

FOUR SHORT STORIES by Jean-Marie Avril

OVERLOADED WITH GIFTS

Bernard woke up this morning very, very refreshed. His wife made him, for once, a breakfast, which she brought up to him in the bedroom. She hugged him and kissed him to the point of suffocating him, and she was sighing: "Oh Fuck me! Fuck me, my love! Fuck me! Fuck me!" And Bernard said: "All right! Take it easy babe! I've got to get ready for work!" And he had to unwillingly drag her to the bathroom, as she would not let go of his leg. Eventually, he had to consent to do the business while taking his shower. Then Bernard returned to the bedroom to eat his breakfast. His wife was masturbating in the shower, apparently not satiated and not satiable. Bernard could hardly finish his breakfast as a rain of hugs and kisses assaulted him from his two daughters and one son. The kids said: "Oh dad! We love you so much!" And Bernard replied: "Ok kids! Take it easy! Daddy's got to get ready for work!"

In the taxi taking him to work, the driver, who was desperate to pay the commuter's ride, constantly begged Bernard to have a free ride. Bernard would have none of it: "That's quite all right, driver! I appreciate your offer but, really, I think it would be more appropriate if I was paying with my own money the fee I owe you." The taxi driver was insistent: "No pal, you keep your change! A fine man like you deserves a free ride!" And Bernard felt he could not stand a chance against the generous stubborn mind of the cab driver and let the latter pay for his ride fee, and Bernard was plainly astonished at the sudden generosity of this unknown fellow.

When Bernard entered the precincts of the CYBERSPACE SURVEILLANCE ENTERPRISE branch in which he worked, the security guard greeted him in this fashion: "Oh good morning Mister Campbell! Do you need some refreshment of some sort? I'll make you a coffee. In fact, I'll make you a coffee for each of your breaks, all right?" Bernard replied to the over-zealous security guard: "One coffee is just fine, James. But you do not need to exert yourself in making me coffee all the time..." The security guard interrupted him: "No, no! It's my pleasure Sir. Well, I better make that coffee now and make some adaptations as I'll have to make you coffee for each of your breaks." On this, the security guard ran to the coffee machine, leaving an utterly astonished Bernard wondering what the hell was wrong with that man.

In his office, his manager and direct boss, Charles Brown, who complimented his subordinate in those terms, greeted Bernard: "How proud we are to have you, Bernard! You are one of our most formidable assets and the company has agreed to offer you a more prestigious position of your choice." Bernard, even more taken aback, replied he would not mind being the second in charge of the City Company Archives. He knew such a position was presently vacant. But Bernard's boss claimed that such a position was not doing any justice to his subordinate. "You could be in charge of the whole archive section, nationwide my friend. I'm going to do whatever I can for you to get to that place. And I won't take no for an answer." And Bernard was dismissed.

He could not help thinking he was quite qualified enough, let alone sufficiently experienced, for such a position. He started thinking: "What's going on today? Why is everyone so kind to me? What is goddamn going on today?" Bernard thought of doing an experiment. He went to his boss's office and asked: "Sorry Mister Brown, but would mind if I fetch myself a cup of coffee before starting work? I--" The manager interrupted him: "Call me 'James', Bernard. I tell you dear chap! I'm going to get that cup of coffee for you." Bernard tried to decline the offer: "That's quite all right, Mister Brown... Sorry... James, but..." "No, no!" insisted James the manager. "You take my seat and wait for me here. Good man!" Bernard was starting to utter his reply, but his boss was too fast as he rushed out of his office to get that cup of coffee for his subordinate.

So Bernard, totally dumbfounded, sat in his manager's chair. Pretty much right away, his manager's female secretary entered her boss's office. She was Jana, aged 27, sexy in a kind of smart way, ginger haired and presently behaving like Sharon Stone in the first BASIC INSTINCT movie. She told the employee, more discomfited than ever: "Come on Bernard! Undress! I want to fuck you right away. You're so cute..." Bernard, totally paralyzed, had just completed the formulation of his: "What? Excuse me..." when she jumped onto him, tearing bits and pieces of his clothes apart and scattering away the items once tranquil in their passive inhabitation of the working desk. Jana managed also to get her computer's PC to fall off the piece of office furniture.

Among a pandemonium of: "Mmh... I want to fuck you so much, Bernard." And a series of Bernard-voiced futile protestations, the manager returned to his office with the coffee intended for his subordinate, now under the assertive amorous embraces of the female secretary. James said: "Oh, what a surprise. That's quite all right, old chap. You carry on and I'll return later with a new cup of coffee for you." Bernard,

vainly, cried for help: "No, Mister Brown. For, Christ's sake, what's happening today to all of you guys?" But the manager left the office as quickly as before, implying he didn't have the intention to hear any more of his subordinate, or it might well be that Bernard was simply ignored and not even counted as an autonomous factor in that odd office scene. The subordinate was simply raped by Jana, his manager's secretary.

He eventually succeeded to leave after the completion of the business, when Jack, personnel's assistant director, saw him running down the corridor. "Bernard," he said, "I love you, you know. Bernard, I cannot help thinking about you all the time. I'm going to make sure my present boyfriend and I will split and—you know what, Bernard?—you and I are going to start a relationship." Bernard, dishevelled and wondering whether this was a dream or not, didn't even consider to respond. He simply kind of looked like he lost his marbles all of a sudden as he was seen staring rushing down the stairs as if performing some sort of running race, screaming: "No, no! What do you all want of me? What're you like this to me? What have I done?" Bernard had to struggle to leave the company building, as the same security guard from earlier would not let go of him, insisting on making a new cup of coffee to his superior in the social hierarchy of the company.

Once in a taxi, Bernard realized that the driver he had asked to take him back home was the same one that took him to his workplace earlier on. The cab driver told Bernard: "Wow, it's you again! Cool man. It's gonna be on me again! What? It's okay pal. Don't worry about paying me. I know damn well a guy like you deserves a free ride." Arriving in front of his house, Bernard frantically searched for his wallet, ejaculating some money: "Hey, no! Wait, driver!" But the driver drove off, uttering an admiration-enshrined pledge: "Have a nice day, buddy! Any time you want a free ride, I'll give you one." And in his house, Bernard realized there were people inside, busy with the preparations of what looked like was going to be a big time party. His wife greeted him: "Hi, darling, this is for tonight. I'm going to celebrate, with you, my love for you. Come on, irresistible darling. Let's make love while they all watch." "No!" screamed Bernard. "Get me out of here!"

And he ran into the street and was run over by the same generous taxi driver who insisted, in his trial, to be given the death sentence for having killed accidentally such a fine man as Bernard Campbell. The trial was a news sensation nationwide and his funeral was broadcast in the entire country

before the rest of the planet showed impatiently an eager interest in such a fine man as Bernard Campbell...

THE DEVIL'S SPARKS

Once upon a time, London, 2013... Jonathan, smart, in his mid thirties, brown haired and a white man, was in his luxurious apartment in Canary Wharf. He was a very gifted person, a genius in information technology, directing a group of I.T. scientists and engineers in the London branch of Microsoft. So there in his accommodations was the brilliant, prodigal son that was Jonathan Sharks and above him hung the portrait of Bill Gates the Father as he was now affectionately and devotionally named by computer scientists, including his enemies. Gates was indeed the Father of the Web. Needless to say, Sharks had a really good income, able to afford holiday packages or solitary travels in remoter parts of the world. His life was parties, computer work, computer and virtual and cyber philosophy and speculation. Sharks had a remarkable imaginative faculty and was equally, unknown to all as he kept the secret for himself, an excellent medium. He could clearly see the astral whereas the average occultist, clairvoyant or priest could hardly distinguish intermediate objectivity from the hideously reflected phantasms of his or her imagination. Characteristic of Sharks was also this sentimental compassion that culminated in the ONE WORLD, ONE PEACE movement reaching global proportions after the crazed year of 2012. This movement was the rally of all sorts of humanitarian utopists, wishful thinkers and well off fellows whose souls were growing tired of the nanny state, cyber heavens and the dreadful news of the struggle for life taking place in less favored sectors of the country and the planet. Tony and Cherie, especially her, had managed to recycle themselves into the globalist neo-spiritual messianic fervor among others. So Sharks was part of that world community animated by the need to love and be loved.

In that fateful year of 2013, that neo-1968 year right after the neo-Summer of Love that 2012 was, the medium sight of our Canary Wharf lodging protagonist noticed, at first gradually and then quite intensely, the presence of things in the astral. He called these "the sparks." Intense, countless entities seemingly lost, aimlessly drifting in the intermediate spheres, crying their pain and Sharks could feel the sorrows animating the non-embodied beings. The pain was so intense, so acute, so terrible that Sharks could only emphasize with the torment of those souls crying, screaming

for incarnation. For embodiment would mean an end to this endless and aimless drifting, wandering in the astral. Carnal rooted-ness was the remedy. Better a rooted pain than this subtle homelessness. At least, on Earth, the sparks could belong to the plane of denser matter. Plus, matter was also an opportunity to advance in the school of evolution, for random floating about in the animistic dimension prevents any chance of progression for those disembodied creatures. It was imperative the sparks could transcend their astral limbo.

So, Jonathan Sharks, smart imaginative computer scientist and master of cyberspace, wondered about the possibility he could have to help redeem those poor devils in their astral ocean, too conscious to be happy living as psychic fishes, so to speak. How he could relieve his own tormented compassion? Where was the housing aid for those astral tramps? And, gradually, from the tiny cell created by the spermatozoon in the ovum, growing fetus-like and then becoming the baby, so the idea germinated in his sentimental and brilliant mind. Yes! EUREKA! If he couldn't find a dense matter body for those souls, those sparks, he at least could help them to get halfway between the astral and the world of carnation, and this solution was cyberspace. At least, the sparks could inhabit the Web and interact with computer users. A fantastic concept nearly fried his mind. This totally new software, both based on ancient mathematics of bygone esotericisms and the cutting edge research of Microsoft, would allow the sparks to enter and live in cyberspace and communicate with the earthlings. The muses would do their job concerning the future release of the sparks from cyberspace into the freedom and the rooted-ness of the flesh. So the virtual world was like a compromise, a temporary one, between the astral despair of ghostly existence and the incarnation into good old-fashioned atoms and molecules. And then, the idea became a mega, a hyper prowess of imagination. Yet he got from A to Z the entirety of the mad invention. He would christen it the CYBER SPARKS SOFTWARE. Jonathan was fuelled with so much energy, so much enthusiasm, and so much emotion of happiness and 21st century Good Samaritan feelings that he didn't waste time. He started working on his new project right away and he worked hard at it. A few days... A few weeks... So skilled was our genius the astral beings trembled with anticipation.

Then the product was finalized as the cyber birth of the virtual companion, the electronic rebirth of the imaginary companion or friend of past childhoods. Not only would Sharks help relieve the pain of the sparks, he would also help millions of adults retrieve their imaginary friend in the miracle of cyberspace. The program, this new software, would generate the electronic materialization of the cherished childhood fantasy on a computer screen. A finalization as a

cyberspace product. It didn't take long for Microsoft to patent, manufacture and commercialize the idea. This was the ideal toy for the people of the ONE WORLD, ONE PEACE movement and Cherie Blair was wetting herself when contemplating this new invention. And so, towards the end of 2013, fast approaching January the 1st, 2014, a global launch of CYBER SPARKS SOFTWARE was going to take place, nationally, continentally and globally for those who could afford the exorbitant price, and there were quite a few of those.

Hundred of thousands of cyber fans, the privileged weepers of 2012 the world over, would simultaneously take place in and witness the virtual re-birth of the imaginary friend, electronic combination of mathematics and silicon beyond the comprehension of the present writer. Of course, the essences of those virtual companions were the sparks drifting in the astral, desperate to belong, overwhelmed by the pain of psychic homelessness, as such perceived by Jonathan Sharks in their sorrowful wandering. The heart-bleeding compassion of 2012 would find fulfillment in the eyes watering communion with the electronic companion, and Sharks was weeping of joy and relief. The countdown to the launch commenced and, the world over, they all put on those electronic spectacles to allow for a 3-dimensional interaction as if the computer user and operator was placed inside the mind, the hardware or software of the machine so to speak.

Here they went... Simultaneously, after a well-orchestrated publicity campaign, hundreds of thousands of people put the cyberglasses on and found themselves in the mind of the machine. In this global interface, the liberal, the fashionable, the bored, the sentimental and many other elements of the planetary middle and upper classes were taking part in this communion of the electronic Global Village with the re-emerging imaginary friends of past childhood, all witnessing the coming of the sparks from the astral into the silicon-based magic of the virtual space. And those imaginary companions did arrive. The thing was, it wasn't blond haired, blue eyed, sweet oriental-looking, beautiful curly haired and pretty shiny ebony angels, each fantasized and envisioned according to ethnic specifics that materialized in the world of electrons dancing on a computer screen. The vainly hoped for, Victorian cherubim revisited a la multiculturalism was not visible on the screen. Instead were countless black triangles, squares and rectangles as well as more exotic and deformed geometrical shapes. And there were the terrifying many eyes in the triangles. The feeling was not one of peace, love and solidarity but a non-communicable sentiment and sensation of doom, an utter, inexpressible fatality made of electronic vampires feeding on the humanitarian hopes and

fantasies as well as the liberal escapism of an entire segment of a well off generation, on a planetary scale.

The sparks were repugnant from A to Z, immoral and blasphemous human-hating forms shattering for good the fragile and misplaced ideal(s) of and belief in the Global Village of Fraternity. The nebulous dream became an objective nightmare and the belief that the road to hell was paved with good intentions had been a thing of the past, except Jonathan Sharks re-actualized it in his non-discriminative compassion of the global experience of 2012.

Now Sharks could see and realize the horror of his product and invention. Alas, he was not psychologically structured in the way reactionaries are, and the terror displaced, dislocated him. He became homeless in this unheard of abomination. And yet, it used to be known to ancient prophets and priests of polytheistic and monotheistic faiths, from the deserts of Australia to the ice of Norway, from the turbulence of the Middle East to the temperate rains of Atlantic Europe, from the luxurious jungles surrounding the Mayas to the cool contemplation of Tao bathed China, from the peace of South India to the stern and ruthless Zen logic of Japan. All of them, former druids and shamans, old rabbis and imams, Greek philosophers and priests of Shiva knew of the terrible realities not to be tampered with. But the amnesia engendered by the miracle of technology and utopian socialism eradicated that knowledge. Only the dusty mullahs of Afghanistan and the bigots of the Mid West were trumpeting fanatically the abhorred beliefs.

At the same time as Sharks was drowning in this hell he could not map, thousands of computer users on all of the continents, Africa being the less affected and Antarctica being out of the picture, so a sheer number of the children of 2012 became depressed, suicidal, psychotic and either committed suicide, murder or lost sanity for ever, their psyche disintegrated under the unbelievable ferocity and evil present in the black geometricals invading the 3-D spectacles. The global interface of CYBER SPARKS SOFTWARE imploded. Hundreds of thousands of well off families, the hopes of Europe, Japan, China, India and the Americas were hacked to death, gunned down, electrocuted by the computer user become a hysterical killer. Jonathan Sharks could not stand his debt of responsibility in this global affair, for his excellent medium sight could discern the planetary torment taking place. He had opened the gates to the Devil's sparks and he couldn't bear the weight of his guilt. From the altitude of his high-located apartment in one of the towers of Canary Wharf, he jumped into the void and crashed down, many stories below. He was dead.

THE OVAL MIRROR

That room had a mirror, an oval one and it got my attention. This room was a fairly normal one, a sort of side room located in a local pub somewhere in Gloucestershire. To the bottom left, that is, when entering this space from the pub entry corridor, was a wooden chair and a wooden table. A bigger table with a few more seats was situated to the bottom right. Another table was placed close to the left wall. In the middle of this left wall, the old fireplace reigned and opposite it was a window allowing the customer to see the street outside. The walls were decorated with reproductions of extremely dull and unimaginative paintings. Above the fireplace, the oval mirror was practicing its dubious magic. I was there with my colleagues of the writing group we had to do some exercise during the night's meeting. The thing is, or should I write, the thing was, I could not concentrate on anything save that mirror holding my attention. It had hypnotized me in focussing on its sole presence. And there I was, gazing at that banal-looking oval looking-glass. The ovalness of the thing was kind of horizontal. And I started daydreaming. I thought I saw a fish or something like a fish, and it was multicolored with black pentagrams scattered here and there on the surface of this aquatic animal. Those geometrical figures commenced rotating anticlockwise. The rotation accelerated and my mind was absorbed into a gradual vertigo that began to shock my sanity. I was feeling an otherworldly presence behind the fish that stood still in the oval looking-glass, unless the cursed mirror was the animal itself. The presence then entered my mind and I cannot describe, i.e. the presence, except for that utter quality of extreme alien-ness, and by it I don't mean some banal Grey out of an average flying saucer. Those space goblins were too familiar in contemporary postmodern mythology to be designated as strangers. But that presence was just other. How do you put a map on something that is completely impossible to map, due to the absence of any set of references, even the most remotely known to your frame of knowledge. It's not like the HEART OF DARKNESS in which there are trees, non-Christian Black tribes and animals. The novel is only the HEART OF DARKNESS because there's no bank and no western outpost dedicated to king and country has yet been established. No, it simply escaped any attempt to put a label on it, apart from the vague term "presence," the formulation of which was the

outcome of nothing more precise than a feeling. And then, it gradually receded and I returned to my three-dimensional perceived sphere of "normal," consensus reality. And my colleagues told me:

"You were sort of daydreaming like... Any fantastic idea of a novel germinating in your mind?"

I replied: "No."

They wondered: "No?"

I added: "I cannot describe it."

They asked: "What?"

I simply answered: "It."

JON WILLIAMSON IS A DRUNKARD

It's damn freezing cold outside. It's the week before Christmas and the day is the 17th of December. It's blue sky. There is carol-singing in the evening. The MOKA owner is tall, with dark hair, enigmatic and handsome. He bought MOKA a week ago. Milly works in MOKA, and she is an employee from the previous owner. She is well known among the locals. Milly is plain, speaking with a Yorkshire accent, short of size and possessing brown hair. Wendy, another employee, is tall, slim, brown eyed, brown haired and attractive. Bekka has long red hair, possesses green eyes, is narcissistic, moody, bitchy and has a crush on Jack, the new owner.

One of the waitresses says: "Hi, Mr Williamson."

Jon answers: "All right love! I'll have a cappuccino and a plain cheese panini."

She replies: "Certainly."

Then Jon Williamson thinks to himself: "Damn hangover! Bloody damn hangover! Oh, I can't go on like that anymore. I can't stand it any further. But what can I do? I love the goddamn ale. But who knows how much it cost me last night? And of course, I was sleeping this morning and I didn't open the shop."

The coffee shop's new owner, Jack, makes an appearance and says to Jon: "Hello, Mr Williams. I went to your shop this morning but it wasn't open."

Jon answers: "Oh hello... Yes, indeed... The shop wasn't open... Ahem... I had to do some job inside, you see..."

Jack says: "No problem."

Jon resumes his thinking monologue: "If he knew. He's only newly settled in the area. He doesn't know I drink like a fish. They call me HIT-THE-BOTTLE down here. Like: 'Oh, it's Hit-the-Bottle again. Yes, he spent last night down in the police station, in a cell exactly.' Or 'Oh yes his shop is not

open. He must be recovering from some hangover.' And the young fellows 'round here, they call me FATHER JACK after the Irish comedy taking the mickey of those priests. It used to be on Channel Four. Oh why is my bum aching so much? Oh yeah, there was this bird. 40 something. Bloody hell. Prettier than Joan Collins. That was in this new pub up Montpellier. Oh yeah. I went to grab her for there was this cool tune to dance to. Sure, I was drunk, but I wasn't bad in my motivation. And then what happens?"

The waitress returns with Jon's order: "here you are: Cappuccino and a plain cheese panini."

He says: "Thanks love. Oh you're pretty this morning. A nice lovely girl you are."

She starts blushing: "Oh Mr Williamson. You have a silver tongue."

He says: "No, no... I mean it. You're a lovely, lovely pretty bird."

The waitress answers: "I must return to the counter. Oh, Mr Williamson, you're such a charmer. I must go now."

Jon replies: "Yes you do, You're a good girl. Thanks for the cappuccino and the plain cheese panini."

And he returns to his thoughts: "Where was I? Oh yeah, I grab the bird and then we fall on this table, and the bouncer takes me by the collar and throws me out by kicking me up in the arse. Bastard. I didn't mean to fall on that table. I only wanted to dance with the bird as I was in a silly mood. What did she yell? Oh yeah—that I assaulted her. That's not true as I only wanted to dance with her. Where did I go after that? I looked at my clothes an hour ago and they were covered with mud and stinking vomit. I must have fallen into some ditch. Bloody hell. At least the alcohol kept me warm for it must have been damn freezing last night. It's bloody freezing cold outside. God, I need this cappuccino. I feel like a zombie."

Jon drinks the black beverage, producing some funny gulping noises. The posh lady at the table opposite him looked at him with disdain. He didn't notice.

The above-mentioned waitress returns to his table.

She says: "Finished your cup already? Would you like another one?"

He answers: "Oh yes please. Ah, you're such a kind hearted girl. A really good person you are. And so lovely, lovely, lovely..."

And she replies: "Oh, Mr Williamson. Oh, Oh..."

She leaves to fetch him a new cappuccino and he goes back to his train of thought: "I'm not going to open the shop today. Damn! Damn! Damn! I'm losing money. I've got to quit the

drink. But I can't! I can't! The wife left me and she still loves me and would gladly return to me if it wasn't for me drinking. My son don't talk to me anymore and he's making money in America. There's only my daughter checking up on me now and again. Good girl she is. She saved my shop more than once with her correcting the accountancy and all that. But she's gonna be pretty busy with her baby coming. God, I'm gonna be a granddad. God damn it. I've got to rectify my behavior. Oh yeah—it shows on her belly and she won't be able to help for a considerable while after she gives birth. Shit. I cannot go on and be a drunkard granddad. What would the grandson or the granddaughter think? My son-in-law is unable to help, busy like he is with his job. Plus, he's setting up one of their rooms as the baby's bedroom. Shit, shit, shit. I ain't collected anything for two months. Too busy drinking and spending my money on the ale. All I've got left is the old junk stored in the cellar, the living room and the attic. God. I'm so zombie-like. I need this cappuccino."

Jon drinks his cappuccino, again emitting gulping sounds. The posh granny looks at him again and you could think she's a reincarnation of Queen Victoria mixed up with the now senile eyes of Margaret Thatcher. She stares at him in disgust and you wonder if she's not gonna explode in fury and outrage. But no—she keeps her lips stiff but the passing ghost swears he has seen smoke coming out of her ears.

Jon says, a bit loudly: "Hey love. A new cappuccino please."
The waitress says: "Certainly."
He says: "Good girl."
The posh granny again stares at him. She's nonplussed.

And Williamson operates an introspection back to his muddled thinking: "Oh yeah, all my antic junk in the attic and the cellar and the living room. Oh bloody, bloody, bloody hell. I've got so much to do. Where to start? Oh yeah, there's those dead rats in the cellar. Good rat poison by the way. The thing is... I can't stand rats, dead or alive. Give me the shivers! Creepy filthy little bastards! I want to drink when I think of them but I need to sort out the junk in the cellar. I could call the Council to ask them to remove the vermin out of my way. But if I do that, it's gonna cost shit loads. Damn! On the other hand, I could sort out the junk in the attic, but there are all the cobwebs and the spiders. I can't stomach spiders either. And all the dust to clean away. Oh so much work to do. I've got to have a drink pretty soon. No, no. You can't do that. I've got to sort myself out and I've got to pay the bills. Shit! So many bills I've got. So much to do. I've practically spent half the council money in the ale. Got to drink that cappuccino."

And here we go again. The cappuccino is quickly drunk and the gulping sounds shatter again the stiff-lips serenity of the old lady. This time, she starts twitching her lips and great is the temptation for her to utter a protest. But she refrains from doing so though her frail feet begin tapping the floor, maniacally.

Jon orders a new cup of cappuccino and the waitress again brings the ordered hot drink to the shop keeper. He says: "You are a such lovely lovely lovely lovely lovely lovely girl."

And she says, blushing: "Oh, Mr Williamson. Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh." The non-approving lady's hands start to tremble.

And we're back to Jon's thoughts: "What am I gonna do. I could go to the car boot sale held at the Race course this Sunday. But then I would have to get up pretty early and Saturday night is drinking time. Especially this Saturday coming. It's Mike's birthday. I'll be pissed with the lads again. So no I won't go to the car boot sale. Not this Sunday at least. Ah... I wish I could win the lottery. But I always forget to buy the bloody ticket as I end up buying a pint instead. I wish I could meet a rich bird. I've only slept with female pissheads since the wife deserted me. And the female pissheads ain't cheap either. You've got to buy all those drinks if you want them in your bed. And it's costly. The thing is... I love my wife. How can she have supported me all those years. Sober like a nun she is. I bet me spending her savings in the ale must have been the last straw. Poor Gertrude! She still loves me. I have to stop drinking. And when I look at my face in the mirror, I see an old man with all the red marks showing on the skin. I look like a tramp. Always wearing the same clothes..."

Jon continues ordering cappuccino, drinking it with the gulp and upsetting the old lady.

Jon's thoughts continue: "Oh no. I forgot it's bloody Christmas coming. Bloody hell. I ain't prepared anything. Well let's not get into a panic. I've got plenty of things in the attic, the basement and the living room. I've got those all those chairs and my son-in-law could get them. The daughter could be satisfied with all those old dolls I collected a while ago. My son I am sure won't mind getting an entire collection of THE SELECT'S DIGEST from the seventies. I'll get my dad a few books on military shit and my mum will be happy with the plastic flowers and the old bibles. Yeah, but I still have to clear the room of the dead rats and the spiders and the dust. Damn! How will I carry out the task? Right old fellow! Don't get into a panic. Sit down and relax. Have a few more of those cappuccinos and then get in

the pub and get pissed on ale. I'll then get the courage to clear my mess up. I'll pick up the dead rats and the spiders and the cobwebs. I'll clear away the dust. I'll take what I've got to take. I've still got plenty of old wrapping paper. In fact, I've got loads of Christmas junk I can use and re-use. I won't be bothered by the rats as I will be off my head with the ale. I put some music on. I'll play THE KING and Elvis will get me to rock and roll and let's twist again. That's it! It's all planned now."

Jon continues to orders a few more cappuccinos, teasing the waitress.

"Oh yes! You're a lovely lovely lovely girl. A pretty bird like you is not the run of the mill. Oh yes, I could do things with you. Naughty naughty girl."

The girl emits: "Oh! Mr Williamson! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh no, you can't go on like that. Oh, you are a teaser. You're very teasing. You're such a silver-tongued customer you are. Oh! Oh!"

The old lady, increasingly annoyed with all this nonsense, starts tapping the table with her fingers hard enough that an audible sound can be heard. Jon returns to his thoughts now satisfied with his plan to get pissed and clear his rooms of the dead rats and the cobwebs. He would then choose the Christmas presents for his dear ones and that would be the end of it as far as preparing for Christmas was concerned. He is also shaking due to the strong cappuccinos rummaging through his nervous system. He burps and farts a few times. The old lady then has something like a seizure and she falls off the chair. Hearing the fall, Jon gets up and helps the lady get up, holding her up, his shakiness turning the woman into a pneumatic drill. The lady sits down and stares at the annoying man and she is as white as a corpse, shaking maniacally. He says: "That's all right love! I know you're a bit shaky and all that. You'll be all right love. Trust me on that."

And the old lady starts screaming like a wild rabid animal. Everybody begins to stare at her. And Jon says: "All right love! All right love! I only wanted to help. Good lord..."

And he walks off, out and down the street.