

## **The Seventh Stair**

At half-six in the morning the tube was packed with City-bound commuters. Collins hung limply from the ceiling strap and allowed the train's motion to throw his body from side to side. He caught sight of his own torso reflected in the blackened window: Lobbs' loafers, cuff-links, dark-blue pinstripe and pristine white shirt; one of Mammon's many acolytes. A perspiring middle-manager at his shoulder silently bubbled garlic in serial belches.

Was this really it? Was this as good as it got? Life wasn't meant to be like this, horrifyingly predictably linear, black and rigid, like the Northern Line.

He'd always felt so superior when they discussed the future, simply because his own was so precisely mapped and certain; the world was his oyster. Now he could see why God had never seen fit to grant humanity the power of the oracle; an absolute awareness of the future is a trap as sure and confounding as any tiger pit. It'll paralyse you and make you crazy, because nothing you ever do can make a damn bit of difference to the outcome. He was trapped, like a bug in an upturned jar, on the scent of jam and finding only aspartame. Collins' world had become a garlic-breathed middle-manager's oyster, and a sweaty one at that.

They'd lipo-sucked the passion from him like adipose from a fat-man.

To be sure, there were daily outbursts in the trading room that could pass for emotion. But these were only manufactured rages, feeding off a rancid mulch of testosterone and amphetamines – sterile, steroidal facsimiles.

'Credit Suisse First Boston? I just fuckin' ripped their faces off.' Nick Mearthy's favourite expression;

‘The Baht’s gonna go through the Pagoda roof, I can feel in my bollocks. And my bollocks are never wrong,’ Brown jiggling his nuts. And later, when the Bhat went through the Pagoda floor, Brown, punching his own testicles over and over again, by way of punishment.

They counted money and only money counted. Watching the digital numbers flicker across their screens like flight controllers, they’d look for gaps, anomalies, the lame duck currencies and when they found them they’d swoop in like raptors and feast on the fuck-up; ripping faces off in a feeding-frenzy.

Collins recalled a pretty young nurse at a party, back in the days when he took pride in the job. ‘I work in the City... for my sins,’ he’d informed her with a modest smile. ‘We broke money.’

‘Yes,’ she’d replied, ‘I think you did,’ before walking away to chat to a fellow with a little more integrity: estate agent, adman, pimp, or some such.

She’d been spot on of course.

They broke small countries too, messing with their currencies and fragile economies. Like quack-chemists, taking base rates and converting them to gold; ultimately unaware of and careless of the many explosions in their wake.

He should have got a dog on a string and become a traveler. But in truth he was himself just a dog on a string, a prisoner in a pin-striped cage.

Collins turned his head and scrutinised the seated passengers. He wondered what was going through their minds. A pretty young woman, someone’s P.A., no doubt, pretended

to read a book; eyes red-rimmed, blinking back tears. A player, young but with prematurely receding hair, shamelessly excavated his nose. Further along the carriage, a middle-aged Indian woman dozed. Every so often as her head slumped forward, she'd jerk herself awake and slowly the process would begin all over again. Collins' gaze traveled down through the carriage where he briefly caught the eye of an elderly black man who nodded in the companionable sodality of shared discomfort.

With a lurch that almost wrenched his arm from its socket the train stopped dead. The carriage lights flickered off and a metallic announcement crackled out from the tannoy: 'Ladies and gentlemen, this train will terminate at the next station...probably.' Now he was going to be spectacularly late. The Senior traders, Mearthy and Brown, could forget about their early morning coffee, at this rate they'd be lucky to get bedtime cocoa.

The tannoy crackled back to life. 'Ladies and gentlemen, this train will now...no, hang on....' There was a further hiatus followed by a curiously abrupt silence. Collins hoped it was terminal; a put-upon commuter finally run amok perhaps. The lights came back on, he braced his arm against the strap and the train lurched forward once again.

The carriages emptied out at Holborn where Collins joined the struggling crowds on the platform. A mere five minutes brisk walk to St Mary's Passage now.

An armpit of a breeze, moist and acrid wafted up the tracks providing some small relief after the stuffiness of the carriage. Commuters jostled each other in their single-minded determination to be first for the stairs, the garlic-belcher shoved past him and

although Collins was in a hurry, he hung back, waiting for the crowds to clear. The pretty young woman with the red-rimmed eyes stood patiently beside him.

Strangely, the mob began to retreat, surging backwards, parting to reveal a tramp standing unsteadily on the seventh step like the last defender in a besieged tower. He brandished his penis like a weapon, holding-off commuters by periodically urinating down upon them; switching the spray on and off like a stopcock through the judicious pressure of his thumb and forefinger. Now and then an intrepid worker attempted an escalade but was beaten back. ‘You want gold, come and get some, you greedy fuckers,’ bawled the tramp.

Collins sneaked a quick look at the young girl by his side. The eyes went first; tiny creases appeared in the corners while her mouth arced slowly upwards as though on invisible threads.

She laughed; a contagious giggle to which Collins quickly succumbed. He laughed, letting go for a change, twisted double with mirth. Others in the rear echelons began to chuckle too.

Within seconds the glum, disconnected rabble became an audience. Even applauding when the tramp, finally out of ammunition, tucked his penis away, capering drunkenly about upon his perch.

The Seventh Stair; his territory as of right, he’d earned it. He’d fought for it with the only means at his disposal and so the grinning salary-men and women paid a toll of ten or twenty pence as they passed.

He’d made them laugh and that was kind of cool.