

## PRY IN THE SKY

If a visitor from the planet Zog were to hover over South London, in a Zoggelin perhaps, and if he, she or it had the technology (imagine an affective equivalent of the implements geophiz deploy on *Time Team* to find out what is beneath the soil), and with it the attendant curiosity and perseverance, then she, he or it would surely detect several flows of emotional and occasionally manic energy drifting together and apart, and then together again like miniature tectonic plates. The hoverer – it, for convenience – would be able to map these disturbances that so trembled South London and to apportion their impulses to events that had taken place, not so very long ago, at a certain kitchen gizmos operation.

If it is to be it, then it would trace, first, the progress of Marcus Friend, formerly a middle manager at the said kitchen gizmos place and now the founder and mainspring of the Beliefs Club as well as occasional sin-eater. On board the Zoggelin is the wherewithal to analyze brain and emotional activity and so our observer would soon become aware that fathering a child is foremost among Marcus' concerns. What is not yet clear is who the mother will be in the event of a happy event. Will it be yellow-loving partner Kate or a woman Marcus once knew very well before she went out of his life, or another woman altogether? Being possessed of at least second sight the Zoggian will work out the answer instantly but the rest of us must wait to learn the score. Geophiz was never like this.

With its anachronistic echoes of Gaudi – all those colliding verticals and diagonals – the Psychologists' Hall of Fame will always attract passing pryers even if the surrounding purlieus could never be mistaken for Barcelona. Were the hoverer from Zog to station itself directly above the museum it would be able

to float comfortably in the soft gusts of hot air that rise more or less continually during the hours of 10 to 7 (9 on Friday evenings, 4 on Sundays). Thus positioned, it might sense with growing bemusement the machinations of Dr Brygid Szymanski, once a trick cyclist at the kitchen gizmos place, now second curator of the museum and yet to get her feet under the desk. With bemusement goes the chatter of the readout. What are these patterns the Zoggian pilot can discern? The shade of Dr Clive Mewles, formerly head trick cyclist at the kitchen gizmos place and first curator of the Hall of Fame, would likely be the light cross-hatching but what would those dark blobs be? One blob would have to be Clive's identical twin Gerald and the other almost certainly Clive's former number two at the kitchen gizmos place – the boy from Bloemfontein, the late Dr Jamie Blenkinson aka Sri Blenkyavan aka Sribeebie. What trouble they tried to stir up! What havoc they tried to wreak!! The extent of it our recorder would only be able to guess at. Wasn't there a doppelganger involved too? Perhaps there was, perhaps there wasn't. Doppelgangers, by their very nature, leave no trace. As for Clive and Gerald, if the hoverer were to drift a few miles south and sit over 9 Dagobert Avenue, Streatham, it would note from the violent oscillations on the readout that those two are not finished with each other – not by a long chalk.

A stone's throw from the Hall of Fame, although that might not mean much to anyone from Zog, in a parade of premises furnished with a top-of-the-range Blockbusters store and home to all kinds of mind therapists, our extra-terrestrial Harold the Helicopter would not fail to pick up the loud vibrations exuded by the grotesquely ambitious Toby Buzzard, Brygid's squeeze and son of Dr Bob, and by the emotional maelstrom that is Julie Owens, formerly PA to both Marcus and Clive and now a movie and aversion therapist. The snoop in the sky might conclude that a single parade could not possibly produce any more excitations but it would be wrong. For there would be another feature present, hard to pick out at first but definitely there, a wavy line running at an angle across all the other features. It is what geophiz would call

an ‘anomaly’. Although mysterious by nature such patterns have been studied. In particular, they have been linked to persons who insist on behaving differently from others. Take a bow Dr Richard Rollins, philosophical counsellor and Schopenhauer’s greatest fan, the Socratic shrink who Julie once consulted about kicking her gambling habit. Richard and Julie – what history, what a couple! To fully comprehend the antics of this modern day Beatrice and Benedict our Zoggian pilot would need to spend days, weeks even, studying the record. Not that time is an issue. There is all the time in the world – at least in someone else’s world. Zog time runs at a tenth the speed of Earth time.

And so, gradually but with increasing sharpness, the impact and interplay and sometimes resolution of all these forces would emerge with clarity from the psychological murk (or guff as Marcus would put it). As for the players, Marcus and the rest, their destiny is the same however they arrive there. The deckchair attendant may set out the deckchairs so as to catch the sun but that thoughtful endeavour is of no consequence given what is waiting on up the road. The inhabitants of Zog may face a different fate; we have no way of telling. Perhaps they know the Grim Reaper as something else altogether; maybe a star constellation, a scythe of stars, of no more or less interest to them than the Big Dipper is to us. Perhaps for them the Grim Reaper is a totemic farmer of stern visage commanding the Zog landscape like an Easter Island statue. Perhaps and perhaps – the conjecture could go on until the cows come home, or whatever they have grazing on Zog. It is time – in whoever’s time – to draw back the curtains, strike up the music, and invite our elevated observer to take in the human comedy that is about to unfold.

## AT THE GREAT GRAND BAZAAR

The airborne observer would know that while it may not be valued on Zog the capacity to surprise is one of the great human traits. Nothing in Marcus' immediate or even distant background – middle manager at the kitchen gizmos place, enthusiastic scuba diver, and devotee of women taller than himself – offered the slightest clue that he would be the person to dream up and then launch the Beliefs Club. But that is what he did, and now, six months in, the Club is thriving. If some augury of commercial drive must be found, because we all like a tidy story, then a cluette might be that his father, Reginald Friend, ran a stamp import and export business. Not a very successful business, it has to be said. It may have been the heyday of stamp collecting yet the business consistently bumped along the bottom year after year. But Marcus saw that a business of sorts was being run and filed away an intention to do better. A small dark attractive bloke with chiselled Italianate features (think the actor Jeremy Northam) Marcus would not like to think that he inherited anything from Fat Reg but whether he did or didn't – and he must have inherited something if the aforesaid was his biological father, something Marcus doubted from time to time – there is nothing he can do about it now. As George Eliot said, “We cannot reform our forefathers”.

Marcus always refers to his baby – his baby? – as the Beliefs Club and never (although others do) as the Beliefs Agency. The last thing he wants is for people to think it is an arm of the Government. The way it works is that if you have a belief, say that the world was created by a ladybird, then you register your belief with Marcus and, if you want, and for an extra fee, he will put you

in touch with all others registered with him who share your belief, or perhaps all those within a thirty-mile radius, or over the age of 50 who share your belief, or whatever it is you care to specify. You might want to add in your application that on no account should ladybirds be wantonly trodden on but it must be understood that is a plea, not a belief.

There is a wide menu to choose from at the Beliefs Club. Beliefs are classified according to a raft of categories – domestic, historical, political, geographical/geological, health, social and so forth. Under ‘domestic’ you might find a group that believes that putting a spoon in your mouth while peeling an onion stops you crying or a group that believes you must chew your food at least 40 times to promote efficient digestion. Under ‘political’ there is a group that believes that Neil Kinnock lost the 1992 election through premature triumphalism. They call themselves the ‘You blew it boyo’ group. Another group – of boyos, as it happens, plus some girlos – wants to go further back in time: the boyos and girlos believe that Lloyd George’s reputation has been unfairly sullied over the 1922 honours for cash scandal. They call themselves the ‘LG was not a twister’ group and are particularly strong in mid-Wales. The health section is notable for containing quite a few groups that wish through their beliefs to challenge political correctness and what they see as conventional wisdom. Such a group is the ‘Junk food does no harm’ group. As might be expected, the geographical/geological section is quite rich in groups. The flat-earthers are there, of course, also those who believe that the super-volcano that is Yellowstone will go off some time in the next 500 years (too bad they won’t be around to see if their belief comes true) and those who believe that Vesuvius will go off any time soon. Those are just some of the groups in Marcus’ Beliefs Club. As you would expect, fashions and fads come along all the time. It must be the prospect of landing on Mars again that has surfaced all the green bug-eyed monsters talk, especially the belief that they are more intelligent than us and would certainly win the World Cup at the first attempt even if they played 1-7-2.

If you are just a one belief merchant you can probably find a website that suits, but for those harbouring many beliefs – which is most people – what Marcus gives you is one-stop shopping. Just this morning someone emailed him asking to be put in touch with (a) people who believe that swallowing bat urine is good for the skin, (b) people who believe that eating a round wafer and taking a sip of some appalling red wine that winos wouldn't touch is to partake of the flesh and blood of a certain long dead person from the neighbourhood of Nazareth, and (c) people who believe that the best way of opening a beer bottle is with what you've got down below. This person, call him X, said he would be particularly interested in contacting anyone within eight miles – he was quite specific about the distance – who, like him, holds all three beliefs. Marcus had to point out that the number believing in (b) is so huge that he couldn't, on this occasion, put X in touch with all of them even within eight miles. Marcus much prefers dealing with intersecting sets, the more the better, because, of course, it keeps the contacting traffic down. It must be possible to count on the fingers of one hand the number of people who believe simultaneously in (a), (b) and (c).

Being more or less wholly non-evaluative, Marcus is the ideal person to run a Beliefs Club. He knows there are intemperate exchanges among the bloggers but he leaves them to their own devices – how could he do otherwise? If you pressed him he would say something along the lines of 'I can believe what I want, and so can you. Why should I have to believe according to your or anyone else's rules?' It's a bazaar where belief is concerned, a huge many-stalled bazaar. Beside it the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul looks like one of those portable refreshment trolleys that are hauled through railway carriages. All points of view are up for scrutiny. Some like totalitarian thought, others beg to differ. The thing is to weigh up the goods. What is so self-evidently right about being a libertarian or a free thinker? Pope Benedict has opined that reason and faith must march hand in hand and that there is no place in religion for violence, which he says is irrational. In particular,

violence should never be used to coerce people into religious activity. Who was he thinking of? The difficulty with the Vatican man's position is that faith itself has nothing to do with reason *per se*, much as he might like to think it has. We are not like the others; we are the reasonable religion, he wants to say. Perhaps better to draw a veil over the Pope's remarks. For, if we apply reason, doesn't faith evaporate? Or, rather, if we apply faith doesn't reason evaporate? Since when did the moving of the stone from the sepulchre have anything to do with reason? Reason was what Voltaire and Diderot and those boys cherished. Reason and belief are not natural bedfellows: belief and violence are the ones who like to snuggle up together.

If reason is what you want then you must visit the Doorkins stall. Try a selfish gene; see what the blind watchmaker has to offer; put your name down to climb Mount Improbable. At the stall the vendor himself is in full flow. A certain Professor of Theology in Oxford seems to be copping it – something about dogs not praising fleas. Marcus has no problem with that sentiment although he would prefer it if cats were substituted for dogs. Otherwise he is unmoved. Among the many things he wants to ask Doorkins (and it is a measure of the man that he wouldn't bother to put these questions to Professors of Theology) is: why should I use your logic? What is so precious about 'evidence'? Is that your evidence or my evidence? Where does rationality get you if many do not buy into it or use what you think is a deranged variety? Suppose an Islamist says 'Oi, Doorkins, I don't like your society – the alcohol, the pornography, the lack of discipline, the frivolity, the excess – why should I accept your arguments or indeed anything you say?' Suppose further that a bystander is present who, on hearing the Islamist, says 'It's a valid point of view'. Valid? What a big word that is – a Doorkins word. Yes, it's valid in the sense that one point of view is equivalent formally to any other point of view but when every point of view is valid no point of view is valid. But let's not lose any sleep over validity. It's a bazaar: we've got points of view for everyone. You can be as clear or as muddled as you like – but what's clear and muddled anyway? Perhaps you like treading treacle? We have that too.

If Western rational methodologies fail to convince or are resisted then we are left with instinct – that is what Marcus thinks, or is it feels? If someone says my instinct is that there is a God then, according to Marcus, there is a God. If I want to be solipsistic, says Marcus, and believe that the self is the only existent thing, then I will be. But it's rare that he says these things and he doesn't trumpet his views to the skies because he suspects – indeed knows – that many of his punters are not so tolerant of views that clash with their own. And there is the odd, regrettable mistake. Just the other day he put in touch someone who believes that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and they had a child whose bloodline is pretender to the throne of France with someone who believes that Mary left Jesus for Peter who had managed to survive being crucified upside-down outside what is now St Peter's in Rome. A mistake all of us might make but there were ructions and Marcus had to pacify two angry clients. Marcus asks that if people should happen to change their beliefs, or modify them, then could they please let him know so he can keep his records up to date. Someone wrote in the other day to say she had changed her mind about the Loch Ness monster being some kind of prehistoric beast and that she now preferred to believe the theory of a Glasgow University scientist that it is an elephant that escaped from Billy Smart's circus in Inverness many years ago and slipped into the Caledonian Canal to cool off. "Nelly the elephant packed her trunk and trundled off from the circus. Off she went with a trumpety trump: trump, trump, trump." Which begs the question: do elephants like to spend 99.9% of the time underwater?

Perhaps the most animated and rewarding interchanges come among members of groups that believe they were a celebrated person in a previous life – for instance, the 'I was Rasputin' group, the 'I was Mary Queen of Scots' group, the 'I was Judy Garland' group. They confide in each other stuff about clothes, amours, likes, dislikes, health problems, and so forth. The members of the 'I was a Roman soldier' group quiz each other on topics like the nutritional value of fennel seeds when you are obliged to march

all day and those are your only rations. They also rib each other on the state of their Latin, all very mindful of General Patton who was adamant that he had been a Roman soldier in a previous life and yet had terrible, make that non-existent Latin. Generally speaking but not universally there is fierce loyalty to the subject of their belief. Most members of the 'I was Mary Queen of Scots' group simply will not tolerate the name of Elizabeth, and that includes the present queen. The stuff these groups come up with rarely triangulates – how could it? – and members of the Roman soldier group cheat by looking up dictionaries, but the group members still manage to rub along tolerably well.

There is a smattering of Beliefs Club subscribers who believe they were two different people in previous lives. For instance, there is the person who thinks he was Simon de Montfort *and* Mother Teresa. Who says you have to be reincarnated in the same gender all the time? Marcus' father believed in reincarnation and took a pretty pluralistic view as to what you might come back as, or what you might have been. There's a spread of beliefs here, isn't there? Marcus' father didn't stop at men and women; he was quite prepared to accept that he might come back as an insect, indeed might already have been one. Not that he could remember anything about being an insect, had he been one, and so he had no stuff to contribute to, say, the 'I was a cockroach' group. Cockroach, in fact, was what Fat Reg thought he might return as next; he certainly had the build for it. Marcus and his father had their differences – impossible to compute – but Marcus is always careful not to crush cockroaches should he see them. Not that they are ever easy to destroy; credit Fat Reg with some savvy. But then he believed that you could determine what you came back as or rather, you could assess from what you have contributed in your present life what you were likely to come back as. Fat Reg had lots of faults but he was not an absolute shit so perhaps he was being hard on himself. But does absolute shit = cockroach? Maybe more like mosquito. And is cockroach necessarily the best vehicle to come back in? Wouldn't you want something that is easily squashed or lasts only a day so that you could get on to the

next life form quickly? On the other hand, you could argue – and Marcus’ father did – that being a cockroach and therefore pretty indestructible increases your chances of a longer life and so gives you the opportunity of leading a good cockroach life thereby increasing your chances of elevation next time round. Or not.

Because the rates Marcus charges to register beliefs are modest the pressure has been on to come up with a lucrative sideline. He thinks he has come up with one. If you have a certain belief he will produce a badge or decal depicting the belief. Thus if you believe that Jesus Christ married Mary Magdalene you can wear a badge showing the two together, or even canoodling. If you believe that walking under a ladder will bring you bad luck then Marcus has a badge for you showing someone emerging from under a ladder and being flattened by a falling boulder. The ‘Junk food does no harm’ group sports a badge showing a deep-fried Mars bar; well, you can’t tell it’s a Mars bar, let’s just say it’s a deep-fried thingummy containing about a zillion calories. They know what it is. Obviously there will be nerds and geeks sporting armfuls of badges. That goes with the territory. The bat urine belief will take some working up into an icon but Marcus will get there. A great favourite among flat-earthers is an image of the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* that shows the East at the top, Europe at bottom left, Africa to the right, and Jerusalem at the centre – naturally. The Americas hadn’t yet been discovered but once that happened they could have been slotted in at the left. The flat earth is nothing but a topological transformation. Who needs literal global representations?

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Julie Owens, once his PA, is another who would never have marked Marcus down as an impresario. You cannot hide anything from your butler, it is said, but he managed to. Now launched on her new career as a movie and aversion therapist, Julie is feeling stronger than ever. Sometimes she thinks her feisty ancestor Anna Leonowens must be watching over her. Were she ever to use *The King and I* in therapy she knows that Anna would be in her corner but the

opportunity hasn't arisen yet. It needs a woman who is having trouble with a capricious male employer to beat a path to her door. Should that happen she wouldn't dream of using the version where Jodie Foster impersonates her ancestor. She's got nothing against Jodie – liked her very much in *The Silence of the Lambs*, also *Sommersby*, although Richard Gere was a factor there – but it's got to be the definitive version with Deborah Kerr and Yul Brynner. All in all, the movie therapy is going very well, the aversion therapy not so well. People always prefer movies to aversion. One movie she won't be using is *Doppelgänger*, not after the trouble she had with Clive over his identical twin brother Gerald.

On her appointments list today – not hugely long – is a man called Jacques Blenkiron. She knows that surname, knows it very well. And here he is. Unlike his brother he is bald as a coot: a good rug wouldn't come amiss. Call me Jark, he says. He agrees he is from South Africa, from Bloemfontein in fact, but otherwise makes it clear that he will take the icebreaker as read.

'I had a brother who lived over here. He died a very sad death. Maybe you heard about it. He was a guru towards the end of his life; he had the title of Sri. He even met the Dalai Lama once. The worst thing is that they never found the body. My poor mother, she has been to hell and back.'

Julie knows about this tragedy. Clive told her. She worked with Jark's brother Jamie at the kitchen gizmos place along with Clive and Marcus. One night, a year or so after they had all ceased working at that place, Jamie aka Sribeebie drifted off into the ether. His body was never found. At the inquest the coroner returned an open verdict.

Julie nods gravely – at least she hopes it comes across like that. Conjuring up visages is far from being an exact science but she's working on it. One thing is obvious: when he talks this Jark doesn't sound like his brother. Without necessarily realizing they are doing it some people just wean themselves off their native accent.

'A mutual friend told me about it. Plus Jamie was a former colleague; you know, at the kitchen gizmos place. I expect he mentioned it, the kitchen gizmos place I mean. It is horrible for you and your family. What happened to him shouldn't happen to anyone.'

Are you over it yet? Is that why you have come to see me?’

‘No, not directly anyway.’

Julie raises her eyebrows but very discreetly, almost as if she is sniffing a rose. This one she *is* confident about. She has learned to calibrate the movement of the controlling muscles. Perfecting the grave nod is only a matter of time. It’s that unerring attention to detail that marks out the best consultants.

‘I’m an author; at least I thought I was. My last book was called *The Locked Piano*, the one before that *The Plucked Liana*. In *Plucked Liana* I was just cutting my teeth; it was an adventure story set in the bush. Pretty standard, if I say so myself. *Locked Piano* was definitely a level up; for a start it was intended as a parable. Yes, I used the piano keys as a metaphor for colour. Did that ever occur to you?’ Julie admits that it hasn’t. ‘White keys are the notes we call ‘natural’ whereas the black notes take their names from the white keys on either side of them. So the blacks get defined strictly in terms of the whites. Ipso facto, if there are no whites there are no blacks. That’s the parable.’

‘That’s very interesting but why are you telling me this?’

‘It’s because I’ve dried up completely in the writing department. Ever since I finished that book I’ve been unable to pick up the pen again. Perhaps it was the disappointment of missing out on the Whitbread Prize. Looking back maybe I was trying to walk before I could run. Then there was my brother’s death: you can’t underestimate the effect of that.’

‘Sometimes well-meaning people can push you forward before you are ready,’ says Julie. While the sentiment could hardly be triter she is pleased to have surfaced the problem so quickly.

‘It’s writer’s block we are looking at, isn’t it? Good.’ Is ‘good’ a good thing to say in the circumstances? It shows she’s still a beginner. She does a little piece of shtick with her forefingers where she lets them rise and fall alternately. Now where did she pick up that mannerism?

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It wasn’t Marcus. Try someone whose name begins with R.

Marcus isn't one for mannerisms. As he lounges on his study sofa surrounded by photos of diving derring-do and assorted trophies, what is occupying his thoughts is nothing at all to do with the Beliefs Club but rather those things that landed last night. Who are they? What are they? Why are they here and not somewhere else? What do they want? What do they believe?

Needing to park these thoughts Marcus wanders over to his PC. After looking at his Inbox and finding nothing much there except this from a subscriber – “It is a great mistake to view God as a fiction from a pre-industrial age when he is a deadly reality for those prepared to kill themselves and others in the fight against atheistic Western imperialism” – he clicks on the Deleted Items box. He would rather not do that but sometimes messages other than spam arrive in there you need or would want to see. Reflecting yet again that there cannot be a more pointless, mindless, unrewarding human activity than sending out junk mail – by comparison a spot of Army jankers like painting coal white seems positively constructive – Marcus scans the contents of the box. Among the facetious share offers, the offer of a Special Christian Mortgage Rate if you will only enter your zip code (what is a Christian mortgage?), a scam to persuade you to cough up your bank details, and unspeakable acts committed on grannies, one piece of spam catches his attention, the idiosyncratic grammar as much as anything.

Did you know that 75% of women are not satisfied with the size of their lovers sausage? Who wants a frankfirter, when they can have a salami? The solution is simple. Simply by taking 2 pills daily your weener will start growing, infact upto 3 inches is probbale. Ever wanted to be able to open a bottle of beer and crack nuts with your dork? That power will be yours. Remember just two pills daily.

Big deal – don't they know that women manage very well without resorting to this stuff? Miss Mexico thought she had it won at the first annual Miss Vagina contest sponsored by the Bronco Burlesque Barn in Amsterdam. Opening a beer bottle using only her vagina, she imagined she was a shoo-in. But she

was wrong. Up stepped Miss India who played the flute and then pulled not one, not two, but *three* live snakes from her tunnel of love. She was followed by Miss Philippines, who shuffled cards, and the hometown favourite, Miss Netherlands, who could dispense any exact amount of small change requested by the audience. The eventual winner was Miss Denmark who, working with five numbered ping-pong balls, could produce any ball upon request.

That is what women can do; for men it seems that the obvious pitch for Viagra isn't enough any more. It used to be something like this:

In the time it takes for most women to heat up from foreplay you can be "rock solid ready" simply by popping a Sildenafil Citrate Soft Tab and dissolving it under your tongue. Look at the advantages over slowcoach Viagra. No more planning intake well ahead of time. More time to correctly assess your partner's mood and avoid a waste of medication. Now you can make love to her right when she turns you on! Looks like we can kick waiting time into touch.

Before moving on, some points to note: one, women function just like electric cooker hobs; two, there's an economic aspect to lovemaking; and, three, Viagra is being slagged off. The blue pill has only been here five minutes and it's being poor-mouthed. Try telling that to the folk who are glad of it. Only they won't be happy to learn that the bar has been raised and the question now is what else you can do with a stiffie. Lifting objects has a following. Word has it that a Chinese man once lifted a 75kg barbell for 10 seconds – yes, you've got it, lifted it with his dork. Presumably he crouched or knelt, his aides placed the barbell on the erect member, and up it went. He said his father taught him the skill to help him get fit after a serious illness when he was 18. Well you would, wouldn't you? Zhan started training by lifting small bricks with his penis, then gradually added weights and extended the stretching duration. Perhaps he was like other Asians who cut holes in their beds so that they can sleep with rocks and

or weights tied around the member to increase tissue over time. Sweet dreams! To maximize the stretching effect you would imagine they would favour beds in the region of eight foot high, or higher, reachable only by ladder or helicopter. Does the penis contain muscle, you ask? It would appear not. But it is a ligament, isn't it? There is this story of a guy pulling a tram with his John Thomas. Why wouldn't he haul it with a rope over one shoulder – if he could? No, that would be way too easy.

Marcus, whose appendage habitually nestles quietly in his Y-fronts until called into action, deletes the spam message. An all-knowing Zoggian might reflect that the emergence of Marcus' williephilia correlates directly with his unstoppable desire to have a child. Be that as it may his mind right now is on those space bandits who dropped in last night. But are they bandits? Some neighbours he spoke to described them as Kylie Minogue fans – seems they were chanting 'Kylie beat the big C. Listen to her new single. More power to her elbow'; others thought they were pensioners chanting 'Down with the big C. Listen to smiley grey power. Give that tax the elbow.' Of course, they don't have to be one or the other: they could be space bandits *and* Kylie Minogue fans.

Marcus, now 41, thought he might be a father by now but, despite much rumpy-pumpy or, as she likes to call it, rungull or wrungle even, Kate has not stepped up to the accouchement, which is a great pity because he likes kids. His ex Stella detested them – called them 'spawn' or at best 'rugrats' – and if he has any regrets it is that he never sussed that out before they got hitched. But, as he says if you ask him, you don't discuss the dessert when you are on the starter. Kate says she wants kids but it hasn't happened. So some rain has fallen into Marcus' life, and that is without mentioning the trepanning following on from that mayhem at the kitchen gizmos place. The good news is that his younger brother Sam has managed to produce, courtesy of his wife Bee, so at least Marcus has twins – a nephew and a niece – he can dote on.

Since that time at the kitchen gizmos place Marcus has gradually slalomed his way into a new career. Slalomed? Yes, he

has hit a few obstacles along the way. At first he wanted to do something connected with the sea, but Kate persuaded him out of that. How did she do it? She told him that she would leave him. So how to describe this new career? There is no way of dressing it up: he is a sin-eater.

The sin-eater was or is (in the British tradition) a person who, through ritual means and for material gain, would take on the sins of a dying person, thus absolving that person of their sins while receiving the burden of the same. Traditionally, each village maintained its own sin-eater. The sin-eater would be brought to the dying person's bedside, and there either he or a relative would place a bit of bread on the breast of the dying. After praying and/or reciting the ritual, he would then remove the bread from the breast and eat it, the act of which would remove the sin from the dying and take it into himself. Because it provides absolution outside the purview of the priesthood the act of being a sin-eater is generally considered a cardinal sin by the Catholic Church, punishable by immediate excommunication.

Immediate or even delayed excommunication does not bother Marcus. What is bothering him is that these aliens, if that is what they are, have sought him out precisely because he swallows sins. What they might want from him is some sin-eating on an industrial scale that would set them up for incursions into Planet Earth. The bit about needing to be dying they have probably skipped as a detail. What sins are exactly if you are from the planet Zog might be a bit of a mystery since these babies are a peculiarity of the Catholic Church, a USP you might say, where if you have committed them (the sins) the priest slaps you on the wrist and says don't do it or them again – or covers up for you if you are a paedophile. That said, if you're a Zoggian, isn't it best to take precautions when you are visiting another planet and you suspect or know they practice this mumbo-jumbo? It would have been one of a list of items to get to grips with, not necessarily in this order – sins, parking cones, motorway rest areas, penis envy, congestion charges if travelling in inner London

perhaps on the way to the Houses of Parliament, avoid plagiarizing *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. That's most of it really: otherwise just try to look like the Army travelling up and down the A34. Yes, that's right, khaki isn't too obtainable on Zog but just make an effort, won't you? As for penis envy your organ is that thingy that juts out of your ear, and it works fine, so don't even think about extending it: it will only break off.

It won't matter to these Zoggies but Marcus got into sin-eating quite by accident. There probably isn't any other way, is there? A Welsh neighbour took to his deathbed suddenly and there was no time to summon their usual sin-eater. The Welsh are quite keen on sin-eating. So Marcus answered a knock on the door and felt unable to turn down the request. The wife gave him a quick rundown on what was expected, even told him what fee he should charge, and hey presto there he was wolfing down the best part of a ciabatta (he hadn't had time for lunch). What sin or sins he took on board that day he had no way of knowing. It might have been anything from a few white lies to a bank heist. Now, quite a few sin-eats down the road, he feels no worse for what he has been consuming. The sins seem to pack down quite well; one or two may even cancel each other out. The section called 'Envy' is as full as any, with 'Gluttony' not far behind.

★ ★ ★

Julie hasn't tackled writer's block before. This will be a good challenge, one she's up for. It will have to be movie therapy. Aversion therapy would have to involve aversion to a block, and that wouldn't be easy to arrange, would it, because a block is already a negative. She doesn't as yet feel up to reverse aversion therapy. Aversion to writing or reading books would be much easier to pull off. She could always ascertain something Jark really likes doing and then work to associate it with writing. But she can see pitfalls in that strategy. Suppose the adored item is ice cream. Then she will have to induce in Jark a mindset that says when I eat ice cream I want to pick up my pen and write. But what if he

substitutes another mindset, like when I eat ice cream I want to eat more ice cream? Or Green & Black's do chocolate as well, don't they? No, it will have to be movie therapy. Already, several likely movies have caught her attention. She hasn't seen them, only read the blurbs. There's *Wonder Boys* with Michael Douglas, who she can take or leave mostly leave except it doesn't matter what she thinks but how Jark takes to him, and the Coen Brothers' *Barton Fink*. That one she *has* seen; absolutely adored it. Then there's *Adaptation* with Nic Cage. That could be interesting given the twin brothers' angle; maybe the late Jamie is part of Jark's problem. Then there's that one where the guy must finish his novel in 30 days or wind up dead, although it is not clear without looking at it why finishing a novel against a tight deadline would be so vital. While novelists might be flattered to think they make a difference – yes, it's true – does anyone ever want a novel so badly that they will kill if it isn't finished on time? And what does it mean to finish a novel? Perhaps there was a wordage requirement. Using extreme shock therapy on this scale would take her to a new level, no question about that: perhaps not. *Alex and Emma*, that's what this snuff-bluff duff movie is called. And let's not forget *Shakespeare in Love* where the young Bard is struggling to complete his latest work "Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter". So there looks to be plenty to work with.

★ ★ ★

What on earth, as it were, are the Zogwarts up to? Last night he saw them sitting at his picnic bench eating some kind of chow, cheeky as you like. Then they disappear only to pop up somewhere else. There seem to be four of them. Surely the police should have picked them up by now. Has he told the police? No, he hasn't. It's not that he has anything to hide; he just doesn't like involving the police. It's something to do with the time a mate dared him to pull the communication cord. All right it was the railway police who interviewed him but the same difference. Fat Reg gave him a clip round the ear for his trouble. He is reflecting

on his father's disciplinary tastes when Kate enters the room. A tall girl, natch, her penchant for canary yellow, or indeed any shade of yellow, is undiminished. Not many women can get away with that colour. Marcus is no longer sure that she can. She hasn't seen the Zogtrotters so there is no point talking to her about them.

'That was Mum on the phone. Dad's taken a turn for the worse. I'll have to go over. I was wondering if I should have a word with Mum about sin-eating. I'm not sure what their position is.'

'They're Welsh so they might be keen. Could be tricky though. He might not want me munching on his sins but then he might be too far-gone to object. That's usually the case. What are his sins, anyway, or don't you know? Of course, you must know.'

'Arrogance and pride, I would say.'

'Well, they're quite palatable. I'd have to own up to one of those myself.'

'What's your diary like, just in case?'

She smacks herself on the forehead.

'That's a silly thing to say. We can't exactly forecast these things, can we?'

'No, but you get a feel for imminent departure. For instance, I would say old Wyndham two doors away is not long for this world. I'm booked in for that when it happens. It's not often that I'm asked to be in two places at once; in fact, it's never happened. So if your dad goes in the next couple of days – and, of course, I hope he doesn't – then we should be OK always supposing they want my services.'

What counts in Marcus' favour is that he doesn't mind being on call. Now he no longer drinks he's not going to be slaughtered or even the worse for wear so there is no reason, short of illness, why he should not be fit and ready to go. And that's how it's been. He hasn't missed a deathbed scene yet and so has had no need to seek out a locum, who would only be competition. It's quite pleasant to have two businesses to attend to – as long as you don't let them interact. While his records show that there are plenty of Beliefs Club subscribers who believe in sin-eating, mostly situated

in the Principality, Marcus is scrupulous about keeping the actual sin-eating separate.

‘I’ll be off then. I don’t know when I’ll be back. Mum’s obviously in a state. Can you fix yourself something for supper?’

‘No probs.’

Marcus goes to the window to see her leave. He watches as she goes down the drive to the road, the sun glinting on the yellow hatchback. He is about to turn away when there is a flash of movement and across her bows shoots a Zoggo. She can’t have seen it because she doesn’t slow up. This is a development he hadn’t expected. Is he the only one who can see these visitors? Those neighbours heard something the other night but did they see anything? Or is it that she is the only one who can’t see them? Or does the truth lie somewhere in between? Perhaps the trepanning is a factor. He has read somewhere that people who have had brain surgery are prone to having visions if not visitations.

Marcus sets to wondering. Suppose they are from Zog: what do we know about Zog? There’s nothing on the database so let’s give Zog a zooooooogle. Yes, here’s something: Zog I, King of Albania, a ne’er-do-well it would seem. Made sure he kept on good terms with Musso, that aggressor over the water. That’s one to keep under the hat, at least for the time being. Bloody hell, there they are outside again, bold as brass. Next they’ll be asking for a pint of milk. In terms of going public Marcus doesn’t want to be thought foolish like Conan Doyle and that business with the Cottingley fairy photographs. In his defence CD was susceptible because of his fervent spiritualist beliefs whereas Marcus has no such inclination to be taken in. He could do with some sin-eating to take his mind off these garden invaders.

★ ★ ★

Julie looks hard at Jark; well, more straight at than hard.

‘Jark, answer me this. It will help me to help you. There are three parts to the question. Are you currently writing a novel and

you are stuck, or have you sketched out a novel but are unable to get off first base, or are you totally bereft of ideas?’

She is sure those must be the only possibilities. Wrong.

‘None orv those, ah’m efraid. Mah late *bru* lift some notes for eh novil wheech came ter me een hees papers end ah em disperet ter work them up een mimory orv eem. Ee always beeleeved een me. Ah hev ter do eet for eem.’

Seeing the tears welling up in Jark’s eyes Julie fishes out a box of tissues from her desk and pushes it towards him. Maybe we won’t go with *Adaptation*. He’s not going to take kindly to the fat-arse brother who knocks off a schlocky horror film script in days and sells it without even trying, leaving his brother’s block on the critical list. Scrub that one. Let’s go with *Wonder Boys* for now.

★ ★ ★

‘Hi Marcus? It’s Si, from the kitchen gizmos place.’

‘Oh, hi Si, how are tricks? I never had the chance to say goodbye to you, did L? It all happened very quickly. What can I do for you? Do you want to register a belief or beliefs? Or do you require the services of a sin-eater? Or perhaps you would like both?’

So much for keeping the two businesses apart. This specimen on the other end of the phone is one of the dossils and hesps he used to have under him. Not known as Si at all or Simon James but rather as Jabba, as in Jabba the Shut, on account of his taciturnity, especially in meetings.

‘Don’t know about a sin-eater’ (being Welsh the reference is not lost on him) ‘but I do have a couple of beliefs I want to register, actually three. Is there any price reduction when registering multiple beliefs? Especially as I’m an old colleague.’

‘Afraid not Si. Good try though.’

‘Ah well, how do I go about it?’

‘Well, there’s a form and a fee which you can find on the website – I expect you’ve looked there – but while you’re on why don’t you tell me what these beliefs are you want to register?’

We've got a group called 'Lloyd George was not a twister'. Wasn't Lloyd George called the Welsh windbag? You're not a windbag though, are you? Far from it.'

'Lloyd George knew my great-grandfather and he told my father a different story. About LG being a twister, I mean.'

'OK, you boyos can sort it out among yourselves. What are these beliefs you want to register?'

'Well, one of them is to do with nature. I believe for every drop of rain that falls a flower grows.'

'Fine, I'm not sure I've got a group to put you in touch with. You might have to be a group of one, at least for the time being. There's nothing unusual in that. Let me ask you a question. You don't believe the world might be smothered in flowers? I mean after a particularly torrential downpour. There's that place in India that has the highest rainfall in the world. It always used to fascinate me at school. Pondicherry, was it? Or was it Cherrapunji? It's that one, I think. According to you it must be choked in flowers. There can't be any more room for flowers to grow. You don't think so. Fine: just a reality check.'

Reality check? What is he talking about? The last thing true believers want is reality checks.

'What else have you got, Si?'

'I believe – and I'm not alone – that the Welsh are Basques or the Basques are Welsh; take your pick. Let's go for the Basques are Welsh.'

'Interesting,' says Marcus. 'We've got a group that believes that the Welsh and Basque languages come from the same root. Perhaps we can fit you into that. And the third one?'

'I believe that masturbation causes blindness.'

'That's an old one. Many Victorians believed it. We're bound to have a group, possibly a large one. Let me see. Yes, a group has formed around that belief. Shall I add you to it? Actually we've got one that says it causes blindness among men *and* women and one that says it only causes blindness among men. Which one shall I put you in? Men only? Fine. Consider it done. And what are you up to these days, Si?'