd were nervous. There were murmurs.

Several thousand in the front rows began shuffling their own papers, anxiously preparing to take notes, as if what he was about to say to them would be of special significance, as if what he was about to say would be important enough to be recorded. There were pockets of chatter. The stadium hummed with enquiry.

Dennis had constantly racked his brains to find a memory of something *before* all this began. Before everything just kept on beginning, again and again, every thirteen and a half billion years or so. But the further back he went, the more repeats he found. It all had to have a beginning, at some point, surely? There had to be a *first* time, didn’t there?

When he meditated deeply, he sometimes detected traces. Perhaps these were memories from “before”? They were just tiny

*Fireworks by portersteve (10k sampler)*

unidentifiable silvery flickers though, like the residue of a memory, rather than a memory itself. There was nothing tangible enough to flesh out and build substance around, no corridor of events or images through which he could peer. The whole situation was a mystery, and he seemed to be at the centre of it, somehow.

Beyond the stadium, there would be buildings, and stocks of food and drink. These could be divided as many times as the population required during the interim period while industries were taken up and markets developed. There wouldn't be any real problems. A society could be and would be built. Shortages created conflict, that was clear from what he had observed, out there in the universes as they evolved.

Dennis stepped down from the stage and joined the crowds spilling out into the streets around the stadium. Like a huge moving choir, they were all singing the same song. No one seemed to care about how they all knew the words and the melody to the song they were singing. It was a song about a star, twinkling. A child's song. Dennis sang loudly and marched with them. Their sun was coming up on a new morning. That was all that seemed to matter now. The collective mood had shifted, as it had done every time before. Many people stopped to talk with Dennis and take a closer look at the baby in his arms. Melissa gabbled and cooed to their delight. No one he encountered asked the fundamental questions about life and the universe any more. It was all about the baby, where she and Dennis lived on Island d'Loonn, and whether he had all the equipment necessary for rearing. Did he require help, advice, or perhaps a babysitter? Did he have the facilities to

sterilise all the bottles that she would require for feeding, what with no mummy on the scene? Did she require changing? There was some comedic sniffing of the air. He thanked them in turn for their support and reassured them that for now at least, he had everything that he needed.

The Olympic stadium was located near one of Dennis' favourite beaches. He walked along the coastal road and trudged across the sands with Melissa still in the crook of his arm until they were alone. He felt relieved to be free of the crowds for a while. The morning was warm. He sat down and carefully laid the sleeping Melissa beside him on the fine grains where his shadow shaded her from the sun. He adjusted the folds of the blue dress. She wasn't too warm or too cold.

The sea advanced and retreated, constantly adjusting the shape of the Island d'Loonn. There was a salty tang in the air as spray was carried in on the breezes. Dennis' brown robe covered his legs in a pleasing way. His large beard swept down towards his belly reassuringly. The robe and the beard together made him feel secure. He stared up into the sky as the newly created stars disappeared into the deep sunlit blue. He thought about the firework display. He recalled the last moments with his Daughter as the old woman, Naomi, before the Morse wink in the blackness, before the tumbling match and the accidental universe, before she disappeared back in time (along with everyone and everything else except for him). He sometimes wondered whether it might be less painful if he were wiped clean also, so that he could begin again and again, rather than living with the cumulative grief of loss.

Then he felt something in the sand, digging into his right buttock. A pinch or a prick of something. He shuffled his body slightly, trying to get comfortable, but it was still there, nibbling. He shifted his weight over onto his left side and fumbled around in the sand with his right hand, trying to clear it. He sat back down and for a moment he thought it was gone, but no, there it was, nagging and niggling at his bottom again. The ridiculousness of his predicament made him smile. The universe had just began. He was wrestling with some serious questions. But still, here he was having his bottom pinched by some rogue shell or pebble! His amusement was soon replaced by irritation, though. All he wanted to do was run over the events of the previous day in his mind, quietly and without incident. Was that so much to ask? He shifted his weight to the left again. Craning around he could see a tiny square of something in the sand, the culprit, obviously. He reached down and picked it up. It was a small curved piece of ceramic, about half an inch squared. It was the same colour and texture as the firework casings, so recently exploded.

He turned the piece over in his fingers, expecting to see part of the familiar rows of symbols that covered the casings of all the fireworks. But instead, there was a single word written on it. That's odd, Dennis thought. The word only had four letters. And one piece of punctuation. He read out loud, shaking his head in confusion.

“Help!”

Dennis stared at the word as the sun arced over the sky through the course of the day. He gradually shifted the bundle of sleeping Melissa around, keeping her in his shadow.

I am an eclipse, he thought.

Nothing out there was evolved enough to write a message yet. So *who* had written it? Was it someone on the Island d'Loonn? Perhaps it was Naomi who had written it? With a horrid grip of fear he wondered if *he* had written the message to himself, somehow, from a future that he could not reach, being constantly dragged back to the beginning again every however many years. But this was ridiculous. The handwriting wasn't his, for a start.

"Okay," Dennis said. "What do you think, Melissa?"

Melissa was awake. He could see the minor fluctuations in her face. She was brewing up, getting ready to begin being a baby proper. There was always a honeymoon period at the beginning of the universe where she was on a kind of pause, perhaps to allow him to complete his duties in talking with the crowds. He didn't really know why. She just spent her first hours in a relatively quiet stillness. He made the most of it! Dennis chuckled to himself. Perhaps she knew how loud she was going to be and was taking a deep breath before she began? Soon she would be crying and require a constant carousel of feeding and changing and cuddling.

The sun began its descent, yellowing and orangening and reddening as it sank towards the horizon.

"Well, my girl, I'm going to keep my eyes peeled. There might be *other* ceramic fragments around the place with more words on them."

Melissa stared back, her eyes widening.

"And you can help me find them."

Dennis stood up and carefully dusted the sand away from his



robe. He bent down and scooped up Melissa into his arms. She was on the threshold now. The howl of life was poised upon her lips. Dennis smiled down at his Daughter and smacked his lips together to make a kiss. He made some noises that weren't words. Perhaps he could appease her briefly with gestures and soft sounds?

“Help!” Dennis thought, chuckling to himself again. It was time to go home and begin the business of Fathering. There was so much to think about. He gave the sea one last contemplative look. Already a flotilla of sailboats bounced upon the waves, some distance out, their sails making dorsal silhouettes. They faded and disappeared as darkness completely arrived.

Dennis held Melissa slightly closer to him as the air cooled. He turned towards the lights of civilisation twinkling to life on Island d'Loonn, and began a determined trudge back across the sand towards them.

## 2

### Catherine Wheel

“Is he coming towards us?” Catherine says. I look up from the drink I’m opening, wondering. It’s late in the evening. Dark out. She doesn’t point; she just turns her head in the direction she wants me to look. *That way*. Oh yeah. I see him. Heading for us.

“Looks like it,” I say. I try to keep it calm. The danger bells are already ringing. He is large, over-coated. We are alone. He is fifteen, maybe twenty metres away, approaching steadily, directly. He seems to be carrying a large something in his right hand. It reaches all the way from his hand to the ground. Looks thick, solid. A piece of wood, maybe? A rod of iron? Definitely something bad. Not a peace pipe.

Ten metres and closing.

“What do you think he wants?”

“I don’t know.” But of course I know. And Catherine knows too. What do any of them want? The ones that emerge from the darkness, the strangers wielding wood. Or metal. What do they want? Oh, just something. They always want something. Money, gratification, some kind of donation. They make their demands of you, for whatever it is that they’re after.

Think, think.

We are sitting cross-legged on a beach on the coast of North Africa. Morocco to be exact. Assilah to be precise. It is a Friday night, the last night of our week-long holiday. No one else is around. They are all at the fun fair that spins and booms away in the distance. We came out here onto the beach in the darkness to get a bit of quiet. To talk through something. I have a couple of cans of beer to drink. Catherine has something soft. And now we are in trouble.

I'm thinking: Stand up! Confront him! Stand up!

I'm sitting on something sharp, too. Of all the mixed up priorities to have, with this man striding towards us brandishing his threat, I am half thinking about how there is something uncomfortable sticking into me. I brush my hand in the sand under my right leg. I feel something and move it out from underneath. I'm about to stand up. But Catherine puts a hand on my arm as he arrives. I think he's going to take a swing with the wood. He's looking at us like we're up for a good smack.

He crouches down to us instead. I point to the club.

"What's that?"

He looks at the club. He looks at it like it's a friend who he's embarrassed of. *Oh, that, well, you know.* He shrugs and lets it drop onto the sand beside him.

I point again.

He starts speaking in French. I am a poor linguist. Catherine says something back. He is obviously irritated at having to negotiate with the girl.

*Talk to man! Not talk to girl!*

He mumbles and keeps looking back at the club, laid on the sand beside him.

Catherine leans and whispers. “Shit. There’s someone else. Behind us. There’s someone else coming up behind.” I can’t hear anything. But this is how they would do it. One up front, one behind. This is how they would do it. This is how they *are* doing it. And the one coming up from behind probably won’t be so shy of his club.

Think, think.

The one crouched down starts to drag his club around onto the sand in front of him, nodding at it, shrugging at it. I think about trying to make a grab for it. I think about trying to push him over. But then I’m sure that the guy behind will smash Catherine, and-

Then the something sharp that I had had to move from underneath my right leg a few moments ago is back. Snagging into my skin through thin cotton trouser. It’s nothing compared to a club round the head, but my hand is down there again, foraging away. My fingers find it, the little diggers. They close around its cool curved surface. Then something strange happens. One second I’m sitting here, scared, the next second I’m on my feet. And I don’t even remember *deciding* to stand up. No one helped me up. I just stood. And I’m pulling Catherine up here with me. Come on! Quick, quick! All gusto and blowing cheeks out. *Come on!* And I’m holding onto whatever it is that was digging into my leg. It feels like broken piece of pottery or bottle. Nothing like a weapon. Having stood up, I speak.

“We’re leaving.”

I say it to Catherine. I say it like we’re at a party where the guests are not to our taste. I say it slightly haughty. Like *I* have a bad taste in my mouth. Like I am the only one with good taste.

Catherine looks at me. Her eyes are darting in the moonlight. Left, right. Left, right. Can we just leave? Just like that? She wants to believe we can. I can see it in her eyes. Darting. Left, right. Left, right. She shakes her head too. Eyes and head all moving at once. She’s asking: Can we just clear our throats and say, uh, no thank you, we’d rather not be attacked today, if it’s all the same to you. Can we do that?

We can.

I still feel light-headed from getting off the ground so quickly. Catherine is slower. She brushes some sand off herself, keeping it presentable, keeping up appearances. For some reason I love it, her preening. So unnecessary under the circumstances, so automatic. Inside I feel empty, full of breezes. All the fear is gone and I cannot understand why. Because there is no way that this can be over. Not just like that. Not just like this.

“Thank you for your time,” I say to the man in front of us with the club. He growls. And then the man behind us smashes me over the head. I kind of knew it was coming. That smash, that bang. Hurts like a bump, but not a bad one. I anticipate a bruise, and not much more. I should be on the floor bleeding, whimpering. They should be grappling with Catherine by now, feeling up the white stuff. Instead, I turn around to face the man who’d smashed me. I can hear the first man standing up. The fluff of the sands about

him, the effort in his limbs. I can hear it over the fairground boom. And that long coat: it's so *noisy!* He's probably going to have a bash as well, I think. But he doesn't. He mumbles something in a language that isn't French or English, and starts to run off across the dark ground towards the crowds and lights at the distant fairground.

The man who'd smashed me with his club is in two minds. Does he run with his accomplice, or does he have a second swing at me? And you know, it's obvious what he's going to do. You might think, being the one that had opted for the sneak-up-behind part of the ambush, that he wouldn't have the balls to go head on. But he does. He has. Here he goes. He takes another swing. And this time I really amaze myself, because I catch the club mid-air with the tips of my fingers, just a couple of inches from my skull. This is exactly the sort of success men envisage for themselves when they re-enact violence in their minds. This or that boss. This or that bully. Responding with some feat of superhuman strength, having all the cool lines to deliver.

Like the line I use on the guy who smashed me with the club.

"Down you go."

And I know deep in my heart that he doesn't speak English and that there is no way that he is a natural communicator, other than with his club, but-

Down he goes. I don't push him or punch him, but down he goes, dropping his club. What a line! What a reaction! D'you see that? D'you see that? I said: *down you go*, and down he went! Wow!

*Fireworks by portersteve (10k sampler)*

A giggle rears up in me. I think about kicking him in the face. I could do it. Be a good finale. A good solid connection with the jaw. The wondering, the brief wondering: *is* his neck broken? Was that a crack? I can do it, I can do it! I take a step forward. He's sitting there. Empty handed, his club dropped. I look him the eye and I'm going to do it. I'm not going to pity the man that smashed me from behind. And then again from the front. And no one is going to stop me. No one will stop me.

Not Catherine. She won't like it later on when she thinks about it. When the adrenalin goes. She'll muse about how she didn't think I was capable of such violence and now there is a frightening new side to me that I have opened up and revealed to her because that last kick, the one that dealt the crack, was too much, too much. No one is going to stop me. I'm wearing trainers, but I can toe punt. My leg comes back, but- but- no.

Something says, no kick, no kick, just walk away. So I let my leg drop back down. I kill the swing. Okay, all right, enough. I see his eyes. The man. The Moroccan. If that's what he is. His eyes are confused. Why aren't I hurting him? He doesn't look grateful. He just wonders: why aren't I hurting him? Because I'm not. Not today. That's all my eyes can say. I bow my head, relieved to be back from the brink, back from the raw animal edges.

I walk over to the man's club, pick it up from the sands and hurl it off into the darkness. I don't hear it land. I turn to Catherine. She is gaping. Her face says: What? How? Could? You? And I just nod because I have no answers to her questions. Why aren't I bleeding on the ground? How *could* I have caught the club

midair with my fingertips? Am I okay? Yes I am. Yes, I think I am.

“We’re leaving,” I say, giving my head a little rub. It hurts, but the pain is mild. There is just enough to tell me where the impact was. I glance back to the man. His eyes seem to submit and await my instruction.

I touch Catherine’s arm. “Come on.”

“Okay,” she says.

We walk back across the sand towards the fairground. The lights of its wheels all spinning and flashing. All circles and ovals. All gaudy, but beautifully so. It occurs to me to look back and check that the man who smashed me is still sitting, but I know there is no need. He’s not going to touch us now. I still have the thing that was cutting into my leg in my right hand. I put it into my pocket. It rubs uncomfortably against my leg again so I take it out and give it to Catherine to put into her bag. She does so without a word.

We arrive at the fairground and we head towards the bumper cars. We’re thinking the same things, I know. We’re asking the same questions in our heads. We watch from the edge. The attendants balance on the back of cars, moving from one to another, freeing up the gridlocks. Their feet never seem to touch the ground. It’s like a dance topped off by the sizzle of electrics and the warning cheer of drivers.

“What happened back there?” Catherine asks me. She is trembling.

“I don’t know.”

“*Something* happened.”

“I know.”



We both know. We both know that *something* happened. The odds. The odds were so stacked against us. Two armed assailants, language barriers, racial and religious divides (possibly, probably). It could have been a plain old robbery, but in a world where governments act and intervene in countries under the guise of assisting and liberating the populations, it is the individual citizens of those governments (like us) who become the targets of retribution. We voted them in, after all. But how could we have got away without being injured or robbed or a combination of the two, or worse? I don't know. I just don't know.

I try to piece it together in my mind. I try to hit on the detail that must be missing. I can remember all the big things: the club, the two men, and my incredible fingertip catch. But there must be something else, some tiny aspect that I am forgetting. At what point did the weird stuff start exactly? It was before I caught the club. It was before that. I'm sure of it.

I know, I know!

"It started when I stood up."

Catherine doesn't understand. On the beach, I stood up, so what?

"It wasn't like it normally feels to stand up." In our lives we stand up a lot of times. Less when we're very young, less when we're very old. But in between, we stand up a lot. So we know how it feels to stand up. It's an effort. How much of an effort it is depends on how tired we are, of course, but it still requires some degree of effort. The thing is, when I stood up on the beach to confront our attackers, to defend Catherine, to run or whatever; it

took no effort at all. I felt light, lighter than I've ever felt. And okay, yeah, it might have just been the adrenalin. But I don't think so. I remind Catherine about how there was something light and easy in my standing up.

"Might have been the adrenalin," she says.

Yeah, okay.

There is gridlock. Drivers pound in, threatening to test the local hospital facilities, threatening to raise the osteopaths from their beds. I have a half-formed joke in my head about Catherine's driving, but it doesn't become funny enough to say.

She turns to me. "And what is that *thing* you gave me to put in my bag?"

Catherine removes the thing that I gave her from her bag. It is, as I suspected, a broken piece of pottery. It is like a half of a cylinder, a crescent moon, about the size of a toilet paper tube. I remember the sharp broken edges, sticking into me. Perhaps it was those edges that spurred my incredible ascension. I don't know. But something happened out there, on the beach. It has a weird pattern indented all along it, in three separate lines, like strings of digital information, but there's a third symbol in there as well:

0100010100100001000010111010011

0001101110110100100010101001000

0100101000111101001000110100010

I am suddenly gripped by a weird fear of losing it. "Put it back in your bag, quick!"

"Okay, okay!"

Catherine takes my arm. We reach the road that divides us

*Fireworks by portersteve (10k sampler)*

from our hotel. Real cars zap by at speed and we take a step back from the edge. I can see the lights of our hotel foyer, a hundred metres to our left. Catherine places a brief protective hand upon her belly. A gap happens and we stride out onto the carriageway, our heads full of events here and the potentially life-changing events waiting for us at home. We fly tomorrow. The air is hot and cloying. Our hotel room is the same. The air-conditioning broke down, we were informed, on the day before we arrived. Everyone must get same story. There is a long-bladed fan that dangles above the bed. It makes an angry grinding noise after every tenth revolution, threatening to descend. It is impossible to sleep through.

We strip and lie down in the warm damp, gradually melting.

### 3

## **The Banger**

David Dregg was six feet five, with a full head of sandy blond hair, and the kind of confidence particular to a solvent, unattached man in his mid-forties with a job that involved the perpetual undermining of his fellows. He lived in a house full of mirrors. His confident strides were constantly being broken by their demands. The only art he required was that of his own beautiful reflection. They all had names too, the mirrors, and he talked to them as if they were his accomplices.

“Well, Herbert, how do I look? No, no- let me guess. You just concentrate on holding my image in the light at that perfect angle. Oh yes, oh yes. Well done Herbert. Well done. And the teeth. Let us admire the teeth...Oh ‘es, ‘erbert. ‘ell done.”

He engaged the kettle. He listened to the occasional traffic, the creaks and grumbles of the central heating system, distributing, circulating. Thinking about his next school inspection, he imagined himself suited and booted, his clipboard poised, his pen taut with ink.

The minor procedure (cosmetic) was completed before they upped sticks from London and shifted the whole family to

Salisbury. It was a completely new start, a new beginning. A new image, a new job, new friends, new everything. The plan was to make it big in The South and then return triumphantly to The Smoke, a king ripe for crowning. His confidence soared. The opposite sex seemed to be noticing again. He had forgotten what it was like after years of nappies and stifling predictability as the older generation fell away, making room. He started to dress and act the part. It was as if after years spent in a fluxing stage of formation, he had finally arrived. There seemed to be no limit.

But there had to be a limit. He had *tried* bonking everything. Of course he had tried not to limit himself. Before the split. Before Brenda had taken herself and the kids off to live with that artist. An artist! He beat a fist into his palm as he said the name: Paul Brickhouse. Nearly forty years old, (two years older than Brenda) and still messing about with silly paints, silly brushes.

A childhood painting-by-numbers catastrophe had created (or at least contributed to) Dregg's loathing of all art and artists. It was a picture of a firework, but he coloured in the *explosion* black, instead of the sky. There was his father laughing and pointing, telling all the visitors, showing all the visitors. And there was his mother, lingering by the door, poised there as always for any unforeseen domestic duty that might require her attention, shaking her haircut at his mistake, tutting about the cost of it (and everything else).

Dregg groaned.

If he had his way, they wouldn't even have that kind of nonsense in the schools. Schools were for the achievement of

linguistic and numeric competency. Not *emotional* literacy and the investigation and indulgence of the creative self. That stuff was for the home, if anywhere. Stuff the little buggers with facts and whip them if they didn't leave grateful. Desks in lines, chanting. Drills and marches and discipline. You get some cheeky shit with a sense of humour? You beat the cheeky shit until the humour is gone. Verbally, nowadays, of course. You get some cheeky shit who wants to disrupt? You shame and embarrass and taunt the cheeky shit until being disruptive is the last thing on his mind, until he can't even make eye contact without being paranoid and cowering.

That's the way he'd play it. That's how he *had* played it, when he was a Headteacher. And the results didn't lie. League tables, league tables. The figures bore out his philosophy, even if a good number of the children graduating at year six had acquired a selection of ticks and winces and speech impediments to take with them onto secondary.

Dregg hated the artist that was bringing up his kids with Brenda, and he hated to see evidence of him anywhere. Especially in schools during his inspections, where he was often reminded of art and kids at the *same time*. And if any of those stupid loser teachers dared to take an art lesson in his presence then he'd... then he'd...

He punched a fist into the air. His face reddened. He blew out his cheeks.

Calm down David, calm down.

Some of the teachers were, actually, young and attractive. Focus on that! Sometimes he wondered whether these women, who

were probably reasonably confident and capable teachers in real life, did bad lessons for him on purpose so he would have to discipline them afterwards. Work existed, certainly, but it was really all about the interactions, flirtations, consummations. He knew that now. It was all a game and everything else (of varying importance) was simply a distraction from the game. He remembered Miss Smith, suddenly, on her hands and knees. And Miss Jones. Ouch! In that summer dress! Of course he respected them. Of course he recognised the clarity and experience in their judgement and don't you make a nice cup of coffee? And wouldn't you like to take this work back to the hotel? And no, I'll drive, I'll drive.

But if they were too old or too fat or too ugly or too thin-lipped or too dull-eyed or anything else that did not meet with his approval then he would just sit at the back of the classroom with his clipboard and a sarcastic look on his face, yawning intermittently. If that didn't have them in tears by the end of the lesson then he would have to start tutting and shaking his head. His scrutiny was relentless. There was nowhere to hide. Unless, of course, the lesson was absolutely excellent. It did happen. Even the ugly ones could have a good day.

He took another moment to enjoy his reflection with Herbert. His hair seemed *even thicker!* It was beyond rational explanation. He ran his fingers through, delighting in the luxurious texture. He was like one of those advertisements on the television. He just looked so good!

Which was more than could be said for the artist that was

bringing up his kids. What did *he* look like? Paul Brickhouse sported a goatee beard! Of all things! A goatee beard! All beards were bad in Dregg's view. But the goatee was the worst offender. A man should be clean-shaven and tall. The artist was five feet five! With no power no money no status no height and a crop of pubes for a chin.

In the kitchen, he opened the fridge and admired the slightly frosty expression staring out at him from across the Giants Causeway of cheese portions and microwaveable trans-fat ready meals. He poured the milk and shut the fridge back up.

He had only returned from the Caribbean yesterday afternoon after a week of all inclusive sunshine. Good hotel, a few passable seducings, one excellent public humiliation. But it was okay because he was thousands of miles from home and that teeny-tiny fist fight by the pool with that woman's husband might have been a little more than he had bargained for, but what the hell? The husband *had* actually caught them at it, having presumably followed the trail of her skimpy sweet-wrapper bikini pieces to his boudoir. And the it *was* supposed to be their honeymoon. Luckily the husband's rage had caused his attack (later that day) to be more erratic than directed, so Dregg was easily able to sidestep the main thrust and laugh uproariously as the man tumbled (fully clothed) into the chlorinated water. In response, Dregg had simply puffed out his hairy bare chest, sauntered over to the pool bar and ordered a cocktail. His swimming trunks showed off his Rod perfectly, brandishing a victorious semi. The mouths of their co-vacationers gaped from the surrounding sun-loungers before disappearing one



by one back behind dog-eared novels and e-readers. Even his semi was quite something.

At least the couple weren't on the same plane home. Probably busy annulling or divorcing or whatever. At least he didn't see them in first class. Too busy chatting up the stewardess, trying to get her to massage his feet. Oh she had wanted to, he could tell she had wanted to, she had even *said* she had wanted to, but it was against the rules. He had winked and patted her bottom as she had departed, the tight high-waisted cadmium red pencil skirt, the white billow of blouse tucked in. She had ignored the pat, so he had upgraded it to a pinch the next time she passed. Her walk down the aisle had speeded up slightly (and amusingly) as his thumb and index connected.

His only complaint had been the security at the airport. They discovered nail-clippers in his hand-luggage and insisted on snapping off the fold-out nail file, just in case. What, he asked them, was he going to take over the plane by threatening a manicure? They were taking the necessary precautions, apparently, what with the threat-level and everything. He had told them: the bombers were easy to spot before, you just looked for the pint of stout, listened for the accent. Now they had those beards. It was even easier!

They didn't even enjoy his anecdote about the fancy dress party terrorist costume, where he had asked guests, "does my bomb look big in this?"

Very amusing sir, they'd said, with a wearied look, fobbing him off.

Brenda had said recently that for the first time in years she was really happy. She was really *happy*. What, he thought, *what?!* With that midget goatee poking away? She had sounded happy before. She had even looked happy once or twice, at Christmas, after she'd done the dinner and was sat down in the chair, resting, asleep. Of course she was happy. He bought her the lot! But then she'd met Brickhouse while showing him a house, available at knock-down through a repossession. He'd bought the place, but had clearly made other offers besides the asking price. The house was small, and out on one of those rundown estates off the London Road, on the east side of the city.

Dregg stared out into his extensive back garden. He spied the tree they had planted together as a sapling upon moving out of London, to symbolise their new beginning. Then he remembered the numerous times since her departure that its thin but sprawling roots had nearly tripped him while on route to the shed. He thought of the axe. The great red-handled chopper, suspended against the shed wall by a significant nail. He could have the tree down. Get a check shirt on, go lumberjack.

His heart beat fast at the thought. Then his vision blurred suddenly, if only slightly. Steady now, David, steady. A wave of nausea passed through, briefly. Fear struck him hard, from nowhere.

Oh, no, not this, not now...

He tried to focus on his breathing to calm himself down, but in doing so noticed that he was actually having difficulty breathing.

He coughed.

Things went from bad to worse in a moment. It was the thunder and the lightning. His eyes cast about for a chair. No lumber-jacking today, he thought, without humour, gripping the seat back, negotiating himself around for a tentative decent. He really needed to stop getting so wound up about everything. It was bad for his health. With his buttocks depressed in the cushion, he tried again to catch his breath. Fear still wriggled through him, slithering up an arm, putting a taste in his mouth. Then he felt an old sewing box of pins and needles, creeping through.

No, no, no!

He tried to reassure himself. Over and over. It's okay, it's *okay*. He heard the drums in his ears and felt the world begin to disconnect its signal, for a distance to emerge between himself and his life. It was like he was watching it all from afar. He closed his eyes and leaned forward, putting his head in his hands. He would change, he could change, he vowed. Making prayers, clutching at hope. He could be better, somehow.

"I *will* change," he said, to no one. And resolved that if he survived, this time, he would win Brenda back and be a better husband and a better man and-

He got a decent sized breath in but once again his panic began to rise with thoughts of a stumbling crash, his eventual discovery (by someone, somehow) splayed out bloated and blue upon the floor, and the disaster that such an early exit might create for his children, being denied his wisdom and support during their fragile teenage years. They were what was important, after all. He had a responsibility there. Even without Brenda. He could be a good

man again, he could be a better man. He had been a fool, an unfaithful fool. And this was his comeuppance.

Gentle now, calmly now.

Slowly his breathing patterns returned to normal, his grip and stress relaxed and the first glimmers of his confidence returned. The pains began to subside. He was going to make it... this time. Like the other times.

“I’m okay,” he told himself hopefully. He stayed still for several minutes, breathing, coming back from the brink, returning to life. At the exact moment of his completed recovery, a letter that had been delayed in the chaotic limbo of the local sorting office flopped softly onto his front door mat. It was from the meticulous and conscientious Mrs Wheel, Brenda’s solicitor, demanding a supersonic divorce and her half of everything.

4

**Island d'Loonn**

“Daddy! Look! Daddy! It’s a *letter*. Oh! It’s *four* letters!”

Dennis had his eyes closed. It was a few hundred years since the accident at the firework display in the stadium that had created the universe and made the old woman Naomi disappear and become a baby again. Dennis could still remember her, as he could remember all the other versions of his Daughter. All those tiny apparently insignificant details of all those lives, all those versions of the same life. All that *living!*

“Daddy! *Letters!*”

They were on the beach again, playing. Or rather Melissa was playing while he rested his eyes in the mid afternoon sunshine. He sighed. “The postman doesn’t come out here, my love, she delivers the mail to our home.”

“No! Not *those* letters. Daddy? *These* letters.”

Dennis half opened his eyes. She was suddenly knelt over him, haphazardly wielding a brightly-coloured plastic spade, digging one-handed and slopping wedges of semi-wet sand onto his belly. She wore a blue dress cut and sewn together from the fabric

of the original.

“Hey! It’s going to get in my robe!”

“Whooooopeee! Doesn’t matter,” she said, shovelling on some more.

“That went in my beard, Melissa, please!”

She was holding something in her other hand. She stopped shovelling. “Oh Daddy! It says: *them*.”

Dennis opened his eyes properly, letting his senses become engulfed by the beautiful white-yellow sun. He could smell the salt of the ocean. He could hear the waves lapping and distant snap and flap of the sailboat traffic that seemed to constantly be circumnavigating the island, some clockwise, some anti-clockwise.

“*Th-em!*”

Dennis sat up carefully, his body demonstrating against the movement, waving placards of creaks and moans. Melissa held up a small curved piece of ceramic for him to see. It was one of the firework fragments. He smiled. “Where did you find this?”

“Over there!” Melissa pointed, swaying her arm in the approximate direction.

“Can I see?”

He turned the fragment over in his fingers.

“What is it Daddy?”

“I think it’s a piece of one of the fireworks that were let off on your Birthday. Daddy found one on that day, and it said ‘Help!’. We still have it at home. It’s a kind of secret.”

“Now we have *two* secrets!”

Dennis thought about the two words on the fragments. “Yes.

Or one big secret? If we put the two words *together*.”

“Help. Them. Help *them*.” Melissa shrugged theatrically, raising her eyebrows as high as they would go. “Help *who* though Daddy?”

“I don’t know.”

Dennis kept the *Help!* fragment wrapped in a silken fabric square in an inlaid wooden box in a drawer at the bottom of a chest in a seldom-used room. He could picture it there, nestling in the dark.

Melissa looked suddenly bored and resumed her digging. “Just a bit more then. Sandy sandy sandy!”

Dennis stared at the fragment as another shovelful was unloaded over his legs. Help them. Help them *what?* Or Help them *how?* And, as Melissa had said: Help *who?*

The “Help!” fragment had niggled at him for a long time while Melissa was still a baby. His urge to assist was horribly activated so that he could not rest for thinking about it. He had finally accepted that he could do nothing to help, however much he cared to, without more information. And if the words of this message, (if that was what it was) were going to appear every few hundred years then he would need to manage his worry and concern quite carefully from now on. Dennis was a curious man with an urge to help that he could not explain or attribute to anything in particular. It was almost as if he *owed* something his help, or that he was somehow indebted, having *been* helped. But he could not recall a time when he had been extraordinarily helped. All he could remember was Island d’Loonn and the repeating loop of his

Daughter. Certainly people on the Island were kind and respectful and they were helpful wherever an opportunity arose, but somehow he knew this wasn't the source of the his urge for reciprocation. Dennis was a kind man, but he was also convinced that somehow, somewhere, there were even *kinder* men and women than he. And all his instincts told him that some or one of these kinder people had helped him with something crucial, at some point. He looked up into the sky, which was vast and blue and harmless. Were they out there, he wondered, on one of the evolving planets? The ones that were so kind? Could it be that he had simply forgotten, somehow?

He had been meditating upon this problem (and all the others) since Melissa's arrival. He regressed and regressed through the process of universal birth and rebirth, ten, twenty, fifty, one hundred times. But with every big bang that his memory reversed back into the tin on the stage in the stadium, there was still the same distracted old woman dropping a match. Had he really been here that long? Had he really been here *forever*, as his investigations suggested? It seemed that there was just an ocean of time and memories, stretching without end into the past.

But then he had made some progress. While experiencing the curious lucid limbo ground between being conscious and unconscious, he had sensed the same brief trace of memory that he could only (haphazardly, intuitively) identify as being from *before* or as being *other* from those of his experiences on the Island.

A few weeks later he had tried again while Melissa slept, determined to ride his breath back into the same arena where he had discovered the illusive trace of recall. After several hours



without success, he contemplated giving up. His body was wracked with pain from remaining still for so long, and his mind craved a rest from the effort. Then he saw it, or felt it again. Like a tiny darting silver fish of thought in a black lake of swirling dark. He craned around, seeking the brief light of it, seeking to properly gaze upon it. If he could see it, he could expand it. That was his assumption. And if he could expand it, he could know it. The machinery of his mind revolved furiously and mysteriously. He kept breathing steadily. In and out, in and out. And there it was again, right in front of him, still, detailed, perfect. The fish. A memory. He plunged into it and was-

-stood among a tight group of giants, standing like sorry ghosts in the smoke from the waiting train on a dark damp station platform. They were dressed plainly in simple muted suits. There were sharp conversations taking place between some of the giants in a language he didn't recognise. He was shoved forward gently but determinedly from behind and was stood next to someone of roughly his height. The someone smiled at him, reached out and touched his arm reassuringly. Looking through and past the giants, he spotted with an odd sense of relief that there were more people of his size. The more he looked, the more he saw. There were a hundred of them, at least. Some of them were crying hopelessly and being comforted by the giants. He looked up to scrutinise the faces of the giants, trying to understand what was happening and why so many people were frightened and upset. He felt oddly pleased to be standing next to the one who had smiled and touched his arm.

The engine of the train roared louder, being prepared for

departure. A whistle blew harshly in the distance, echoing around the station. The platform cringed. The more he looked, the more the anger and determination that he had first witnessed on the faces of the giants revealed itself as sadness and distress. And then he realised that they weren't giants at all. There were no giants here, this wasn't a fairy tale. He craned his head backwards again, gazing up. It wasn't that *they* were even particularly big. It was because *he* was particularly small, by comparison. Then he suddenly realised with a strange shivering thrill that permeated every extremity of him. He realised what he was- or who he was, in the scene.

He was a *child*.

A child!

He blinked in shock and lost concentration. Immediately, and the vision disappeared. He felt as though he was tumbling in darkness and braced himself for an impact. Instead, he emerged from his meditation gradually as his awareness of the outside world increased. It had felt as if Island d'Loonn and all his knowledge of life upon it was somehow reaching inside of him, encouraging him back out from where he had gone, encouraging him to return to the safety and familiarity of everything he knew. He followed his breathing back to life and to the sound of Melissa talking.

"Blah blah blah Daddy, hello! Island d'Loonn to Daddy, hello?"

"Hello?"

Melissa wielded another shovel-load, and scattered lumps of the partially wet sand into his beard.

“Hey! Why did you do that?”

“Daddy your beard is *too* big. Would you like me to get some scissors?”

“No! Thank you.”

“I can. I have practiced at the school. I can give you a lovely-lively makeover. La la-la la-la! Shall I get them? Then you won’t get sand in it. Because it’ll be gone!”

“Thank you for the kind offer, but you know I *have* to have a beard. And a robe. It’s my uniform.”

“Like mine is my lovely blue dress?”

“Yes, just like that.”

“I love my blue dress. But snip-snip snippety! No one will mind. You could just have a funny nose fuzz like some of the people have.”

“Just a moustache? No, thank you. Are you finished playing?”

“Yes.”

“Then shall we go home now?” Dennis asked.

“Can we take the bus?”

Dennis smiled. She always wanted to go on the bus. And it was the last day of the school holidays. “Of course we can.”

He thought about the firework display in The Olympic stadium, and how the beautiful baby that he had cradled in his arms on that dreaded but wonderful day had grown so quickly. Look at her now! He wondered at all the memories he had collected. Her first sounds and movements, her dietary foibles, her curious looks. The long private nights where he had battled with his

exhaustion and with the frustration of her wakefulness. There were so many tiny *details*.

The bus was a ripe red and conveniently parked on the coastal road. Dennis exchanged pleasantries with the driver as they climbed aboard. She handed him two beautifully ornate hand-crafted tickets. Father and daughter made their way up via the narrow spiralling staircase. Melissa ran to the front seats, as she always did, and flung herself on. Dennis smiled, following, and sat down beside her. He squeezed her hand gently. There were a few other passengers on the top deck. Dennis turned about him and acknowledged them all in turn with courteous nods. There were some he knew, some he didn't. They all nodded back, smiling, except for the young man in the purple hoody and the baseball cap. He just stared away, mumbling, as he always did.

    Melissa whispered. "There should be a driver up here, too!"

    Dennis laughed.

The bus lurched out from the stop into the road, winding its way inland through the redbrick streets of terraced mansions, all occupied now. The frontages were painted in different colours, the windows decorated with life from inside. Bunting hung in long low curves from the street lighting on the pavements. Some people came out and waved to them as the bus travelled past. A few had tiny flags on sticks. Dennis could not make out the pattern on the flags. They were pale coloured, but only revealed a blur as they were waved. There were no other cars on the road. Everyone seemed happy enough. Melissa squeaked and waved and smiled at the people as they drove past.

On the horizon Dennis could see the range of snow-capped mountains and their foothills that made up the very centre of the island. His geological instincts told him that their home must have had a volcanic beginning, but the scientific processes he applied whilst observing the universe of evolving worlds were constantly being compromised and tossed into doubt by the strangeness and mystery that permeated all life here. He had visited the foothills around the mountains on several occasions, camping out under the stars by night, searching for accessible pathways into the mountains during the day, hoping to make a map. From this distance, their details vanished and it was as if the mountains were made up of three stark colours. Black, red and white. They also seemed covered in glitter, with the sunlight twinkling Morse messages from their steep rocky slopes. He chuckled wryly to himself.

Don't bother coming, the messages probably said, you'll never find a path!

The mountains and foothills were surrounded by forests which opened out into huge parks of ancient trees and grassy fields. These merged into farmland and vineyards where all the food and the wine that sustained the Island was produced. In an environmental anomaly, there was a small part of the Island that was barren to the point of being classified as a desert, despite its immediate proximity to water from the River Aims. It was therefore possible to take a boat *through* the desert, but no one did. Again, the science in him winced at the contradictions. Nature here, it seemed, just refused to play by the rules. With each big bang

incarnation, the Island folklore declared the desert area a virtual no-go zone with stories of the unpleasant magical happenings that were bound to befall uninformed travellers. Dennis wondered if myths were predisposed to gather around points in life where the normal rules appeared twisted out of kilter and beyond rational understanding.

Melissa pretended to hold a steering wheel, exaggerating each turn with dramatic twists and leans. “Phew! That was close Daddy!”

As usual, Dennis honked an imaginary horn as she made the noise for it. He liked the desert. It was a place that he could retreat to with confidence, knowing that he was unlikely to be disturbed. He’d never travelled through it by boat though.

The more familiar urban landmarks became visible now as they headed south along another section of the coastal orbital. Crowds gathered on both sides of the road, still waving their blurred flags.

They drove on past the ornate palace where the Island’s Council had its regular and often fractious meetings. Dennis had spent an hour in there, listening. He had reassured himself that he had not been the only one to fall asleep. They were discussing a party. Dennis was happy to have a party. The wine was certainly matured. But some of The Council wanted to *combine* the party with a celebration of them getting The Olympic Games, whatever that meant. They didn’t say. They were always trying to combine things. And then they would divide them up so they could combine them again. Suddenly the idea of a party with The Council at the

helm, didn't seem much like a party at all. He imagined their committee of grey.

The bus accelerated as they passed the university hall where Dennis gave most of his regular lectures, every hundred years or so. He had one coming up. He needed to work on his notes. His students were often frustratingly happy with whatever he said. But there were still no actual answers to the raft of philosophical questions being posed. Perhaps that was the nature of the discipline, simply to investigate possibilities? But the students were even shy of that, picking over the linguistic minutiae of the questions. However valid and noble their exactitude, Dennis quickly tired of semantic quagmires.

The bus pulled around onto the steep hill where their mansion was. Most of the mansions were smaller in stature than the grandeur of their name suggested, with few of them having more than three bedrooms. The Council were determined to get Dennis and Melissa into some great sprawling castle of some kind. One had actually been built specifically. But Dennis preferred not to. There was enough reverence for them already, what with all the cheering and the flag-waving. The last thing he wanted to do was separate themselves even further behind barricades of officialdom and fountains. And the neighbours were mostly fine, despite the singing.

“School tomorrow?”

Melissa glowered at him, her steering wheel cast aside. “Yes Daddy.”

“It'll get better. I've met the new teacher. He seemed really

nice.”

Melissa said nothing.

The bus stopped and they disembarked. Dennis opened their front door and they went inside. Melissa went to her room, on the edges of a sulk. Dipping her toes into that gloomy water. There was more of this to come, Dennis supposed. She would be reaching her “teens” in only a few thousand years. It was difficult, being a single parent. It was difficult for Melissa, having him as the parent. He had duties to perform on the Island. It was inevitable that she shared him with these. And why should she have to? She was already a parent down! Where was her Mother, after all? The anguish of the Mother-absence and the effect that he saw again and again as his Daughter grew up each time was too much to bare. And, yes, it all came out in the wash pretty much, in the end. She always turned out okay. But that wasn’t the point, was it? It was the journey *through* childhood that was her experience, not her acceptably balanced arrival at adulthood. Growing up was not about achieving end goals or finished articles. It was about the every day and the every night that built her up from the ground, one moment at a time.

Dennis had attended the most recent school parents evening with trepidation. He was always horribly caught between his desire to protect and support his Daughter in all things and his ambition to cooperate with the professional bodies concerned with her upbringing. But the graphology of the handwritten invitation was such a giveaway, with all those sharp fishhook descenders.

He had sat down on the tiny chair provided, hitching his



robe up to avoid it getting caught. He smoothed down his beard, feeling that he was being judged, or that he had been pre-judged. Melissa's teacher unsheathed her pen and laid it down carefully upon the table in front of her. She would be taking notes. Her grey hair was scooped and held incarcerated in an aggressive bun by several pins. She bowed her head to reveal the full hedgehog. She began by giving Dennis the results and the scores and the charts.

Yes, yes, thought Dennis. Scores were all very well, but-

Melissa's teacher picked up her weapon and scratched a few words onto a sheet. The paper cowered. Then she told him that they were all very *concerned* with Melissa's attitude. There was a strict curriculum to follow, as decreed by The Council. It had been meticulously developed in consultation with the foremost educational experts on the Island. Several esteemed printers had tendered for the contract. The Council were fully behind the completed spiral-bound documentation.

Dennis held in the yawn. He could imagine the bland fudge that was their consensus.

"It's not a pick and mix," Melissa's teacher had stressed, "it's the *law*."

"It's a load of-" Dennis began.

"And," Melissa's teacher interrupted, "she has been caught throwing missiles across the classroom. Luckily, no one was hit and nothing was damaged."

"What did she throw?"

"Soft fruits, mainly. It's a disgrace, Mr Dennis. And a waste of food, despite our rich abundance. *Not* an example I would like her

to set.” She pointed to a few pale round patches on the classroom walls. “I refrained from allowing the cleaners in, in order for you to see.”

Dennis had nodded and examined her knitwear with a brief flick of his eye while she bent her head down to tattoo in another note. There was a kind of target motif on it, with circles of different coloured wools emanating from the centre. Perhaps, he wondered with a small burst of pride, Melissa had been unable to resist its lure?

He walked upstairs and tapped on Melissa’s door. “Hey my love, I’ve got this amazing new game I need your help with. It’s called The Olympic Game, you know, like the stadium? And we have our secret to hide, remember? Are you busy?”

“No Daddy.”

The gloom sounded as if it had lifted. He opened her bedroom door and she dashed towards him. He folded her up in a cuddle. “My wonderful daughter,” he said. “I’m very pleased with you.”

They walked across the creaky floorboards of the landing to the seldom-used room. Dennis opened the bottom draw. There was a small wooden box with an intricately inlaid top. The slithers of different woods made an image that represented one of the symbols that appeared on the casing of the standard firework cylinders.

Ø

They both sat down on the rug in front of the drawers and Melissa opened the box. Dennis lifted out the silken fabric bundle and let it open in his hand, revealing the “Help!” fragment. He

placed their new find next to it in his palm.

“Help them,” Melissa said.

“And we will,” Dennis assured her, “just as soon as we know who they are and what we can help them with. Until then, this is our secret.” He waved his free hand to indicate the fragments, the box and the chest of drawers.

Melissa nodded up at him, her eyes shining.

“Can you put them away for us?”

She carefully wrapped both fragments up, placed them in the box and lowered the box into the open drawer. She pushed it back into the far corner of the drawer. “There,” she said, “our secret is extra-*extra* safe now!”

Dennis gave her another cuddle.

“Daddy?” Melissa said, her voice muffled slightly in the folds of his robe, “did you say there was a new game to play as well?”

He laughed. Ah, yes, the game. The Olympic Game. People were always talking about it happening, at some point, in the stadium, but it had never happened. So Dennis thought he would co-opt the name and use it for a game he had made up that was going to be just for the two of them.

They walked out past Melissa’s room and through into the study. There was a desk covered in Dennis’ paperwork. Melissa’s artwork from school made a deep foliage across the walls. Adjacent to the desk was a pair of glass doors that opened out onto a small balcony surrounded on three sides by wrought iron railings fashioned into flowering curves. It was getting dark outside. In the distance, there was a vaguely orange glow in the sky. It was pulsing

slightly. It happened every few years. Dennis could never work out what it was. It seemed to happen in random places around the urban areas. He had tried to travel to one once. The bus had driven through dark twisting streets, but the phenomena of orange could never be located. He had wondered whether there it might have been caused by a fire on the ground, but none of his enquiries ever turned up any reports of a blaze. He supposed it was just another one of Island d'Loonn's many environmental anomalies.

They stepped out onto the balcony, where a large telescope on a tripod pointed up at the sky.

"We just have to wait until it's properly dark. I've heard that you're quite good at throwing things."

Melissa bowed her head, seeming embarrassed that he knew. "Oh Daddy!"

"Well this game allows you to practice your throwing without making a mess *and* whilst playing a kind of game- like I said."

"The Olympic Game."

Dennis smiled.

They got snacks from the kitchen downstairs. Above them, the stars appeared again, the theatre re-opened. The strange orange glow was gone. Dennis explained the rules of the game. Nothing could go wrong, he thought. Since there was such a lot of space, out in space.

They brought chairs out onto the balcony.

"I'll go first," Dennis said, putting his eye to the specially adapted telescope, checking that it was ready for the game.

"Then it'll be my turn!" Melissa squealed.

*Fireworks by portersteve (10k sampler)*

Dennis sat back in his chair for a moment and smiled at her. Thoughts of school were a million miles away now, he thought. Things would be better, somehow. From their balcony they could just about see the beach and the black shifting seas beyond. There were still sailboats there, circumnavigating the island, clockwise and anti-clockwise, going about their business. Except now their tiny dorsal sails were lit up by tiny light-bulbs dangling from their masts.