

McBluebeard

David N. Guy was born in Maldon, Essex, in 1978. After studying infinity at the University of Chelmsford (formerly Essex Polytechnic) he became unemployed, some say unemployable, except for a brief time as a bad office presence. His unhappy love affairs, his difficult relationship with his mother, and his own inflexible intellectual honesty and intense sensitivity combined to weaken his health and in 2005 he contracted Pendrex disease. In 2006 he was moved to the Maldon Leper Sanatorium, the only place that would take a man in his condition. Unable or perhaps unwilling to communicate with the outside world, David N. Guy took up writing to pass the time. Over the next two years he wrote 7 novels, 5 works of academic non-fiction, 6 children's stories, and 13526 comic strips.

Sir Terald Vaaaak described him as "one of the greatest living British writers". David N. Guy died in 2008.

BY DAVID N. GUY

Fiction

McBluebeard

*The Swans Are All Dead And The Rivers Are All Red With
Their Thick And Everflowing Blood*

The Man Who Tried To Scream

The Severed Ubb

The Trail of Piss

Flesh-Eating Maggots

The Trial of Piss

Non-Fiction

Maldon: A History

*The Layman's Guide To The Use Of A Hob As A Means Of
Discipline, Especially In Regards To The Burning Of The Face*

Pale-faced and Beautiful: A Complete Guide To Nemi

Maldon's Ghosts And Spirits (with Ron Bowers)

Saving Images as JPGs: A Guide To Good Practice

Books for Children

The Wich That Was Afraid Of The Dark

The Wich And The Wich's Cat

The Wich And The Journey To The Moon

The Wich That Wouldn't Let Go

The Wich Makes Sausages

Flesh-Eating Maggots (illustrated)

Praise for McBluebeard

"Have a look out of your window. Chances are, you've seen something made of concrete – probably a building. If not, go to a window at the other side of the house and repeat. Surely now you have."

Greg Fidgeon, Maldon and Burnham Yellow Advertiser

"McBluebeard is a lurid and frightening document of a profoundly disturbed man's mind. Frankly, if a borderline illiterate like David N. Guy can be considered one of the greatest living British writers then we might as well all give up right now."

Terald Vaaaaaak, The Observer

"In life he was an absolute ogre of a man. Fists, feet, teeth – there was nothing he would not use while eating. It was an appalling spectacle. Sometimes I wonder how something like that ever came from within. We used to laugh, my husband and me, about how he was swapped at the hospital. Later we stopped laughing."

Lynn S. Guy, "Beards, Broken Bottles, and Bryan Ferry: Recollections Of A Life Lived In Fear"

"Why book so rubbish?"

Wayne Marsh, via email

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Ted Vaaak, who presented a lecture entitled *The True Story Of The Crabbus Man* to the Royal Society in 1962.

The Crabbus Man, for his shambling life and his tragic death.

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Introduction

'The tale is the means by which experience is turned into fiction' was a phrase that David N. Guy used, pretty much completely redundantly, in every single interview he conducted with himself in his two years in complete isolation within the bare and cold walls of the sanatorium, within which he was confined for the last few years of his life. These often-rambling self-conducted interviews formed the basis of both my PhD thesis, *The Mind of the Broken Man: How Pendrex Soils The Soul*, and my subsequent best-selling book, *Phallic Symbolism And Our Obsession With It* (Random House, 2008). When people hear David N. Guy saying this over and over again, it is often assumed that most of his works were largely autobiographical, in the manner of writers such as Jack Kerouac and Charles Bukowski. However, having conducted a number of interviews with members of his family, his nurses, and the hunchbacked lady at the job centre that he admired silently from afar, it appears that most of his fiction was actually just fiction, and that no incidences of mass murder, animal rape, or even any singing or dancing had occurred at any point in his life, as far as anyone could tell. Astonishingly, characters such as David McBluebeard appear to have been entirely invented, with no basis in reality, beyond a twisted resemblance to the penis, which so fascinated David N. Guy throughout the majority of his short life.

This obsession with the male member can be seen throughout most of his works, and especially within this book. The way McBluebeard rises up from the flames in his apocalyptic encounter with Elvin at the end of this novel, foaming and spitting from his mouth, can only be explained if the character is a physical manifestation of a large and lustful cock. Otherwise the whole sequence makes no sense. And it is no coincidence that McBluebeard is defeated by being plunged into an icy cold lake, causing him to first shrink, leaving him pathetically small and vulnerable, all his power and beauty gone, his mad lust finally doused.

The Penis is referenced in a number of other parts of the book. I won't spoil them all for you, but one of the most striking is the moment when the shadow left by David McBluebeard's beard looks like a huge and rampaging prick on the sheets of the bed, ready to violate the tender buttocks of his companion. This whole sequence is no doubt a knowing reference to a similar sequence in *David Boring*, by Daniel Clowes, in which the titular character, David Boring – note the shared firstname, and how both

characters' surnames contain a capital B – stares at a young woman's buttocks, his knee throwing a shadow penis onto the sheets, which hovers between her legs to denote his passion. Then he has sex with her. (A deeper analysis of this work can be found in my essay *A suspended pocket of stillness between climax and oblivion: Fetishism, Paranoia and the Fashioning of Postmodern Self-Identity in the Works of Daniel Clowes*, published by Virago Press, 2005.)

Like many recent works of sexual horror, this novel has been marginalised and criticised by the mainstream in this prudish country of ours that is more comfortable with sexless works about grey and dull city life, but in my opinion this is one of the most important works of fiction published in the United Kingdom in the 21st Century, its excruciating Essex-based phallus terror a stirring metaphor for these troubled times.

Freyja Peters PhD, 2009

McBluebeard

a novel by David N Guy

PART ONE: The Maldon Mud Race

Checking In

"Hello, Sir."

"Hi, I'd like to check in."

"Of course. What's your name?"

"Elvin."

"And your first name, Sir?"

"It's Elvin."

"Oh. Your surname, then?"

"It's just Elvin."

"What? Elvin Elvin?"

"No, just Elvin."

"Well, that's a bit strange."

"Don't be so rude."

"I'm sorry... I didn't... I meant no offence. It's just... I don't know how to add this to the system. I've never had anything like this before. The system needs a surname. It insists on it."

Elvin looked at the ceiling in exasperation.

"It should already be on your... *system*. My editor booked this up weeks ago."

"Oh, did he? Well, let me see if I can find it then. It must be on here somewhere."

"Do you mind if I go and make a phonecall while you sort this out?"

"Of course not, Sir. The phone is just over there."

Elvin strode across the foyer of the hotel towards the phone. It wasn't even really a hotel, it was a fucking B&B. Elvin was furious. He lit a cigarette, took a long, exaggerated drag, and then he picked up the phone.

Trains

"Fucking hell, this place is a shithole. How the fuck did you even find it?"

"What? It's nice. Well, it used to be."

"They can't even cope with my name. I still haven't even been able to check in."

"Oh, the *hotel*? I thought you meant the town. The town's nice."

"No it fucking isn't. It doesn't even have a train station. I had to get a bloody bus here."

"Buses aren't that bad."

"It's the second of January, I'm hungover, it's freezing fucking cold, and the bloody thing didn't even turn up for an hour. And then it took another hour to get here. And I'd already been on the train for an hour. When you said it was 30 miles from London... How can there be towns without a train station? It's fucking ridiculous."

"Stop swearing so much."

"Shut up. What the fuck am I even doing here anyway?"

"What? You're supposed to be taking photos of their mud race? For the magazine? Didn't Emlyn tell you?"

"Yes, of course he did. I... Shut up. Just shut up. I can't even get a signal on my mobile. It's like I'm trapped in the fucking 1970s."

"It can't be that bad. What's the hotel like, anyway?"

"It's piss. It's a B&B. They don't even have a bar. All they have is a lounge. I don't want to lounge."

"Well, there must be one nearby."

"I still can't believe this town doesn't have fucking trains."

"Shut up about trains."

"I like trains."

"Anyway, I'm glad you called. Emlyn just rang. He won't be able to make it out there in the end."

"That fucking cunt."

"Jesus, Elvin, the man's ill."

"Like fuck he is. He probably isn't even as hungover as I am."

"Anyway, I'll need you to write a short article about this race thing as well. A paragraph or something at least."

"I'm not a writer."

"That doesn't matter. Also I'll need you to interview the organiser."

"God, I hate you sometimes."

"Yeah, well, I'll see you in a couple of days."

"Aren't you even going to tell me his name?"

"It's McBluebeard. David McBluebeard."

"What sort of fucking name is that?"

"I dunno. Maybe its French or something."

"What?"

"Sorry? Anyway, you'll need to meet him for lunch tomorrow. Have you got a pen? I'll give you the address."

"Wait, I'll just get one. (*turns*) Excuse me, do you have a pen?"

"Sir, you'll have to stop smoking in here, I'm afraid."

"What?"

"You aren't allowed to smoke in here."

"I just want a pen. Do you have a pen?"

"You'll have to put that out, Sir. We could get closed down."

"Okay, okay. Look, can I just have a pen?"

"Of course, Sir."

"Thank you."

"And your cigarette, Sir."

"Fucking hell. There you go. Is that alright?"

"Yes. Thank you, Sir."

"Jesus. (*turns back to the phone*) Are you still there?"

"Have you got a pen?"

"Yes!"

"I was just making sure."

"This is like some sort of unending nightmare."

"What are you moaning about now, Elvin?"

"I'm not moaning."

"Yes you are."

"Shut *up*."

Checking In Part II

Elvin went back over to the reception desk and handed the clerk his pen back.

"Have you found me a room yet?"

"Yes, of course, sorry Sir. You'd been put on here as Mr E. Photographer. Like I said, the system needs a surname."

"Evidently. Can I have my keys now?"

"Yes."

The clerk handed Elvin the keys.

"I heard every word you said by the way."

"What?"

"On the phone. I heard what you said. About this place. About us."

"Er, yes... well done?"

"You said this place was a..." The clerk leaned in and whispered "A *shithole*."

"Well I'm sure you'll survive."

"I just think you should be a bit more careful about what you say, Sir. You'll never know who's listening."

"Like mother?"

"Possibly."

"I don't think she's likely to be hiding around here."

The clerk paused. "There's other mothers than yours you know."

"Yes, I suppose there is."

Another moment of silence. The clerk stared at Elvin, emotionless and still. The cheap clock on the wall ticked and ticked so slowly Elvin thought maybe the event horizon of a black hole was situated somewhere behind the desk.

Then the phone rang and the clerk picked it up and said hello. Elvin turned around and went to find his room.

The Hotel Room

The hotel room was almost completely brown. The floor sloped upwards at an angle from the doorway to the far left hand corner by the window, and the ceiling sloped downwards towards it, so that the whole room felt like an optical illusion. An optical illusion in brown.

Elvin threw his bags onto the bed, lit a cigarette, and went to have a look out of the window. At that end of the room he had to hunch down a bit, and stand with one leg bent as if he was standing on the side of the hill. Outside it was dark. His room looked out onto a church and its graveyard, and the high street beyond. Everywhere was quiet. And this was a Friday night. Elvin scowled. I really need to go and get pissed, he thought.

Elvin had a quick look through the cupboards in the room. In one of the drawers Elvin found a can of coke and a packet of peanuts. He couldn't quite decide if this was the full extent of the mini-bar, or whether the last guest had left them here. In 1971. And instead of a bible there was a slim self-printed book of poetry by some local poet. His bearded face beamed out from the cover in terrifying monochrome, the cheap blue card the pamphlet was printed on making him look like a frozen barbarian from the north. *Nuns, Crows, and the Gibbet*, by David McBluebeard. Elvin groaned a little at the realisation he'd have to interview this man tomorrow. Frankly, he looked abominable.

Elvin put the pamphlet into one of his pockets and strode out into town.

Wanting to eat

Elvin was relieved to find that there was a pub right next to the hotel. As he walked inside the three regulars at the bar turned and stared. What Elvin assumed was the barman was throwing some logs onto an open fire. Stuffed animals leered at Elvin from the walls.

"Can I help you, Sir?" the barman asked.

"Yeah, do you serve food here?"

At this the barman and the regulars at the bar began to laugh and laugh and laugh. On and on they laughed.

"I don't... Is that a no?"

The barman sounded like he was crying by now. One of the men at the bar was wiping tears from his beard. Elvin looked at his watch. Elvin looked at each stuffed animal, in turn, for a few seconds each. Elvin checked his mobile phone for a signal but there was still none. Still they laughed, the fire giving their faces a demonic red glow. Elvin lit a cigarette.

"Put that thing out," the barman suddenly, instantly, snarled. "You can't smoke in here."

The three men at the bar stilled laughed. Maybe they were dying. Elvin couldn't tell.

"Just get out. Just go" the barman screamed.

The barman wore a look of horrified fury, all snarls and sneers. Elvin was transfixed. He carried on smoking without even realising what he was doing for a moment. Then he remembered and left.

The High Street

The High Street was a barren affair, all boarded up shops and overflowing bins. A couple of tattered Christmas decorations were stretched across the road, looking abandoned and somehow lonely. Elvin sat down on a bench to finish his cigarette. He was cold and hungry and miserable. He looked at his watch again. It was only ten past seven. He'd been here less than thirty minutes. It felt like he'd been here always. Everything else was just a slightly fading dream of freedom. He flicked his cigarette into a puddle, but the puddle was frozen, and it skidded out into the road in a shower of sparks.

The Bled Cock

A little further down the High Street Elvin found another pub, *The Bled Cock*. The pub's sign, a faded painting of some cocks hung up by their feet and bleeding from their necks, creaked back and forth in the wind.

Inside, the pub was all low wooden beams and dark, quiet corners. At the far end a man was playing a guitar and singing folk songs, but apart from the barman no one seemed to be listening. Elvin walked across to the bar and called the barman over.

"Do you serve any food here?"

There was a pause. A long pause, and awkward.

Then, "Yes, of course", and Elvin was handed a menu. "Can I get you a drink as well?"

Elvin looked at the available selection in horror. *The Pig's Ubbs? The Maiden's Filthy Throat? Essex Delight?* Elvin was out of his depth. In a panic he just pointed at random at one of these incomprehensibly named ales and hoped for the best.

"Ah, *Wench Alice* is one of our finest, Sir. Have you tried it before? No? In that case, I'd recommend taking it slowly at first. It is pretty powerful stuff after all." The barman laughed strangely. "And have you decided on what food you'd like?"

Elvin ordered the pigeon, paid, and then found himself a seat in a shadowy corner. He sat his pint on a beer mat, making sure the glass was exactly central. Satisfied, he pulled the book of poetry from his pocket, and began to read.

Author's Biography

David McBluebeard was born in Maldon, Essex in 1978. His parents were unknown, and for several years he was raised in a monastery. After making his fortune in software – his Fractal Beard Generator is still the industry standard – he returned to his hometown and invested heavily in the surrounding area. He founded Maldon Barrytechnic, the town's first college, bought a hotel, and has since turned his hand to the arts.

David owns a private island in the nearby estuary, where he lives with his 5 cats. His pride and joy, however, is his full-sized and fully automated working replica of the HMS Victory. This is his first volume of poetry.

Broken Bridges

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Elvin looked up from his book. It was the folk singer. Elvin shook his head. The folk singer placed his guitar by the table and took a seat.

"Hi, I'm Tom."

"Hello Tom."

"Are you a fan?"

"I'm sorry, I wasn't really listening earlier."

"No, I meant are you a fan of McBluebeard." Tom motioned toward the book Elvin was reading.

"Oh. No." Elvin threw the book onto the table. "I don't even know anything about him. I'm supposed to interview him tomorrow."

"He's a good man. He's..."

Tom trailed off as the barman brought Elvin's food over. Once he'd gone, he started talking again.

"So you're from out-of-town I take it? What do you think of this place?"

"It appears to be fucking shit. The hotel's shit. The High Street's like a ghost town. There isn't even any trains. It's all fucking awful."

"There used to be a train station here. There was a nice big bridge across the river."

"What happened to it?"

"The army blew it up."

"What? Why?"

Tom shrugged, and then excitedly blurted out: "In the seventies Eddie Kidd jumped over the gap on a motorbike!"

This rather banal fact just sat there in the sudden awkward silence like an embarrassing unwanted guest. After awhile Elvin forced himself to say something. Say anything.

"Is there anything else interesting about this place?"

"Well, they turn the street lights off at one in the morning. We're a very environmentally sound town."

Elvin had no idea what to say. He looked down at his plate and busied himself with eating.

The Crabbus Man

"The Crabbus Man is one of the most enduring of our local legends. Some say he was born to the old mayor of this town, in the days of old. The poor boy, born deformed and monstrous, clacking pincers for hands, with freakish gnarled limbs. His father was ashamed, and tried to keep him hidden away, but eventually he could hide him no longer, and sent him to school. The townsfolk saw him, and were horrified. They railed against him, outraged howls of abuse shrieked after him wherever he went, and finally they passed laws to outlaw this young child, and he was exiled to the caverns under the river. His father became a broken man. In his guilt they say he spent all his riches extravagantly furnishing the caverns for his child, but the boy did not care. He lavished his child with treats, taught him all that he knew of the world, but the boy never forgave him.

"They say the sweet Crabbus Man weeps and plans down there to this very day, his deformities and his hatred granting him eternal life. They even say that one day he will return to us, and use his knowledge to wreak a terrible revenge on us all.

"And they say that we would deserve it, as descendents of those townsfolk, and accept it even, for justice must be served."

Tom went quiet for a second.

"I don't expect you to believe all this, of course. But there is one more thing. A few years ago a series of caverns beneath the river were discovered here. It made the news and everything. It was quite exciting. They weren't extravagantly decorated, of course, and the Crabbus Man wasn't found, but in the last cavern, the deepest and darkest of them, they stumbled across a single photo of an old, distinguished looking Victorian gentleman, faded and stained, and in his arms you could just about see that he cradled a beautiful little baby."

"I need a piss," said Elvin, and promptly got up and walked away.

Poetry

By the time Elvin got back from the toilets Tom had left. Elvin bought another pint and then went back to his table. He sat his pint on a beer mat, making sure the glass was exactly central. Satisfied, he picked the poetry book up from the table, opened it at random somewhere near the middle, and began to read.

*I once saw an ubb
It was huge
I think it was an ubb
I was at the seaside
And it wobbled in the sand*

Elvin closed the book and dropped it back on to the table. He picked up his pint, downed it, and then went back to the hotel.

Dream

Back at the hotel, fast asleep in his tiny little bed, Elvin dreamt he was James Bond. He was driving his immaculate white sports car sexily down the seaside road. His beautiful hair was beautiful. *So* beautiful. His white tuxedo gleamed so brilliantly bright in the sun that it seemed to burn a hole right through the fabric of the dream itself. Amazing synth music played on the stereo, sounding a bit like *Forever Young* but even more incredible.

There was a sudden bump, the car swerving out of control. Elvin looked in his wing mirror. A man was holding on to the side of the car, his huge body and bearded face staring madly forward. Elvin tried to shake him off, but the man held on grimly. He tried again, shaking the car from left to right and back again, all the while staring into the wing mirror, never taking his eyes off the monstrous assassin. Too late Elvin looked up, and saw the wall he was about to drive into. Then he drove into it and his car exploded.

More Dream

He woke in a facility somewhere, strapped down tight to a table. Scientists peered at him, speaking in a language Elvin could not understand. Elvin tried to speak to them but they ignored him, just kept on taking measurements and writing them down. Looking around, Elvin could see the huge, bearded man strapped to an identical table, surrounded by identical scientists, writing down identical measurements.

The scientists suddenly all left. Taking his chances, Elvin broke free of his shackles. He looked across at his adversary, who appeared to be unconscious, and then sneaked across to the oblivious guard at the door, and punched him in the neck. As the guard slumped to the floor an alarm begins to screech and whine. Elvin ran from the room in a panic. Outside the door was a huge block of stairs. Hundreds of guards trooped down them, guns in hand. Elvin quickly ran up the corridor, and hid in the shadows, and watched as all the guards sprinted into the room he'd just escaped from.

Silence for a bit. Then a huge roar. Screams. Gunfire. A guard flew out of the room and crumpled to the floor, dead. Elvin crept out of the shadows, and curiously peered round the doorway.

Inside the bearded man was running amok. Picking up guards in his hands and hurling them into the furniture. Inhumane screams of rage bubbling from his lips.

Elvin turned and ran.

Early Morning

Elvin woke and realised miserably where he was. He sat on the end of the bed in his pants and smoked a cigarette. The room was dark, the still-drawn curtains so thick with years of filth and smoke that barely any of the early morning light could find a way in. The thought of getting dressed and going down to eat breakfast filled him with revulsion. He retrieved the packet of peanuts and the can of coke from the cupboard and hoped they'd be enough to keep him alive until lunch, and his meeting with David McBluebeard.

Elvin got a notepad out of his bag and started to write down questions that he should ask him. Elvin still couldn't believe that fucking asshole of a writer had phoned in sick. The lazy shit. And he couldn't believe that the paper were too fucking tight to send another writer down. Bastards, the lot of them.

He'd never interviewed anyone before. What were you supposed to do? What were you supposed to ask? Did you just let them waffle on and on and on and record it and that was it? He didn't even know anything about the man, except that his poetry was awful. Maybe Elvin could ask him about that. And there was this stupid mud race, which was the reason Elvin was here in the first place. Also, there was that stuff about his private island and his battleship.

Elvin wrote all these down in his notebook, his tongue absentmindedly poking from the corner of his mouth as he concentrated.

Smoke and Snow

By the time Elvin finally got dressed and left his room it was almost noon. In the lobby there was a different man at the front desk, and as Elvin walked passed him he called out.

"Mr Elvin? Sir?"

Elvin turned, impatient. "Yes?"

"There was a telephone call for you this morning. We rung up but you didn't answer the phone."

"I was working," said Elvin, making excuses even though no one probably cared anyway.

"It was a Mr Power. He called to remind you of your lunchtime appointment with Mr McBluebeard."

"Yes. Okay."

"Also, Sir, he faxed over a list of questions and pointers for you."

"I don't need it. That's what I've been doing all morning."

"Okay, Sir. Shall I throw it away?"

"I don't really care."

Elvin lit a cigarette and stood there smoking in the hall until he was told to put it out or get out. By God Elvin despised this place.

Outside it was snowing, strange huge lumps of it blowing slowly around in the gentle breeze. Elvin looked up at into the great white depths of the sky. He opened his mouth and let a few of the flakes settle on his tongue, then quickly stopped in case anyone was looking. He finished his cigarette and threw it on the floor and stamped it into the thin layer of snow, the crunch and squeak of it under his shoe sounding like a tiny final scream of anguish.

He lit another cigarette and strode off purposefully down the High Street, his confident gait hopefully disguising the fact that he had no idea where the restaurant that he was supposed to meet McBluebeard in even was.

Drinks

About an hour later Elvin found the restaurant. Inside the place was entirely empty except for a gaggle of waiters loitering around near the bar. One of them broke free and approached.

"I'm here to meet with a Mr McBluebeard. There should be a table booked."

"Ah, yes. He should be along in a few moments. Would you like to take a seat?"

The waiter pulled a seat out for him at a table by the window.

"Would you like a drink as well, while you wait?"

"Can I just have a bottle of beer, please?"

"I'm sorry, we don't serve beer."

"Well, a glass of red wine then."

"I'm sorry, we don't serve wine either."

"Well, what do you serve?"

"Cider."

"And?"

"That's all we serve."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know... I could find out, if you want?"

"No, no, that's fine. I'll just have a pint of that then."

"Actually, I just remembered that the cider is off."

And then, McBluebeard appeared.

McBluebeard's Beard, And Some Other Features

David McBluebeard stood there in the doorway, huge and imposing. His beard was magnificent, each hair in it thick and coarse, like it was made from a thousand spiders' legs pushing their way out of his neck and face. Each hair seemed to sprout more hairs, and those even more, and Elvin found himself getting lost in amazement at its luxurious beauty. Although the man's hair was black his beard ranged from black to brown to ginger, even some gleaming white hairs emerged amid the technicolour marvel. There wasn't any blue in it, though.

From the midst of his beard his mouth blazed, open and smiling, ferocious, and deeply erotic. Teeth like pristine tombstones, lips like labia, his tongue fattened with blood.

His body was huge, his shoulders wide, his chest barrelling out, his belly pushing even further. Elvin stood up and reach out to shake McBluebeard's slab-like hand. Elvin's breath caught as McBluebeard squeezed his hand slightly, gently, tenderly, but tightly enough so that he knew the man could crush him completely if he wanted. Elvin felt diminished in his shadow, like a child in the presence of Father Christmas, or an obese God.

Drinks again

"So you must be Emlyn?"

"Actually, no, sorry, Emlyn couldn't make it. I'm Elvin."

"Elvin? What a beautiful name. Is it French?"

"I... I don't really know."

"Oh? You should look into it. It is always important to know where one's self comes from. Would you like to sit?"

McBluebeard swept his arm out in an expansive gesture, motioning Elvin to his chair. McBluebeard waited until Elvin was seated and then sat himself. He motioned the waiter over.

"What would you like to drink, Elvin?"

"All the drinks were off, apparently."

"Off? *Off?*" He turned to the waiter. "Is this true?"

"I'm afraid it is, Mr McBluebeard."

"This is terrible news. Terrible." McBluebeard stroked his huge beard with his huge fingers. "Just terrible."

"I'm so sorry." The waiter stammered and trembled.

"Sorry? Hahahaha." McBluebeard burst into rivers of terrible laughter. "You don't need to be sorry. Here, go to the off licence and buy us the best drinks you can find. And maybe even something for yourself."

He laughed again as he handed the young waiter a £50 note from his pocket.

"And be quick."

"Of course, Sir."

The waiter rushed away, out of the building and down the High Street. Another waiter quickly replaced him, and took their orders. Finally, Elvin and McBluebeard were alone at the table.

"Do you mind if I record this, Mr McBluebeard?"

"Of course not. And call me David."

Elvin placed his tape recorder on the table, and the interview began.

Mud

"Are you going to ask me any questions?"

Elvin looked up from his sheet of paper.

"Hmm? Oh, oh yes. Of course."

Elvin looked at his sheet one more time, for reassurance. He decided to skip his first question. That might be a little too confrontational at the start. Maybe he'd ask that next.

"So, McBluebeard, could you tell me about this so-called Mad Mud Race you've organised? Is it really mad? That sounds a bit presumptuous really. Shouldn't you let other people decide if it's mad? It doesn't sound particularly mad to me?"

"Hahahaha." That terrible laugh again, loud and long and quite possibly evil. "Hahaha, oh no, its not mad, its *MAD*. All in capitals. **Maldon And District**. Hahahahaha. Its the Maldon and District Mud Race. Ahahahahaha." The whole table shook as he laughed. "That was my best joke. I'm quite good at puns."

Elvin stared blankly. Eventually McBluebeard continued.

"It is an old tradition, really. A thousand years ago, Vikings landed on an island in the river near here – an island I now live on and own – and crossed the river there to engage the townsfolk in battle. So this mud race is a recreation and a celebration of that. A... *mad* dash through the thick mud, over the icy cold river, and then back again. I oversee the entire thing in my replica nineteenth century battleship, to ensure the fairness of the event.

"Of course, the Vikings did not actually wade through the mud, but waited until low tide, when a causeway emerges from the river and allows safe passage across to the town.

"Also, the Vikings killed every man in town."

A strange expression crossed McBluebeard's face. He appeared as if there was something he wanted to say, but then the starters were served and he started to scoop huge spoonfuls of prawn cocktail into his mouth instead.

Ubbs

"What's all this bollocks about a castle on an island and your own private battleship?" Elvin read from his list. "Oh, wait, you've already mentioned those. Erm, sorry, wait... wait... Okay. The only other question I have is why is your poetry so shit?"

McBluebeard blinked in surprise. Then, of course, he laughed.

"So you aren't a fan?"

"Well no. I must admit I only read one, but it was awful."

"I'm sorry to hear you—"

"It was fucking awful."

"Oh..."

"It was the one about an ubb."

"Which one about an ubb?"

"There was an ubb on a beach."

"That's my best one."

"Dreadful. Also, I don't even know what an ubb actually is. Is it some sort of jellyfish?"

"Hahahaha, oh my, no. It is the most beautiful thing in all of creation." McBluebeard sighed. "Alas there are no more ubbs here in this town. Not since the purge."

There was an awkward silence.

"It took me almost thirty years to discover poetry, but now I have, I can't imagine my life without it. It is all I want to do, forever. And now I've been given the chance I'm not going to let it go."

"Didn't you self published this poetry book of yours, anyway?"

McBluebeard looked miserably down at the table.

"Yes."

Lunch

"Who ordered the mussels?"

Elvin pointed at McBluebeard, who sat there silently, impassively. The waiter gave him his food, and then passed Elvin's plate across to Elvin. Suddenly, David McBluebeard jumped up, his face cursed with emotions.

"I'm sorry, I just can't. I can't continue with this interview." He sounded on the verge of tears. "My poetry... I can't believe someone could be so rude. I just can't go on. I can't pretend that this doesn't hurt. I can't."

He fumbled in his pockets, and throw a couple of £50 notes on too the table. "I hope that covers everything," he murmured from behind his tears, and then he stormed past the waiter and out the front door.

Elvin watched him go, and then leaned across and picked up both notes off the table, and slipped them into his pocket. *Well, at least I'd asked all my questions*, Elvin thought.

He took a bite out of his mashed banana sandwich and watched the snow fall on the street outside. The sandwich was stale but he still ate it anyway, his jaws working mechanically. He finished it, called the waiter over and paid, and then got up to leave. As he was putting his coat on the first waiter came running back in, out of breath and flustered.

"Here're your drinks, Sir" he said, and handed Elvin a four-pack of Skol and forty-six pounds worth of change.

Phone Call

"I interviewed him. He appears to be a complete fucking catastrophe of a man."

"Oh. How did it go?"

"Alright."

"Just alright?"

"I made him cry."

"What? How?"

"I've never interviewed anyone before. I didn't know he'd take it all so personally."

"Take what so personally?"

"I can't be bothered to explain. I could play the tape down the phone to you if you want?"

"I don't want to hear it. Just write it up and email it to me."

"I'm not sure they even have computers here."

"What? Everywhere has computers."

"My mother doesn't have a computer."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well she doesn't. She's a bit frightened by them."

"Shut up about your mother, Elvin."

Decisions

Elvin stepped out of the phone box, stood on the snow-covered high street and looked at his watch. It was almost 3 o'clock. He knew he should probably go back to his hotel room and write up the interview and then go and find a computer or a fax machine or something. The only trouble was the hundred and fifty quid in his pocket, and the four pack of shit lager under his arm. He decided to go and get pissed instead.

Behind the Church

Elvin sat on a bench in the graveyard drinking his cheap lager and smoking a cigarette as if he was a friendless teenage schoolboy again. He held his cigarette up to the falling snow in the hope the snowflakes would hiss and steam as they melted on the burning tip, but they didn't at all.

Opposite the bench, half covered by some overgrown shrubbery, was a wooden monk reading a wooden book. Underneath his wooden cowl the monk had no features at all, just a blank wooden face. Apart from that the graveyard was almost entirely empty. There didn't even seem to be any graves. Maybe this town was so depressing everyone ran away before they got a chance to die.

Elvin lit another cigarette and opened another can of beer. He just wished he hadn't left McBluebeard's poetry book in the pub, so he'd at least have something to read. Instead he just shivered and drank, his coat sleeves pulled down over his hands so he could hold the ice-cold cans without them freezing to his palms.

Pub

An hour later Elvin was sat by the open fire in the pub he'd drank in on the evening before. He sat his pint of *Whore's Tresses* ale on the table in front of him, making sure the glass was placed exactly central on the beer mat. He was so cold he just wanted to cry but he didn't because he thought the barman might see and he didn't want that. His tiny little heart just couldn't have coped with the humiliation.

Being cold always brought out the self-pity and the weeping in Elvin, ever since he was a young child. When he was ten he'd been taken to a restaurant with an all-you-can-eat offer on ice cream, and he had kept eating and eating and eating, getting colder and colder and colder, his face going blue and his mind slowly closing down, all higher functions except the spooning and the eating mechanism deserting him. Then he collapsed.

He still considered it the most traumatic day of his life.

News paper

Somebody had left a copy of *The Sun* on another table. Elvin watched it abjectly. He hated *The Sun*. They never bought his pictures. And also once they printed a story about a crop circle being unexplainable and he hated crop circles too. Actually maybe that was *The Daily Mail*. Elvin couldn't be sure. It didn't really matter. *The Daily Mail* never bought any of his fucking photos either.

As much as he hated *The Sun* he needed to read something. Otherwise he'd just sit there staring at the fire until his eyes began to burn, overcome with melancholy and despair. And he really liked the *George and Lynne* cartoons. Once he'd laughed so much at one of George's puns he'd fallen down the escalators on the tube. It was something about cricket or tits. Or maybe both. It was pretty funny, anyway. Yes, he should get up and swipe that copy of *The Sun* and sit there and read the *George and Lynne* cartoon. He needed cheering up.

But what if whoever's paper it was came back and wanted it back and then got irate that he'd stolen it and then they had to have a fight. Maybe they were still here, in the toilet, maybe, or having a fag outside. Elvin wasn't sure if he could cope with an argument at the moment.

Overcome with indecision and unacknowledged cowardice, Elvin continued to glumly watch the newspaper from his seat.

Closing Time

Elvin was still sitting there when the barman rang last orders, which jolted him out of whatever reverie he was lost in. Elvin still had most of his first pint left in the glass, festering away. He couldn't bring himself to drink it. Why did all of their ale have to taste like piss?

He stood up and went to take his glass back to the bar. On the way he sneaked a quick look at the newspaper. He flicked straight to the cartoons, but somebody had got there before him. The *George and Lynne* cartoon had been cut out. They'd left *Striker* there though. Elvin growled slightly in disgust. This had basically been the worse day ever. Not even the 150 quid made up for it, really.

He hurried to the bar, put his pint down, and turned to leave, but the barman called him back.

"Sorry, Sir, I just remembered you left this here the other night."

In his hand the barman held the David McBluebeard poetry book. Elvin shrieked in horror and ran for the door.

Dream 2

Back at the hotel, fast asleep in his tiny little bed, Elvin dreamt he was Neil Armstrong. He was bounding around on the moon, enjoying the sun and the silence and the endless grey desolation and the earth up in the sky. Everything was so beautiful. So beautiful. He turned back to look at Buzz Aldrin behind him, stepping gingerly out of the Eagle.

But it wasn't Buzz Aldrin. Even through the visor Elvin could see the huge monstrous head of David McBluebeard, his beard pushing horribly against the glass. McBluebeard reached up and removed his helmet, and his beard sprang out, finally free from constraint. It seemed to roll forward, unfurling itself, reaching out for something to grasp. Reaching out towards Elvin.

Elvin turned to run and clumsily tripped. He fell into a crater and rolled all the way down.

More Dream 2

Elvin lay at the bottom of the crater and looked up at the earth. He didn't want to, he wanted to get up and run, but he couldn't move at all. He could have closed his eyes, he supposed, but the earth was pretty mesmerising.

McBluebeard's beard crept into view first, followed by the rest of him. He stood over Elvin, screaming silent obscenities through the vacuum of space at him. Then he knelt over Elvin. Silent now, he pushed his face down towards Elvin's visor. He fell still, then gently kissed the glass. A further moment of stillness. Elvin stared at him, stared and stared and he couldn't look away and he couldn't even imagine ever looking away or looking at anything else ever again. All there was was McBluebeard, all the terror and the horror and the awe of the universe encapsulated within him.

And then McBluebeard began again to scream, and pulled his head back, and he crashed it forward into Elvin's visor. And again. And again. Over and over again until the glass began to crack and Elvin belatedly began to wonder whether he should try screaming while he still could.

Checking Out

Elvin was woken from his nightmare by the hotel reception desk ringing his room, telling him he needed to hurry up and check out. Elvin had never woken up from a horrible nightmare happier. Just two more hours and he'd be out of this awful little town forever and he'd never have to think about it again.

Minutes later, downstairs, dressed and packed, Elvin waited to checkout at the front desk, room keys in hand. The man on the desk was the same man it had been when Elvin had checked in, two days earlier. Two days! It seemed like weeks and weeks.

Elvin handed in his keys while reading the bill. "What's this?" Elvin enquired, pointing to "Extra Charges: £3.50".

"Oh, that's charges for room service."

"I didn't order any room service."

"You ate the refreshments in the mini-bar."

"That's not fucking room service."

"I'll think you'll find it is, Sir."

"It was an out-of-date packet of peanuts and a warm can of coke that tasted like piss."

"The peanuts weren't out-of-date."

"They fucking tasted like it."

"Why must you swear so much, Sir? It is exceptionally rude."

"I'm not paying £3.50 for that."

"No one is trying to make you pay for swearing, Sir. I just don't like it."

"No, I mean for the peanuts."

"Don't you just charge all this to your expenses, anyway, Sir?"

"How dare you. Anyway, it's the fucking principle of the matter."

"Very good, Sir. I will still have to charge you, though, I'm afraid... Thank you, Sir... Also, Sir, I'm afraid you can't smoke that in here. Sir? Sir?"

The Park and the Race

Elvin hurried to the park to cover the mud race. Frankly he was bored of all this now but at least he'd be going home soon so he'd just take a few photos of some mud or whatever there was there and then he could run away.

The race was taking place in the park, by the river, instead of anywhere near McBluebeard's island, as Elvin had assumed. The park was basically a few playing fields, and some trees, and a large duck pond, or maybe a small duck lake. And beyond the lake was a wide concrete path, and then there was all the mud, and finally there was the river.

The lake was frozen, and there was a swarm of ducks waddling up and down the ice, shouting and complaining about the sudden lack of water. They looked pretty irritated. Elvin didn't care. He took a few photos of them anyway, and then some photos of the big crowd of people by the river.

The course of the race was from the shore, across about 100 yards of thick rancid mud to the thin trickle of river, across that, across some more mud, around a buoy, back across the mud, and the river, and then finally back across all the rest of the mud that they ran across originally. It looked stupid to Elvin. It looked stupid to everyone, probably. And yet still they did it.

Further down the river, Elvin saw a huge battleship sailing around in the deeper waters. David McBluebeard really did have a perfect replica of the *HMS Victory*. Astonishing. From his ship he shouted out orders, his booming voice amplified to inhuman levels. It sounded like a baboon screaming down orders from heaven.

The Race

McBluebeard called the competitors to their places, and then screamed "GO!" so loudly everyone just stood there in shocked silence for a moment, before suddenly exploding into action. Elvin pushed his way forward through the crowd to take pictures of the men struggling through the mud, shivering and screaming and collapsing into it. As the pushed further across the river they slipped deeper and deeper into the mud until it was almost up to their waists. The first people to the water brought a sudden surge of applause from the crowd. They crossed, and then started the journey back.

Getting back was even harder, the already churned up mud seeming to suck them further in. It was a gruesome spectacle. Elvin took pictures almost automatically, barely noticing the shouting crowd or the cold.

And then someone had won, and Elvin took some photos of his cheering face, and then some more photos of the beaten racers still struggling through the mud. Some had collapsed, and looked dead. The whole scene was like a battlefield. A battlefield in mud. In a river. And with no blood. But still, a battlefield.

McBluebeard excitedly shouted the winners name from his boat. The crowd roared.

Elvin sneaked away to the bus stop, unmissed in the excitement, finally on the verge of escape. He sat on the bench there and smoked a cigarette and smiled that it was over and he could go home.

PART TWO: The Island of David McBluebeard

Waiting

It was 4 o'clock in the early evening and Elvin was still sitting at the bus stop. He'd been in the town for less than 48 hours, and he'd been sat here for just over five hours now, smoking cigarettes in the snow and the gathering gloom, and he had begun to suspect that perhaps the bus was never going to come. He hadn't made any attempt to move, though, just in case one came as soon as he turned his back and all his waiting would have been for naught. Better to stubbornly sit here until the end of time. Or at least until he ran out of cigarettes.

Elvin's early morning optimism had slowly been leached away by the cold and now all that was left was a long grey husk where his soul should have been. Occasionally he cursed the town and its lack of trains.

And then out of the snow and murk came stumbling the huge figure of David McBluebeard. His beard seemed even more tangled and dense than before, and his coat and hat were covered in thick white snow that seemed to accentuate... *everything*. In one of his gloved hands he held an ornate black wooden walking stick, the head carved into the shape of an unidentifiable beast of the deeps. Elvin looked upon him and trembled. Remembering how their last meeting went, he wondered if this was the end. Trapped here in this town, with no chance of escape, Elvin imagined McBluebeard raising his cane up, up, up into the clouds and the blizzard, before bringing it down in an arc onto the top of Elvin's weak skull, his brains bursting out in an explosion of blood and matter and death.

Instead, McBluebeard looked uncomfortably at his feet and mumbled an embarrassed apology.

Apologies and Invitations

"I'm sorry about my behaviour at lunch yesterday. It's just that... It's just... I really love my poetry... I'm really proud of it... And... Well, maybe I love it too much. I need to learn how to cope better with criticism. It just... I felt like you were picking on me and I lashed out. I shouldn't have done."

"Er, that's okay. Don't worry about it."

"Also, I'm sorry, but the buses have all been cancelled."

"What?"

"There's too much snow. No one can get in or out of town."

"Fucking hell."

"Yes, I know. Like I said, I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"I just am. Also all the phonelines are down."

"Well this is just great."

"I really am sorry, you know. To make it up to you I'd like it if you agreed to stay at my house tonight, as my honoured guest."

"Well, okay. Anywhere other than that shitty hotel..."

"Excellent, then it is settled. I'm afraid we'll have to walk there, however. I do not own a car."

"I can walk."

"It is an important skill."

The Approach

They walked mostly in silence, McBluebeard leading Elvin out of town and towards his island. They walked a mile or two across snow-ridden fields, passing a farm where strange beasts loomed out of the blizzard. McBluebeard seemed to tower above Elvin, his incredible girth adding to the illusion of his height, his bear-like arms swinging his cane back and forth vigorously, yet never using it to aid his walk. Elvin smoked incessantly, turning away whenever David McBluebeard looked about to speak.

They left the farm and the fields behind and came to a dirt road that wound its way around a small grassy hill. On the other side was the river, and a short natural causeway that led across to McBluebeard's island, and his home.

"It was on this island a thousand years ago that Vikings landed to sack this town, and it was across this causeway that they came to fight the men of the town," McBluebeard suddenly announced.

"You already told me that yesterday."

"Hahaha. Yes, so I did. Did I also tell you that this causeway only appears at low tide, for an hour?"

"Yes."

"Well, I just wanted to make sure you knew. There'll be no escape until tomorrow morning at about half four. And then none again until five in the afternoon."

"What about on your boat?"

"Well, yes, I suppose."

"I like boats."

"Really?"

Elvin was silent in reply, taking a long deliberate drag on his cigarette.

"Well, lets not stay here talking all evening. We best hurry across while we still have the chance!"

McBluebeard turned away after this outburst and camply walked across the causeway.

The House

McBluebeard's house was a huge and sprawling ramshackle mansion, seemingly built one room at a time, with no planning or continuity or shape or reason in mind. Turrets and towers and chimneys belching smoke curled their way up from walls and windows and roofs, tunnels and alleyways burrowed into the massive edifice of brick and wood and stone, and porches seemed to multiply around the lower edges of the castle until it appeared that everywhere you glanced there was an entrance or an exit. Balconies overlooked balconies overlooking balconies all the way down from the snow clouds to the ground. A huge black hot air balloon floated high above one corner of the house, tethered only by a rope ladder tied to a chimney.

Cats roamed the grounds, climbed across the roofs, sat looking out of every window. As they saw McBluebeard approaching a wave of cats hurried towards him, but upon seeing Elvin they hesitated, and then backed away into the shadows and the corners.

Elvin tried to comprehend all that he saw, but everywhere he looked he saw some new dismal outrage of bad design and broken architecture, and then before he'd even had time to articulate his distaste McBluebeard had opened a door and swept them both inside.

Rules

“You’re a guest in my house, and I like to think of myself as a gracious host, so please feel free to say and do what you wish, and if there is anything you need or want please just ask, and I will try and provide it for you. You can go where you like, and look at whatever you wish. You can sleep in my bed, read my diaries and poetry, eat my cakes and drink my ale, if you so desire.

“However, every man must have one secret, and every household must have at least one rule, and in this house there is a cellar, and in the cellar there is a room, and that room is forbidden to you. Promise me that you will not enter. Promise me that you will not break your word and go against my rule.”

Elvin nodded, and then nodded again, placed his bag by the door. He lit another cigarette, and then walked into the hall without even taking off his coat or shoes.

The Kitchen

Elvin walked on into the house, turning left and right down corridors and hallways at random, until eventually, by some form of sixth sense, he arrived exactly where he wanted to be, which was the kitchen.

The whole room seemed to be made out of metal and wood. An imposing black cooker sat in the centre of the far wall, pots and pans piled up on the worktops and shelves around it. Huge knives and cleavers and spoons lined the walls. A massive thick wooden chopping board sat upon a vast oak table. A big black cat lay curled up on the top of the pile, licking contentedly at its front paws.

Elvin opened the cupboards and drawers, looking for something to eat, something to drink. He opened a door that led to a large walk-in cupboard that was so big the end of it wasn't even visible in the gloom. A wine rack ran along the wall into the distance, and to Elvin's horror he noticed that it was filled not with wine, but with bottles of beer. *The man is a disgusting barbarian*, thought Elvin. *An abominable ape pretending to be human*. Elvin closed the door, shuddering slightly in shock and disgust at what he'd just seen.

Cake

Elvin turned back, and flinched in surprise as he saw the figure of McBluebeard standing silently in front of him.

"How did you find me?" Elvin asked. "I thought I'd left you back by the front door."

"I followed the wet and filthy footprints you'd left all over my carpets."

"You sound like my mother."

McBluebeard made no reply, just stood there, staring straight forward. Elvin tried to edge past him but McBluebeard's bulk was difficult to pass. Elvin tried giving him a discreet little push, but it had no discernable effect.

"Can you move, please?" Elvin asked.

McBluebeard slowly looked down, his face completely blank. Then suddenly life and awareness flooded back in from somewhere distant, and he stepped aside.

"Sorry. I was... I was miles away. Thinking about things. Sorry."

"Do you have any food? I'm fucking starving."

"There's some cake in the fridge. Shall we withdraw to the drawing room to eat it? That'll be more civilised than standing around in the kitchen like a couple of miserable family outcasts at Christmas."

David McBluebeard strode across the kitchen to the fridge, barging past Elvin as if he was barely even there.

"There's some beer in the cupboard behind you if you want, as well," he shouted back to Elvin over his shoulder.

The Drawing Room

They sat facing each other in huge armchairs, the by now half-eaten chocolate cake on a small table between them. The room was so elaborately decorated with statues and bookshelves and expensive looking paintings that Elvin felt he should really be smoking a cigar and talking endlessly about his wealth and his investments. Instead he lit another cigarette and drank some of his beer.

"You're very quiet tonight, Elvin. I hope I haven't offended you."

As McBluebeard said this he reached down and cut himself yet another slice of cake, which he picked up in one of his grubby hands and pushed whole into his gaping maw. He seemed to swallow it all without even chewing, a little like a pelican eating a fish, just choking it down in big gasping gulps.

Elvin turned away and concentrated as hard as he could on smoking. He was beginning to think he should have just booked back in at the hotel. Even if it was shit at least he could have gone straight to bed, instead of having to deal politely with this oaf of a host.

"Ah, are you admiring my clockwork orrery?"

"What?"

"This," McBluebeard said, as he rose and moved towards a mechanical device in the corner of the room that Elvin was facing blankly towards.

"No. I wasn't."

"Oh..."

McBluebeard sat back in his seat, a complex expression of complete dejected glumness upon his monstrous visage.

An Awkward Silence

Elvin watched the smoke as it rose slowly from the tip of his cigarette. Elvin stared at the wall, the faded pattern there hinting at a long forgotten past of elegance and refinement. Elvin looked down at his shoes. Elvin shot a quick glance at McBluebeard, before quickly averting his attention to the ceiling. Elvin looked at the strange grey cat sleeping in the corner. Elvin looked at the last slice of cake but didn't have the courage to reach out and take it. Elvin pulled absently at his eyebrow, checking for loose or overlong hairs that could be plucked out and studied. Elvin coughed once, then stubbed his cigarette out by pushing the remains of it into his empty beer bottle. Elvin put the beer bottle on the coaster on the table, ensuring it was placed exactly centrally. Elvin sat back in his chair and sighed. Elvin reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Elvin stared at the picture of cancerous lungs on the front. Elvin reached into his other pocket and removed his lighter. Elvin took a cigarette from the packet, held it up for a quick inspection, and then placed it between his thin lips and lit it. Elvin watched the smoke as it rose slowly from the tip.

McBluebeard rose from his chair and strode from the room.

A discussion on the limits of all our tiny universes

McBluebeard returned with two bottles of beer, and placed them on the small table next to the empty cake plate. Elvin stood in the corner by the orrery, looking at the tiny brass planets slowly moving around the sun. He continued to smoke, listening to the quiet clicking of the gears in the machine, and did not notice that McBluebeard had re-entered the room, and so when McBluebeard spoke he jumped a little before composing himself and pretending that he had just been turning around to listen.

"It is fascinating, isn't it? Somedays I can watch it for hours, dreaming of space. I often wish I could go to the moon", David said. "But alas, I am overweight."

McBluebeard fell silent for a moment. But only for a moment.

"One of my cats died last year. My oldest cat. She was almost twenty years old, and had lived her all her life. She had never been off this tiny island. She was born here and she died here. She knew this house, she knew me, she knew the other cats here. She knew the gardens and the roofs and the birds that fly past. And that was all she knew. The sea surrounding us was the complete boundary of her universe. Twenty years, and this was all there was.

"And when I think about the tiny limits of her universe, I inevitably wonder what are the limits of my universe. What are the limits of yours, of all of ours? Until a few hundred years ago these six planets and a handful of their moons were all we knew of the solar system. People had not yet begun to wonder whether the stars were other suns. Their universe was smaller than ours. And now our universe expands with every generation, with every passing day. Our limits get bigger and bigger. And we begin to think we know it all, or at least that it is knowable, eventually. That even if we cannot see beyond the horizon we can surmise what is beyond.

"But we cannot.

"And did she imagine more, my poor old cat? Did she wonder what was beyond the river that bounded her world? I do not know. I cannot really imagine a cat dreaming of such things, though, but of course it is possible. Cats are wiser creatures than we can know. Perhaps she dreamed of elaborate birds and rodents that no one else had ever conceived, that no one else would ever know of. Perhaps the universe of her imagination was even bigger than any of ours, trapped inside her mind due to her lack of language.

"And now it is gone."

Elvin had finished his cigarette by now. He impatiently took his bottle of beer from McBluebeard's bear-like paw, whispered "I think I once saw a cat cry", and then turned and walked out of the room, leaving David stranded and alone in the corner.

Visions

Elvin walked through the seemingly endless twisting corridors and hallways without looking where he was going. For some reason the lights were already on everywhere he turned. Perhaps McBluebeard was scared of the dark? Eventually, at the end of a long and featureless corridor, he came upon spiralling staircase that wound its way upwards.

Still filled with a shapeless rage at having had to listen to McBluebeard talk and talk and forever talk, Elvin just wanted to bellow in anger, but instead settled for sitting on the stairs. Why didn't that abominable man just shut up, anyway? His philosophising was at least as bad as his poetry, Elvin thought, and certainly more boring, if that was possible. It was certainly quite an achievement.

The only thing worse that Elvin could imagine would be if David McBluebeard suddenly demanded Elvin listen to him singing a song. Or playing the recorder. Elvin tried to visualise McBluebeard playing one of those gigantic oversized recorders some of the posher children had been made to play in the school band at primary school, and the resulting image was so terrible he had to quickly drink the entire contents of his bottle of beer to help calm the shudders.

The Relentless Approach of David McBluebeard

Elvin had just about calmed down when he saw David McBluebeard appear in the distance at the end of the corridor. A trick of perspective made it look like he filled the entire hallway with his bulk, and although Elvin could see McBluebeard's legs moving, he appeared to be getting no closer at all.

Elvin sighed and considered running up the stairs and hiding, but even the thought of it seemed like too much effort. He looked at his watch, and was surprised to see that it was almost midnight. He'd been in this house for six hours or so, somehow. He hadn't even done anything except eat some cake and listen to his host drone on and on. Could McBluebeard's tedious outburst about his dead cat really have lasted over three hours? The evidence of his watch suggested it must have done.

He looked up. McBluebeard was still moving, and yet seemed as far away as ever. Everything had a dreamlike quality to it, an inevitability and remoteness that made Elvin wonder if he had been drugged. He tried to stand, attempting to pull himself up by grabbing the banister, but he felt so heavy and cumbersome he sat straight back down again. Perhaps it wasn't some sort of drug that was affecting him, anyway, maybe the shock of seeing McBluebeard had combined with his fit of shudders and convulsions to render him inert. Whatever it was it was not pleasant.

His mind kept returning to the time, all that time that he'd been here, all that time that seemed to be missing, and he began to wonder if he was trapped here, in this house, in this town.

Suddenly McBluebeard was towering over Elvin, a huge smile across his ridiculous and demented face.

Wine

"Ah, there you are, Elvin. I've been looking all over for you." McBluebeard paused, and thrust a bottle of wine into Elvin's hands. "I found this in the back of the cupboard, and thought you might like a glass. You didn't seem very impressed with my selection of fine ales."

Elvin looked at the bottle. It didn't have a label on it, and the green glass was covered in dust and filth, and what looked like claw marks were scratched into the neck of the bottle. He removed the cork and sniffed tentatively, before taking a quick sip. Elvin's face contorted in disgust. Then he took another gulp. Again his face contorted in disgust.

"This is quite nice," Elvin coughed.

McBluebeard beamed in delight. "I thought you'd like it."

Feeling revitalised by the horrible wine, Elvin tried to stand, and this time actually managed it.

"What's up these stairs, anyway?"

"It leads to my library. Would you like to see it?"

Before Elvin could even answer McBluebeard started to advance, forcing Elvin backwards and up the spiralling staircase whether he wanted to go there or not.

In McBluebeard's Library

The staircase came up in the dead centre of the library, which was a small square room, with a dust-covered wooden floor, unpainted windowless walls, and a single MFI bookcase on each of its four walls. There was an old leather armchair in one corner of the room, between two of the bookcases, and a small table sat next to it.

Three of the bookcases were filled with books, while the fourth was packed with rows and rows of ringbound folders. It was to this bookcase that McBluebeard went, removing one of the folders and handing it to Elvin.

"These are my pride and joy," he said. "A complete archive of George and Lynne strips, dating all the way back to 1980. I cut them out of the paper every day."

Elvin looked at it in amazement. *George and Lynne* was his favourite cartoon, and yet even this McBluebeard had managed to defile. In every strip in which Lynne or one of her friends were naked, David McBluebeard had drawn in bras and pants in biro to hide their beautiful shame. It was an abomination.

"What the fuck have you done?" Elvin screamed, unable to control his anger and fury. "Why the fuck have you drawn on all of these, you ridiculous uneducated cretin? Don't you understand anything? How...? How the fuck can you say you're proud of this, and then commit this... this desecration?"

Elvin threw the folder on the floor and gave it a little stamp. Then he went to the corner and slumped down into the chair. He took a long gulp from the bottle of wine, and then lit a cigarette, glaring at his host from behind the clouds of smoke. McBluebeard looked on in shocked silence, and then slowly bent down to pick up the folder from the floor and placed it back on the shelf. One of the strips had fallen out and ripped in half, and McBluebeard picked the pieces up and stared at it with tears in his eyes. Eventually he placed one half of it in his pocket, and dropped the other half on the table by Elvin's chair.

"I'm going to bed."

And then McBluebeard left Elvin alone in the library.

The Final Panel

Elvin's fury eventually began to subside, so he picked up the *George and Lynne* fragment that McBluebeard had placed on the table in an effort to re-ignite his rage. It worked.

The fragment only contained the final panel of the strip. Lynne should have been naked, but instead she was wearing a blue biro bra, and a pair of red biro pants. She was twisted round unnaturally so the reader could have seen her arse and her breasts simultaneously, if they'd been lucky enough to see it in the newspaper instead of in McBluebeard's archive. Lynne was standing in the middle of the garden, saying "No, he was off *the* side!" to nobody in particular. George, standing behind her, appeared to be asleep, or maybe in the middle of a debilitating stroke.

Elvin took the cigarette out of his mouth and burnt a hole through George's face.

The Sleeping Behemoth

Elvin climbed down the stairs out of the library, and then tried to retrace his steps all the way back to the kitchen. Somewhere along the way he must have lost his way, however, because soon he came to the end of a passageway he did not recognise. There was a door at the end, and from beyond he could hear frightening noises, sounding something like the sickening growls of a feeding bear. Curiosity persuaded Elvin to push open the door.

Inside was a cavernous bedroom, dominated by an imposingly large bed at the far end of the room, underneath the huge arched windows. The sheets were pitched up like a tent around the gigantic carcass of McBluebeard in the bed. His clothes were lying on the floor in a heap, as if he had teleported straight out of them into bed. The growls that had caught Elvin's attention seeming to be half the man's snoring, and half him screaming in his sleep.

Elvin eased the door closed and tiptoed away.

Escape

Eventually Elvin found his way back to the kitchen. He went to the cupboard and took out a couple of bottles of beer, placing them in his coat pockets, one in each side. From the kitchen he made his way back to the entrance hall. He picked up his bag from where he had left it, and then, buttoning up his coat, he opened the door and stepped outside into the night.

It was still snowing, and it was fucking freezing. Elvin lit a cigarette and sucked on it for warmth, then drank some more of the wine.

The lights from the house lit the garden up, giving the snow a strange ethereal glow. Strange shapes of shadow moved around in the darkness at the edges of the lawn. Elvin hoped they were just cats.

The pathway was covered in fresh snow, and he couldn't be sure he was taking the right route, but he set off anyway, his determined stride making light work of the uneven conditions underfoot. Elvin muttered under his breath about how he should never have fucking come here anyway, he should have stayed at the hotel. He should have stayed in *London*. This was the worst weekend of his life.

Beyond escaping McBluebeard's lair it didn't appear that Elvin had much of a plan.

Forgotten Barriers

Elvin successfully made his way back across the island only to discover that the path across the river had gone. The tide lapped at the edge of the shore by his feet, and he stared blankly at the waters in his way. The orange glow from the town's streetlights sparkled on the waves. Elvin spat out his cigarette and shouted such obscenities in his rage that even he felt a bit disgusted.

He looked at his watch, slowly remembering McBluebeard talking about the tides, and about how he couldn't leave until the early morning. It was almost one now, so he'd have to wait here for about four more hours. How depressing.

Suddenly the streetlights all switched off and everything was plunged into darkness. When Elvin's eyes finally readjusted to the dark the only light was the pallid glow emanating from the palace of horror he'd just tried to leave.

Going Back Inside

Elvin sullenly trudged back through the snow to the house, and he was glad to see that the door hadn't swung closed and locked him out. He stepped inside and put his bag back down from where he'd just picked it up. He stepped into the hall and knocked the snow from his coat and stamped his feet until the carpet was covered with snow and muck. He was so cold he kept his coat on in the hope that it would quickly make his shivering subside.

He wondered what he could do for the next three hours. He took one of the bottles of beer out of his pocket. He didn't have a bottle opener, however, and twisting the cap just threatened to cut holes right through his palms. He put the bottle back in his pocket and drank some more of his wine instead. Then, inevitably, he went back to the kitchen.

At The Back Of The Cupboard

Elvin was still shivering slightly when he got to the kitchen. He searched for some coffee or tea or soup or something that could help warm him up, but the kitchen seemed mostly empty, as if it was an unused facsimile of a home, a showroom at the world's worst interior design show.

He opened the big walk-in cupboard where McBluebeard kept his beer. Noticing again how it seemed to run off forever into the darkness, Elvin stepped inside and fumbled looking for a light switch, but there was none. *How strange*, thought Elvin. Everywhere else in the house was so brightly lit there were barely any shadows. McBluebeard even slept with his lights on. And yet here everything was dark. Elvin walked further in, starting to feel his way along the wall as it got dimmer and dimmer. After a while Elvin looked round, and the kitchen doorway was a tiny little orb in the distance. He turned back and carried on forward into the dark, and eventually he came to a door.

He reached about in the dark, and, finding the handle, opened the door. Inside was a stairway, and at the bottom of the stairs a light, revealing the cellar below. Elvin recalled McBluebeard's warning about the cellar, and his promise not to enter. Elvin shrugged his shoulders. The ridiculous oaf was asleep upstairs, on the other side of this house. There was no way he would ever know.

Elvin stepped out of the darkness and into the light.

Armoury

The room at the bottom of the stairs was a fully equipped medieval armoury. Racks lined the walls, filled with rows of swords, lances, axes, pikes, maces, scythes, hammers, daggers, bows, and flails. All the blades gleamed and shone under the electric strip lights. A collection of flintlocks and other ancient looking guns were displayed in a glass cabinet on the far wall. Just to the left of this there was another door, presumably leading off further into the catacombs.

Was this really what McBluebeard was so frightened about Elvin seeing? What a strange man. A collection of old weaponry was hardly that embarrassing. Especially compared to some of the strange man's behaviour.

Elvin took a sabre down from the wall and swished it around the room. *If only I had a cape as well*, Elvin whispered to himself. *I'd look fucking excellent*. He swung it back and forth a few more times, more vigorously than before, until his arm began to ache. He placed it tenderly back on the rack, and tried to take down the huge double-headed battleaxe that was next to it, but he could barely move it. Chastised by his weakness, Elvin turned and made for the door by the gun-rack.

Torture Chamber

Behind the door lay another similar room, another similar door on the opposite wall again presumably leading further into McBluebeard's forbidden cellar complex. This room was not an armoury, however, but a torture chamber. Maybe they went on forever, an endless succession of rooms filled with increasingly depraved weaponry. *Perhaps the last room is where he keeps his poetry!* Elvin laughed at his little joke. Elvin liked jokes.

His good humour began to dissipate as he looked more closely at the contents of the room. There was a hearth to his left, a tapered poker laying discarded in the ash. Saws, chisels, knives and hammers hung from a rack above it. A guillotine occupied the centre of the room, its blade encrusted with rust and filth. Next to this sat an iron maiden, its doors hanging opening to reveal the spikes within. In the far corner was a wooden table, chains and clamps open and waiting for unwilling wrists and arms. A bench lay overturned on the floor, its seat naught but a long upright blade.

A shelf ran along the right hand wall of the room. On it lay a pair of iron shoes with clamps to fasten them at the ankles, and a number of nails in the heel pointing directly upwards. The shelf also held a number of items that Elvin couldn't even comprehend the use of. A metallic device in the shape of a pear, a rusty key inserted in the top. A mask made of hooped metal, a bell hanging from the clasp at the back. Two cymbals connected together by a single long screw. Gloves with a funnel attached to the palm. A stick with tiny barbed hooks running up each side.

Elvin looked at the unopened door. The stone floor at its base was stained brown, as if unimaginable filth had seeped out from the room beyond. He knew he did not want to open the door, yet knew it was inevitable that he would. He drank from his bottle of wine, but it tasted like blood in his throat. At Elvin's touch, what he hoped was the final door swung open.

Abattoir

Elvin stood in the doorway, smoking a long thin cigarette. What lay before him was even worse than whatever he had imagined might have been hidden inside.

Inside this huge cavernous catacomb was an ocean of desecrated flesh. Mutilated bodies hung naked from hooks, barrels filled with flesh and bones were lined up against the walls. A cauldron filled with a foul smelling oil bubbled away over an open fire. Blood stained the floors and the walls and the surfaces of the many tables dotted here and there around the room. Skulls and bones lay piled up in huge mountains in the corners. A stench of vomit filled the room. Or maybe it was bleach. Elvin couldn't really tell the difference.

Elvin approached the nearest table. On it lay the body of a woman, her head removed, the flesh of her hands peeled back, the veins pulled out and displayed like wires, stapled to the table in a strange, wisping pattern. He glanced up at the bodies hanging nearby, and realised that, as far as he could see, every corpse here was that of a woman. Was this the purge that McBluebeard had spoken obliquely of earlier, during the interview at the restaurant? Elvin realised he couldn't stop staring at everything in wild-eyed terror, couldn't turn away and close his eyes and make it all go away. He couldn't even turn and leave, his feet leaden and immovable. Was this panic? Shock?

And then a voice from behind him dragged him out of his trance.

Confrontation

McBluebeard stood before him, his face incandescent, his mouth roaring in fury. His huge frame filled the door, and in his hand he held a massive two-headed battle-axe, and he seemed, somehow, to cast a shadow over the whole room.

"You. You broke your promise. You broke my rules."

"Your rules? Your fucking rules? Who cares about your fucking rules? What the fuck have you done? What sort of creature are you? How could you do this? Why would you do this?"

"*Why?* Yeah, I'll tell you *why*."

And then McBluebeard raised his axe above his head and brought it swinging down towards Elvin's face with all his might.

Fire and Explosions

Elvin jumped to his left just in time, the axe whistling past his shoulder and into a barrel behind him. Hundreds of severed breasts tumbled out as McBluebeard struggled to pull his weapon free. Elvin walked backwards, trying to circle round McBluebeard so he could get to the door. The beast lifted his axe in anger, animal fury and lust undimmed in his eyes. Elvin flicked his cigarette into McBluebeard's face, but it just bounced off his head and fell fizzing into the cauldron of oil, or whatever it was that this monster had been boiling. The liquid burst into flames.

McBluebeard screamed again, incoherent and horrifying. He readied his axe, and approached. Elvin stepped backwards again. He trod on a bone, tripped, and fell into one of the piles of skeletal remains that clogged the corners of the room. McBluebeard rose above him like a bear, and slowly, steadily, deliberately raised the axe above his head, both hands on the hilt. A single tear rolled down Elvin's cheek. He took one last drink from the bottle of wine, and prepared himself for the coming blow.

And then everything exploded.

Destruction

McBluebeard was smashed to the floor by the force of the blast, his clothes covered in fire, his back peppered with shards of metal from the exploded cauldron. Oil burned through his clothes onto his skin, and he lay screaming and thrashing around.

Elvin, shielded both by McBluebeard's body and the mountain of bones he had fallen into, was completely unscathed. Even his bottle of wine was safe. He pulled himself up and ran for the door. He didn't look back.

If he had he would have seen a room on fire, bodies bursting into flames wherever the molten oil had splattered and sprayed. Thick smoke rose in plumes to fill the room. Tables and barrels ignited, flesh and fat bubbled and burnt. Even the accumulated filth on the floor seemed to act as an accelerant, spreading the fire throughout the entire tomb like a judgement.

Escape

Elvin stumbled through the torture chamber and into the armoury. As he ran for the stairs he slipped on the cold floor and fell crashing to the floor. He pushed himself up, cursing his clumsiness. Smoke followed him from the charnel house he'd just left behind. He opened the door to the stairs, and started to climb.

It was only now that Elvin looked back. Smoke filled the room, an orange glow lighting it from afar. The smoke and the stench of burnt flesh made him cough and gag, and he thought he was going to be sick.

McBluebeard burst through the doorway from the torture chamber, blundering into the room like a bull. His eyes glowed in the dark room like two burning coals, and flames flickered across his clothes. He saw Elvin doubled over coughing and spitting on the stairs, and pointed at him, a high screeching shriek piercing through the noise and chaos. And then he charged, effortlessly smashing a rack of weapons out of the way with his shoulder.

Elvin stumbled backwards, falling into a sitting position on stairs, before turning and scrambling up the stairs. He had almost made it to the top when he felt a burning hand grip his ankle and try to pull him back down into the depths. Elvin turned, and looked directly into the inhuman eyes of the beast. Without thinking he swung his wine bottle down into McBluebeard's face. It shattered across his bovine skull, broken glass gouging huge chunks of flesh from his forehead. He pulled his arms up to his broken face and screamed in pain, and fell backwards down the stairs, disappearing into the ever-thickening smoke. Elvin sat on the stair in silence for a moment, exhausted.

He put his hands in his pockets to look for a cigarette, but found the bottles of beer he'd placed there earlier instead. He pulled them out and threw them down the stairs, hoping to inflict further damage on the unseen body of McBluebeard below. Then he climbed the last steps and ran down the long dark corridor to the kitchen, the smoke effortlessly keeping pace with him as he fled.

The River

Outside the house it was still dark, and the snow continued to fall. Elvin ran from the house, cats streaming out of the building with him like a wave. He fled across the garden towards the causeway. When he got there the tide was still not low enough for it to be clear. Elvin stood there, panicked and frightened, and wondered what he could do. He didn't fancy standing here for an hour or more, waiting for the tide to change. He kept imagining McBluebeard bearing down on him like some furious nightmare from the depths of hell, axe in his hand.

Behind him he heard a scream, back in the direction of the house. Was that McBluebeard? Or maybe one of his cats? Maybe it was all of his cats, screaming in unison. Elvin did not know, but it was enough to jolt him into action. He stepped into the river and waded out, hoping that the tide was low enough and the submerged causeway high enough for him to make it all the way across.

The freezing water seeped into his boots and through his trousers. How far across was it anyway? Elvin couldn't remember, and couldn't even see in the gloom. The water slowly deepened, first rising above his knees and then to his waist. Elvin kept pushing through, slower and slower though as his clothes got heavier and his body colder and colder. His teeth chattered incessantly. He could hardly even think, his mind barely even remembered the horrors he was escaping from.

And then, finally, suddenly, he reached the far bank and collapsed exhausted into the snow.

PART THREE: The Battle Of Maldon

Waking Up

Elvin woke up moments after he'd collapsed. The house of horrors he'd left behind was fully ablaze now, huge plumes of smoke twisting upwards into the clouds. Even from his position across the river he could feel the flames heating him from almost a mile away.

The relief he felt at his escape overwhelmed him. McBluebeard was definitely dead, and everything would be alright. Everything was just fine.

And then McBluebeard burst out of the river, his body on fire, a flaming axe in his hand, and as he screamed in a tongue that no human had ever spoken he smashed its heavy blade down on Elvin's face, cleaving his head in two. Elvin could feel the blood flowing down his face for a second, before he fell backwards dead into the snow.

Waking Up

Elvin woke up with a jolt, alone in the snow on the riverbank. The house of horrors he'd left behind was fully ablaze now, huge plumes of smoke twisting upwards into the clouds. The faint glow from the flames lit his face but provided him with no warmth at all. His teeth chattered and his whole body shook deeply with shivers that were almost convulsions. He picked himself up and walked towards town.

He'd never felt so cold, nor so frightened. His wet clothes hung to his body, threatening to freeze in the cold. His hands were numb and dumb with the cold. He tried to light a cigarette but he could barely even fumble one out of the packet so he had to give it up and put them away. He trudged on and on in the darkness, growing panic in his mind that he might fall and never want to get back up. Every step became a battle forward. He had no idea how long he had been walking, had no idea how long he had to walk for.

At first Elvin didn't even realise he had reached the town. His concentration was all focused on his feet that he had barely even been looking up. Then he tripped down a kerb and almost went sprawling into a parked car. He looked up and saw he was on the High Street. He went to the hotel he'd stayed at before and banged on the door until someone opened it and he fell into their arms like a weary lover.

Waking Up

Elvin woke up in a drawing room, naked except for his watch and a blanket wrapped over his shoulders. His clothes were laid out in front of the fire, its glow warming his face. He sat up and looked around. He dimly recognised it as the lounge at the hotel, the memories of his journey back from the island through the tundra slowly resurfacing in his mind.

The door creaked open and the receptionist from earlier came in. He carried some clothes in his hand.

"Oh, you're awake. I brought you some dry clothes."

Elvin just stared, still too cold and dazed to attempt to speak. The receptionist lay the clothes over a back of a chair, and then placed a pair of shoes on the floor.

"I'm sorry. This was all I could find. I hope it's alright."

He stood there awkwardly for a moment, staring at Elvin, before turning for the door. "I thought you were going to die," he said, and then was gone.

Elvin took the opportunity to lie down and fall back to sleep.

Waking Up

Elvin woke up. The fire had died down to little more than a faint orange glow. He stood up, pulling the blanket tight around him. It was still dark outside. He looked at his watch but it no longer seemed to be working. Elvin looked at the clothes the receptionist had left him. There were no pants or socks, just a pair of smart suit trousers, a white shirt, and a white tuxedo jacket.

Elvin quickly dressed. He felt his socks, but they were still too wet. He slipped the shoes onto his bare feet anyway, and was amazed that they fit. He looked at himself in the mirror above the fire, brushing his bedraggled hair into place with his fingers.

He went back to his soaked clothes on the floor, and searched around in his coat pocket for his cigarettes and his lighter. The cigarettes were all damp anyway, and practically useless.

Elvin slumped down in a voluminous armchair. He slipped the lighter into the tuxedo jacket's pocket, and pulled out some material from within. At first he assumed it was just going to be a handkerchief, but he was delighted when he realised it was a bowtie.

Waking Up

Elvin woke up. Hands held him, carrying him forward by his arms and his legs. As Elvin's mind cleared he realised they were taking him to McBluebeard. He began to panic and struggle, but the hands holding him held firm.

"What are you doing?" Elvin screamed. "Do you know what he is? What he's done?"

There was no reply. They did not slow.

"He's a fucking monster. He's killed everyone. He's killing everyone. All those women. *All those women!* Don't you care?"

Eventually: "We care."

And: "They were our mothers."

And: "Our wives."

And: "This is our punishment."

Elvin screamed in incoherent disgust. And in fear.

The air stank of smoke and blood. Screams of pain mingled together from all directions into a cacophony of despair. Occasionally the sound of cannon fire would rip through everything, although it sounded further away than before. Perhaps McBluebeard had moved up river to level over parts of the town. Elvin could not tell. All he could see was the floor beneath him, changing from concrete to gravel to grass and finally concrete again. Then their hands roughly threw him to the floor and consciousness was knocked from him.

Waking Up

Elvin woke up. He picked himself up from the floor. He could feel blood dripping from a wound on his cheek. Dust and filth and blood had ruined his white tuxedo. His head hurt and his jaw ached and his eyes tried not to focus.

He was by the lake in the park, ducks still running angrily across its frozen surface, seemingly unaffected by the cannon fire and the screams. His two captors stood behind him. One was the receptionist. Elvin didn't recognise the other. Across the lake, on the riverbank, stood a huge crowd of men, hundreds deep. And behind them, drawing nearer, dwarfing them in the early morning light, was McBluebeard's boat.

McBluebeard appeared at the edge of the deck. He threw a rope down to the men on the shore, but Elvin didn't see what they did with it because his eyes were transfixed by McBluebeard. They focused themselves now and stared intently at this monster.

His clothes were ragged tatters, smoke rising languidly from his body. His head was burnt bald, his scalp an ocean of molten flesh, blood and pus bubbling and seeping to the surface. Yet his beard was untouched, looking now even denser and larger and more magnificent in contrast to his weeping pate.

The ship's cannons fired one last time, ripping the crowd of men to shreds. Blood flared into the air, flesh burst, limbs flew. Hundreds died instantly, but scores more were not so lucky. Their maimed and broken bodies crawled and scrambled hopelessly in desperation. Elvin watched on in horror as McBluebeard leapt from the boat to the shore, his huge axe still in his hand. He walked to the nearest living man and swung it down on the poor wretch's screaming skull. McBluebeard bent down to look more closely at the broken mess, pushing the shards of the skull apart. He took a handful of brain and blood and stood up, looking at it closely, a strange look of intense concentration upon his face. Then he wiped his hand on his tattered trousers and strode on, swinging his axe mercilessly into any man that moved, chopping flesh and bone in a frenzy of destruction.

Elvin fell to his knees and vomited until he passed out.

Waking Up

Elvin woke up. McBluebeard still chopped and smashed and screamed on the other side of the lake. He seemed to be slowing his pace, however, and eventually he looked up and saw Elvin.

"ELVIN."

Elvin made no attempt to move.

"ELVIN."

The two men behind Elvin motioned him forward with a push and a shove, and they started leading him around the lake. Elvin looked at the ice, at McBluebeard, at his captors, at McBluebeard again, at the ice, at McBluebeard, and then he turned and stepped out onto the lake. He strode towards McBluebeard, terror looking like confidence in his gait.

Behind him, Elvin's two captors looked uneasily at each other, but made no attempt to follow. In front of him, McBluebeard looked at him and smiled. Slowly, McBluebeard reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a beautiful archaic flintlock pistol. He pointed it at Elvin and fired. The bullet missed him, and flew straight and true into the skull of the receptionist behind him. McBluebeard threw his gun to the floor, and then reached once again into his jacket and pulled out another identical weapon. Again he pointed and fired, again the bullet missed Elvin and exploded instead into the skull of the last living man of Maldon.

Now all that remained was McBluebeard and Elvin.

Climax

McBluebeard threw his pistol away again, and advanced.

"ELVIN."

Elvin stood in the centre of the lake. With every footstep McBluebeard took towards him, Elvin could hear the ice creaking and moaning beneath his feet.

"ELVIN."

McBluebeard stood almost next to Elvin now, towering above him, his axe raised high above his head. The sun must have found a hole in the clouds to peak through, because its rays glinted off the axehead directly into Elvin's squinting eyes.

"ELVIN."

Elvin looked at the blade above him. He closed his eyes. He wished he had a cigarette. He waited.

"ELVIN."

There was a moment of silence then that stretched away to infinity, a tiny pause that Elvin's mind poured into and filled in desperation, hoping to drag out this final moment forever.

"ELVIN."

And then the ground cracked beneath McBluebeard's feet and he fell into the ice-cold waters of the lake.

Collapse

McBluebeard screamed, a long keening sound of terror that sounded like nothing Elvin had ever heard. The colour drained from the great beast's face as the waters slowly leached the warmth from his frame. He flapped his arms around in terror, trying to grab onto the ice for purchase, but the edges of the hole around him kept breaking under his arms as he reached for safety. His clothes and boots filled with water, and as his strength failed he started to sink down into the depths into which his axe had already fallen.

His half-submerged face stared at Elvin for a split second. His eyes were still filled with that nameless fury. His frozen blue lips tried to tremble out his final words, but water surged into his mouth and all he could manage was one final pathetic cough as he began to choke.

And then finally he was gone.

Leaving

The bus wound its way through the rubble and debris and the corpses in the road, and pulled up outside the remains of the church. The doors opened and Elvin stepped inside.

"A single to Chelmsford, please."

"That'll be £4.60, then, mate."

Elvin fumbled in his pocket for change, suddenly realising he'd left his wallet in his soaked trousers at the hotel. He patted the pockets of his tuxedo in hope, and pulled out a metal case from the inside pocket, but all it contained was a single cigarette.

"I, er, I don't have any."

"Ah, well, sorry then mate, but I can't let you on."

Elvin stepped off the bus without complaint. As the bus doors slid closed in front of his face he put the cigarette in his mouth, pulled a lighter from his pocket, and lit it. The bus pulled away, and Elvin watched it leave. All around him the remains of the town flickered with flame, and the snow came down in ever thickening sheets, and soon all that could be seen of Elvin was the tiny prick of light from the tip of his cigarette.

"I still can't believe this fucking town doesn't even have a train station."

Afterword

I'm sorry I got to this concert late, and I hope you can forgive me, Constant Reader, but now I'm here I might as well start. The trouble is, what is there left to say about *McBluebeard*? Those of you who have read through its many odd – very odd, extremely odd, *incredibly* odd – twists and turns hardly need to be told about the oppressive atmosphere throughout, or the groundbreaking, genre-defining central figure of David *McBluebeard*. And those of you who have skipped the novel and moved straight to this afterword should be treated with nothing but contempt. I mean, jeez, Louise. What the hell do you think you're playing at?

Perhaps I should talk about the way David N. Guy has created a work filled with a sense of foreboding, of menace, a work of serious artistic intent that belies its genre trappings. Who could believe a mere fantasy novel could talk so deeply and poignantly about masculinity and unrequited love? The central story can be read as a simple gothic horror novel about murder and mayhem, but look deeper and there is a surprisingly tender exploration of the hidden recesses of the human heart. At times, it moved your ol' Uncle Stevie here to tears.

Or maybe I really should talk about David *McBluebeard*, a character so bold and unique he is without any literary precedent, not even in the many novels that David N. Guy has paid homage to – or, more accurately, stolen from – in this book. The closest I could come to naming a man of similar stature would be Baron Sukumvit from Ian Livingstone's masterly *Deathtrap Dungeon*, but as he was just a peripheral figure in that, the comparison does not really hold.

Or possibly all that can be said is that *McBluebeard* deserves to be held up as proof that Britain isn't all about terrible food and incomprehensible sports and horrible towns filled with awful people. There is so much more to it than that, and all of it is here, in excruciating detail.

Stephen King, Maine, 2009

Appendices

Appendix A: A brief note on the text

Appendix B: Missing Chapters

Appendix A: A brief note on the text

Like all of David N. Guy's works, *McBluebeard* was handwritten on sheets of unnumbered A4 printer paper, usually loosely bound with a single elastic band, and then placed in a cardboard folder, with the name of the project written on the front of the folder in biro, in capital letters, and then circled repeatedly. Occasionally the corners of the folder were covered in hand-drawn geometric shapes, often starting off benignly before degenerating into swastikas and other symbols of abuse and oppression.

The pages themselves were almost always free of mistakes or corrections, suggesting that no alterations had been made, and no second or subsequent drafts had occurred. The only editing of the text seems to be the occasional removal of a chapter or two from the completed manuscript.

The troubles arise when these omitted pages have been left loose in the folders, and it is difficult to tell whether they were intentionally removed by David N. Guy, or whether they had just accidentally fallen free from the elastic band's icy grip that should have been clasped more firmly upon their shoulders.

The lack of page numbering often makes re-inserting these pages into the text difficult, and in the case of *McBluebeard*, the decision was made to keep them separate from the main novel, unlike in the earlier edition of this book (published by Ron Bowers Ltd, 2006), much to the consternation of myself at the time. It was this incident that caused me to resign my position there, and it is with great thanks to Ubbs Spawn Press that I have been able to correct the mistakes of the past within this, hopefully definitive, edition.

The missing chapters are reproduced here (in appendix B), in the order in which they were found in the folder. It is impossible to say if they were ever intended to be part of the finished novel, and as such should not be considered as part of the canonical *McBluebeard*.

Ted Vaaak, Editor, 2009

Appendix B: Missing Chapters

The Infinite Dreams of David McBluebeard

“For a long time, whenever I dreamed I was always aware that I was dreaming, and I either watched the dream with a pleasant sense of detachment, or I could step in and take control of the dream. But slowly, as I’ve grown older, I’ve stopped being aware like that, until now I never am. These days my dreams are terrifyingly real, and when I wake up my heart’s beating so fast it feels like it might explode and the relief I feel on waking is the only thing that keeps me alive.

“And sometimes I wonder if I ever really was aware I was dreaming, or whether I just dreamt I was aware.”

“I don’t understand what the difference would be.”

David McBluebeard paused, stroking his beard in contemplation. “When I try to think about it I usually begin to scream at the thought of all the infinite layers of awareness that might exist, down and up, inside each and every one of our skulls.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Anybody who says they aren’t scared of infinity has never really thought about it.”

Elvin idly wondered if he could shut McBluebeard up by smashing his bottle of beer into the man’s ridiculous face.

Blood

"Where the fuck have you been? I've been trying to get hold of you for fucking hours."

"Sorry, I've been giving blood."

"On a Sunday?"

"Yes."

"Well that's fucking stupid."

"What? No it isn't. I like giving blood."

"What? Why?"

"I lie there and look up out of the skylight – I give blood in a hall of some sort and most of the ceiling is a big window – and it is all just really calming and beautiful."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Sometimes I think how wonderful it would be if they just left me there and my blood slowly drained out and everything would fade out to white and I'd peacefully drift away."

"Have you gone fucking mad?"

"You should give blood, Elvin. It'd do you good."

"My lifestyle precludes it."

Dream 3

Elvin ran and ran blindly down corridors, the smell of blood in his nostrils. He could hear McBluebeard crashing around in pursuit somewhere behind him. He could imagine McBluebeard's monstrous face snorting in rage, his huge axe held up in front of him like a torch to light his way.

Suddenly, Elvin crashed to the floor. Wires were caught around his legs. He tried to take them off but they were caught around his boot. He struggled to remove his boot, panic causing his hands to turn stupid and fumble around cluelessly and hopelessly. After what seemed like an age he managed to pull the shoe off and untangle the wires. He put his boot back on, stood up, and tripped again when he tried to run.

More wires were tangled around his other boot. He removed this too, and underneath it a long golden pixie shoe appeared, unfurling itself like a leaf slowly unfolding in the morning sun. Elvin stared at it in confusion and fear. The wires was connected to the toe, and when he followed it to its conclusion he found it was attached to an old Sega Master System that was sat under a nearby table. Baffled, Elvin tugged at the pixie boot, convinced it wouldn't do any good, yet it slid smoothly off. He threw it away in disgust.

Then he looked up and saw McBluebeard appear at the end of the corridor. Elvin struggled to get his shoe on, the panic even worse now than when he was trying to remove the other one moments earlier. Moments before McBluebeard was on top of him, he got it on and sprinted away.

Turning the corner, he could hear his pursuer cursing and wheezing behind him. Not daring to look back, Elvin ran and ran. He turned into a doorway and found himself in a huge hall filled with an abandoned circus funfair. He ran through it, ignoring his curiosity and not even pausing to look.

In the room beyond there was a miniature bathtub filled with spiders, and Elvin was inexorably drawn towards it. He knelt down and slowly pushed his face into the writhing mass, and then Elvin woke up, moments before the scream could escape his lungs.

The Perfect Joke

“Now I see why they call you *McBluebeard*,” Elvin laughed, as *McBluebeard* sank frozen into the depths of the lake.