



# *Millennium*

# *Deja Vu*

*Tam Fairlie*

*the fl@ubert duck series*

*for*

*Mavis,  
Sarah, John, Andrew  
Ariane, Stuart  
Matt, Chris & Owen*

# Déjà vu

“I call to order the third official meeting of the Fairwood Millennial Society.” Sarah glanced across the table at her brother Andrew, the Treasurer, who was already doodling over the new cover of his ‘Official Accounts’ book. On the agreed basis of frequently rotating responsibilities Johnny had assumed the role of both President of the Society and custodian of the coveted laptop computer. A greenish light emanated from its screen highlighting a demonic aspect to his features, his upper teeth pressed against his lower lip as he peered into the depths of another world where he was organising a kaleidoscope of files. His cousin Chris was hovering over his right shoulder peering at the scoreboard for Frenzied Freak on which he was just a few points behind Johnny.

Sarah had accustomed herself to the role of perpetual Secretary which at least gave her an opportunity to discreetly affect the content and direction of the meetings. Ariane, alongside, viewed critically all



observations that were being inscribed in the Minutes and kept a close eye on the spelling with which Sarah was reputed to take excessive liberties. Ariane was a solid ally against the fecklessness of the boys and Sarah usually agreed to Ariane's improvements to her note taking with good humour. Mavis sprawled out towards the lamp in the middle of the table totally absorbed in the stitching of a bark sculpture.

The continuous drum roll of rain rumbled steadily on the shingled roof of the old dining room. The daylight had faded and the flickering lights of the candles and oil lamps seemed a world away from the progressive future being envisioned at the turn of the Millennia. Occasionally a gust of wind, like a big claw stealthily descending in the black night and gave the house a violent sideways wrench. Every nail in the structure seemed to be flexed and straining to hold onto the dry timbers. An advancing wall of rain and hail coupled with a strident shriek of wind hit the weather torn clapboard wall like an artillery barrage and made everyone start nervously. Huddled in this flimsy shelter they felt as if they we're caught in the crossfire of an elemental battle of legions of warring demons overhead.

Matthew, Owen and Stuart were playing cards in front of the fire in the adjacent room. They all seemed to be oblivious to what was going on outside so totally immersed were they in an endless game that no one



seemed to win or lose, though the numbers being bandied about in delighted shrieks became increasingly astronomical. Sarah supposed that the fire would be dying down and she wondered how long the situation would deteriorate before someone thought to add another log. Even though it was simply a case of fetching this from the adjacent wood box, she imagined that perhaps the obsessive gamers would instead abandon their outpost and seek a warm refuge with the others in the dining room.

One of the window shutters was swinging on creaky hinges and thudding regularly against the sodden clapboard siding. Its erratic, wind tossed movements sounded like some desperate, shapeless fiend determined to get in, thumping violently against the side of the house in malevolent pique.

Before Sarah could finish inscribing the names of those present in her book Andrew opened the discussion.

“I think that the first item of business should be - cell phones. So far nobody has come up with a really good idea for what we’re going to do as the Millennium Society and it’s getting late - just six months away. But I think that if we were all equipped with cell phones then we could be in constant touch with each other wherever we went. We could soon have ideas to burn. You could even be out sailing and just phone back with

an idea whenever it struck, at any time.”

Mavis looked up from her work, considering this idea critically for a moment and returned to assembling the bark sculpture without comment.

“Or better still, if we all had laptop computers we could sketch out our ideas and then email them to each other and we could do interactive games ... even over the net,” muttered Johnny in a distracted, far off voice. Johnny was again engrossed in piloting ‘Frenzied Freak’ through a labyrinth past innumerable Doom-Whelps in search of a colossal lode which would spell the end of the evil empire of the Doom-Nads. He had been working on this challenge for weeks. Yet somehow the game presented enough unpredictability that he had never quite eluded the third encirclement of Nadirs. In Sarah’s view he was able to function as President of the Society, and on most other levels, about as well with or without ‘Frenzied Freak’ cavorting through the foreground of his daily life. Demanding him to pay attention to the business at hand seemed to reap only minimal reward.

Andrew tried unsuccessfully to envision some of the advantages of laptops. “But you can’t really take a laptop onto a sail boat - I mean ... wouldn’t you have to keep it in some sort of clear Plexiglas bubble? . . . Or what? And how would you get at the keys?”

Ariane felt uncomfortable with all this talk about computers. She had a good idea of the practicalities or how all these things might be done; but she restrained her informative nature in solidarity with Sarah, and the silent expression of a common sense scepticism which she admired in her cousin.

“You see, the whole point about computer games is that they so totally sidestep any real issues. It’s as if the whole evolution of the human race were induced by this great desire to recreate the universe without real Good and Evil, a universe occupied by those caricature DoomNads where it doesn’t really matter if the heroine falls through a trap door into a slimy pit, because nothing is real ... you can always start the game over again, and again, and again.” Sarah glanced at Johnny’s impervious concentrated countenance. There was more than a hint of desperation in her voice.

Sarah was never totally enamoured of technology reliant proposals. But she felt that there might be advantages in encouraging diverse avenues of thought to avoid the formation of an undesirable consensus. In fact the purpose of the Millennium Society still remained quite obscure. It had been formed in a moment of inspiration a year earlier in this same room. There had been one meeting and discussion during the winter but this had focussed mainly on organizational niceties, the opening of a bank account, still languishing, and the



design of the first informative newsletter, which though covered with elegant portraits of local mushrooms contained only rudimentary information about the state of the Society, its woeful finances and an unlikely list of Members' Rules.

"This is incredible," Johnny whooped, "look at what's happening to the screen!" Ariane rushed around to peer over his shoulder, the strain of feigning disinterest had now grown too much for her. The screen had burst into pulsating colours emanating from a blinding nucleus of light, like a series of pastel hoops shaping a long tunnel. It appeared that Johnny had at last penetrated the long sought third bastion of the Doom-Nads.

Sarah glanced away dreamily into the pitch black window panes behind them, aware of all the separate light sources reflected within the room. Beyond the backdrop was utterly blackness, as if a sinister, voracious creature was enveloping the whole house in its blanket, having settled, gloating with expectant pleasure over the warmth within. Through the cacophony of wrenching and forlorn howls it sounded as if it were battling to maintain possession of its prey.

Suddenly she became aware of a wavering light which flickered across the open expanse of rock outside the black window.

“Who could possibly be coming to visit us on a night like this? Was anyone expecting a visitor?” She got up and went to the window cupping her hands around her head against the glass. “How could they even get here in a boat in such a raging storm?”

“Perhaps they’ve been shipwrecked and just thrown ashore with their flashlights, said Andrew. “Anyone up for a reconnaissance mission?”

Andrew opened the door a crack to peer out. A violent gust of wind wrenched it from his hand and sent the old shutter crashing in to the siding, knocking a plate off the wall in the interior. There was a frantic, scurrying sound of alarm from the cosy nest of mice within the organ. The card players in the next room, Owen, Stuart and Matthew, rushed in to see what all the commotion was about.

All faces peered out over the rain swept rocks. But no one could be seen approaching. Johnny made one dash out shrieking “Anybody there?” and returned seconds later, his clothes utterly soaked.

A capricious gust of wind caught the top of a nearby pine. With a fearful moaning sound it seemed to be gesticulating wildly, warning them to stay in the house, its frantic, flailing sound suggesting imminent danger.

Johnny closed the shutter door firmly and snapped the locking button. Chris went into the main room and locked the doors there. Just as he was pushing the floor bolt into its socket a screen broke loose on the veranda and slammed a walking stick leaning against it into an adjacent glass pane. It seemed to explode in splinters across the room. Suddenly he envisioned one of the tentacles of the Doom-Nads from Frenzied Freak sliding through the fracture, seeking out the lock with an intelligent, malevolent purpose. He let out a startled shout and rushed back to the others in the dining room slamming the intervening door behind him.

Everyone looked at each other expectantly. Suddenly they seemed to be quite content now with the close quarters of the dining room, allowing the fire in the old stone fireplace in the living room to die down to an ineffectual glow. Occasionally a little spark would reignite a log and send a flickering light to dance around the room, starkly illuminating the door with its broken panel, as yet untried by Doom-Nad tentacle. The corners of the large room were lost in deep shadows in which shapeless horrors seemed to lurk. Sarah tried to convince herself that the light she had seen earlier was just such a freak spark that had somehow reflected in the black windows and given the impression of a flashlight moving across the open rock. There was heavy apprehension in the air and from time to time one or other of the huddled group glanced up anxiously

at the little black panes surrounding the room, afraid that they might glimpse there something unexpected which they wouldn't care to see.

Beyond the myriad dots of reflected light Sarah had an uneasy sense that they were being watched through every window pane and wall crack, scrutinized by a jealous, cold and bloodless presence craving their little centre of warmth.

The card game continued nervously in the corner of the dining table, an act of defiance to delay the inevitable moment when everyone would have to creep upstairs to the wind tossed attic rooms and leap into cold, clammy beds, hoping to fall asleep, eyes screwed tightly shut and ears muffled by blankets. They would need to be very tired to achieve a sleepy oblivion in minimal time.

Andrew, ever busy with his hands, had begun to thread the remains of the Spagett-E-O's onto a stick skewer. Sometimes this mode of witless activity baffled and irritated Sarah. She appreciated the essential exploratory nature of all art but occasionally she could not understand how the activities of her brothers fitted into any general scheme of evolution. Despairingly she asked herself whether all generations had to go through the Spagett-E-O playstage, whether her own children in years to come would be sitting around the table totally absorbed in achieving dubious and transient artistic

distinction. Was it going to be any better in the new Millennium that they were planning for?

Owen, who was busily sorting his cards into suits, had a tendency to hold the inactive suits in his mouth while the suit to hand was being put into order. They were playing a very complicated version of Murder Rummy which involved the better parts of a number of incomplete packs. Great efforts were made to maintain the secrecy of their hands.

Chris had set about constructing a tower out of the redundant cards that he had lifted surreptitiously for the other witless players. He had already collected the rejected, dog-eared cards which were so obviously identifiable that they could impart little suspense to a hand.

Johnny leapt up suddenly knocking over the salad bowl which rolled onto the floor spilling its contents. "Let's make some of that popcorn and ... and who votes for caramel topping?," he proposed with a transparently false exuberance as he picked up a few stray lettuce leaves and dropped them again in the bowl.

Before anyone could vote against caramel topping he had stalked off into the kitchen and there were noisy sounds of rummaging for pots and the assembling of ingredients. Johnny was getting into his stride; Sarah

thought to herself and shivered with apprehension. Ariane slipped off to keep him company and view with incredulous delight his *modus operandi*. She was accustomed to an ordered and fastidious life at home but there was something thrilling about seeing all of the pot lids pulled out of the cupboard at once, all the mixing bowls dragged out from their recesses, all the spoons and implements used briefly and then discarded in a heap in the sink. It was like some nightmare episode of *The Guerrilla Gourmet* without a huge crew backstage to cart away the debris. Nevertheless she always enjoyed these ventures to the brink of chaos - purely as an observer.

The caramel sauce took some time to prepare. At first it was attempted in a cast iron frying pan which tilted its contents into a burner flooding the top of the stove and sloshing onto the floor in little sticky puddles. The mixture was then transferred into a variety of mixing pots. Ariane had the impression that the woodbugs on the shelves over the stove were lined up and applauding appreciatively the operations being carried out below.

Johnny looked up at the black window panes, shuddered at their blank emptiness and returned to rummaging for the measuring spoons with renewed vigour. The kitchen filled up with a sweet smoky smell. The popcorn which was being accomplished at the same time as the caramel topping burst into a frenzied

barrage of pops, drowning out even the relentless pounding of the heavy rain now mixed with lashings of hail on the roof.

As billows of smoke began to rise above the caramel pot the air took on an acrid odour. Johnny quickly added more water to the mix giving it a quick stir and with a flamboyant sweep drenched it over the popcorn. Though the results were not entirely plausible, he knew that they would be appreciated. You simply cannot go wrong with so much sugar. With a great flourish he bounded into the dining room, the bowl held triumphantly over his head, leaving Ariane to turn off the stove and clear a path to the sink.

It took only a fraction of a second but Sarah seemed to see the whole episode as if in slow motion. On entering the room, he slipped slightly on the sticky caramel saturating the soles of his shoes, and threw his head back while the big wooden bowl heaped with caramelized popcorn hit the lintel of the doorway. The effect was astonishing. The whole room seemed to be showered with sticky popcorn, a kind of explosion of materials which almost mimicked the bombardment of the elements occurring outside. There was a sudden clap of thunder as if the elements outside were applauding.

Johnny froze, stunned at the transformation that he had wrought in a mere moment. He caught the bowl



as it flipped and stood motionless. The astonished card playing boys burst into peals of glee, applause, then awkward silence. There was popcorn everywhere, sticking tenaciously to all surfaces. Popcorn even seemed to be attached to the ceiling rafters, starry dots of reflective light in the overhead gloom. Ariane emerged from the kitchen and struck a classic dramatic pose, hand to forehead, a picture of inconsolable grief which broke the stunned silence. Everyone suddenly burst into a whoop of delight. Then with practical purpose she returned to fetch a broom and clear a path across the room.

“Don’t anyone move, or we’ll just tread it all into the floor. I think I can hear the woodbugs cheering heartily from the sidelines.” Having restored good humour she swept clear a lustrous path of sticky syrup, opening up a route or potential movement without crushing the soggy kernels into the linoleum.

Sarah could see how disappointed Johnny was with the results of his generous labours and biting her lower lip just a little she turned her head again to touching up a milkweed sketch in her Official Minutes notebook as if not really affected by the instant squalor visited upon the room. Andrew attempting to accommodate the unforeseen developments as just another of the bounties of the natural environment began employing the sticky popcorn to hold together his own increasingly

ambitious edifice of cards.

Sarah glanced up at the windows and saw the reflections of disbelief registered on all the faces. Then, suddenly, she saw it again, a dim, shimmering light moving across the rock in front of the house. "Look! It's there again ... These can't be reflections from our fire or the lamps, they're moving so slowly and deliberately. Look! Now, it seems to be wending its way down the path towards the bell tower."

Johnny took a look around the room and announced resolutely that he and Andrew had better go out and investigate. "Perhaps it's someone who has got lost and just a bit shy about barging in upon us."

Sarah thought that perhaps they must have taken a glance through the dining room windows at the squalor within and thought better about it ... setting off to find some more rewarding group to offer succour.

Johnny was now heard to be rummaging at some length in the back room finding raincoats for himself and Andrew. He seemed uncharacteristically solicitous that 'the Dude' should be properly equipped. They suited up in expansive black rubber foul weather gear, reaching almost to the ground. They opened the back door a crack and slipped off into the night towards the path down to the docks.

“There go two brave Ninjas,” hooted Owen in a hollow sinister voice. Ariane continued to attempt to establish order and good humour in the room. Sarah got up to help.

At first they were grateful that they had a moment to re-colonize the kitchen. They stacked dirty dishes and mopped the floor. But as time passed, the room became rather quiet, no-one feeling able to break a mood of suspense. Then they began to get worried. Johnny and Andrew had been away almost twenty minutes in this miserable night.

“What could they possibly be doing even if they were helping someone in a beleaguered boat? Surely they would bring them up to the house?”

“Perhaps they’re just hiding in the Pagoda until the kitchen mess is cleaned up”, suggested Matthew practically. He was becoming attuned to the functioning of his cousins’ minds.

This seemed quite plausible, though Sarah recalled that the woodbox in the Pagoda was quite empty. Without a fire in the stove, it would be a very uninviting environment.

Just as Sarah was searching out an umbrella for a trek along the path to the other house, there was a

clamour at the door and Johnny and Andrew slipped into the room and stood dripping by the door.

“Where on earth have you been? I was just coming out to look for you.”

“Oh nowhere in particular.” Johnny answered mechanically and sat down in his seat without taking off his dripping raincoat. Andrew sauntered over to his position by the cards and, also dripping, set about re-assembling his card edifice as if nothing had happened.

“Well, was there someone there? What did you find? Didn’t you invite them up?”

“Oh, nothing much really.” Johnny seemed even more distant and noncommittal than usual.

Sarah was uneasy. Their behaviour was certainly suspicious but Sarah could not quite put her finger on the exact nature of what it was about their manners that seemed more than usually exasperating and contrived. She felt certain that they were hatching some little plot and she was determined not to fall into some trap. Moreover both the boys seemed to be surreptitiously studying the activities of the others out of the corners of their eyes as if expecting to learn about something that had happened during their absence.

“So what is it you two? What are you up to?” Sarah enquired in an exasperated voice.

Both boys shook their heads vacantly, as was their wont.

Andrew got up from the table and went into the kitchen. He returned with a plate of popcorn and Spagett-E-O's which he had obviously fished out of the compost pail. He sat down again to his card house construction. Mavis looked at Sarah and rolled her eyes in sympathy.

Johnny positioned himself in front of the laptop computer yet again and the Doom-Nad Music prelude to the game provided an unwelcome termination to any further sensible conversation. Andrew got up to hover around behind him and peer into the screen over his shoulder, utterly transfixed as if he had never before witnessed the compelling glory of Frenzied Freak. But a startling change seemed to have come over both of them. Unaccountably Johnny had suddenly worked out all the variables in the game and was now able to predict the appearance of each DoomWhelp and prepare to evade or dispatch it.

Within minutes the seventh circle of Doom had been penetrated and the fate of the evil empire of the Doom-Nads was sealed. He pushed aside the machine

in disgust. The others began to wonder whether all these months of struggle just added up to a moment of triumph followed by such disparagement as he sat there still bundled up in his dripping raincoat. To further astonishment Andrew, who usually kept a guarded distance from Frenzier Freak, practically wrestled the machine from Johnny's hands to embark on another similar romp through the Dingy Dungeon. He too was greeted with stellar success eclipsing even the experts' scores. He too seemed to be able to anticipate each move as if unaware of the possibility of chance or unpredictability.

Sarah was pulling herself together for a spot of interrogation when suddenly Johnny, anticipating her leaped up and shouted, "I know, Let's make some more popcorn with caramel sauce!" There was a stunned silence as both Johnny and Andrew trooped off into the kitchen. Again there was the rummaging of pots, lids and implements like a whole percussion passage from an atonal symphony. Owen and Stuart went over to the kitchen door and peered through in bafflement watching the chefs crouched over the stove. Everyone remaining in the dining room felt that they had permanently lost their appetites for caramelized popcorn. Yet there were the two boys attempting a further batch with the same gusto as before. Minutes later billowing clouds of acrid smoke again blew in from the kitchen.

“This is totally ridiculous!” groaned Sarah, but she didn’t see how she could restore order except by going to bed. Even the prospect of more caramelized popcorn made nobody anxious to leave the drowsy warmth of the dining room and ascend to cold, damp beds in the attic.

Again Johnny appeared at the door of the dining room carrying the large wooden bowl over his head. All eyes were fixed on him with incredulity. With a deft upward movement coupled with a delighted squeak he flipped the bowl upwards and again a shower of popcorn exploded across the room.

No one said a word; they all just stared in utter bewilderment.

“Have you gone totally mad?” Sarah wailed.

Neither of the boys seemed to be possessed or on the verge of delirium. Having repeated his startling manoeuvre, Johnny stood stalk still grinning demonically at the assembled group as if waiting for his next cue. Mavis speculated on whether she had entered some kind of time warp, or extreme case of déjà vu. Had not all these events occurred exactly one hour earlier? Was Johnny trying to prove some addled minded scientific theory about the relativity of time? Had the two boys been hatching this bizarre recurrence



while they were out in the gale together?

Surveying the scene of their manufactured disaster with some satisfaction the two boys ensconced themselves again in front of their laptop, heads almost touching and quickly became immersed in their fantasy worlds.

What could possibly be the reason for so deliberately re-enacting the embarrassing accident that had occurred so shortly before? The table was ringed by people, jaws agape in astonished incomprehension.



## J & A SEE THE LIGHT

**B**ut when Johnny, followed closely by Andrew, had stepped out onto the rain lashed rock leaving behind the chaos in the dining room they both looked around overawed by the terrifying forces that Nature had unleashed. In the pitch black night they could not even see a distant twinkle of a friendly light across



the bay. The feeble flashlight carried by Johnny traced a little dot along the path and Andrew found himself feeling his way along behind. The details of the terrain were so deeply etched in their minds that they could navigate the paths instinctively as a blind man might.

There was a roar of whitecaps in the channel below crashing against the shore and the relentless sinister drum beat of waves caught in a hollow crevice in the rocks, a rolling, throbbing funereal dirge. In the distance they could make out the complaints of the metal boat rubbing against the dock timbers, a hysterical gibbering sound of some demented banshee.

“We had better check the boats at least.” Johnny bopped his brother over the head as if this would somehow buck both their spirits.

“There don’t seem to be any visitors at least. What we saw must have been fireflies.”

“Or maybe marsh gas” Andrew piped in hesitantly. There was a doubtful apprehension in his voice.

As they proceeded down to the docks, Johnny glanced back at the warm radiant light from the dining room, a tiny dot of warmth and security in this maelstrom. He thought sadly of all the popcorn now embedded in the linoleum. It had all looked such a triumph only

moments earlier.

The floating dock had broken loose from its anchorage and had been pushed up against the shore where it was awash with whitecaps breaking over it. There was no sign of the jaunty little wind surfer that had been dragged out earlier when the wind was picking up. How typical that no one ever considered windsurfing until the wind had escalated to Force 8 and was uppermost in everyone's minds. At that point it would be impossible to keep anything upright.

There was a sudden violent wrenching sound from behind the boathouse. Andrew winced apprehensively and then grabbed Johnny's arm in surprise.

"Look Johnny! There's that flickering light again!"

The two boys peered at a dazzling pinprick of light in the area alongside the boathouse. It was clearly not produced by a flashlight; it shed no beam onto the surrounding terrain.

Instead it seemed a self-contained arc of dazzling high voltage spiralling like a pinwheel. The light quivered, then extinguished as if a baleful eye had blinked. Not without hesitation the two boys approached.

"I think that we can rule out fireflies in this gale ...

and marsh gas?” Andrew looked apprehensive.

Neither of the boys was prepared to admit the thought uppermost in their minds was “UFO”- An Unidentified Flying Object sighted on Fairwood Island”.

The light did not seem to hold the slightest interest in them. It blinked gently and moved away shyly, enticing them forwards.

As they cautiously approached the back dock, Johnny pointed up the hill. The shimmering light had moved again, heading along the ridge of the back path towards the Pagoda. In this retreating behaviour it seemed more tantalizing than threatening and they broke into nimble pursuit.

They reached a clearing where a hoary old stump exposed to weather on the rock caught the feeble beam of their flashlight in such a way that the two boys recoiled as if having encountered a crouching bear. The tree tops over head seemed hysterical with violent gestures warning them off. The spiralling light suddenly disappeared again leaving them in total darkness. Disappointed they turned to grope their way back to the house but soon became aware of being enveloped in a faint glow that was apparently gaining intensity. The rock surface began to glow with a ghastly pale radiance.

“It might be an electrical disturbance, from sun spots something like the Northern Lights,” said Johnny in an awed voice. “Yes” squeaked Andrew tersely.

Gazing upwards they could see that the spiral of light that they had been following had expanded into a huge cone which drifted down slowly enveloping them. They found themselves at the vortex of a spiralling tornado of energy. The light strengthened and became dazzlingly bright, the concave surface overhead became glassy smooth and reflective. Johnny and Andrew could see their own reflections in the foreground. Beyond they seemed enveloped by a metabolism of close packed pulsating cells shimmering with a phosphorescent light and an energy flow that seemed to be sparking from one cell to another along erratic paths.

On inspecting their slightly beleaguered appearance in the reflective glassy surface, kitted out as they were in dripping raincoats in the midst of all this luminous glory, Andrew pulled down the rim of his hat to impart a more reassuringly dauntless look.

To their astonishment their reflections seemed to be taking on lives of their own. The reflection of Andrew did a full 360 degree pirouette posing in his raincoat while the flesh and blood Dude was doing no such thing. Johnny started to test his own reflection with a series of unpredictable movements and thought that

he caught it out in several gestures. He was alarmed by the flicker of mechanical satisfaction that he seemed to glimpse in his own reflected eye.

But then they were utterly bewildered when the two reflections seemed to tire of this charade and peeling themselves free they turned away like unsuccessful doctors who could do no more for their patients and retreated back into the network of pulsating, glowing cells.

“I don’t think that we have raised these spirits. It’s almost as if they were mining our brains, milking us for our personalities.”

“Our personalities?” Andrew looked most sceptical.



## POSSESSED

**B**ack in the dining room Ariane had been observing Johnny very closely as he stood there,





popcorn bowl in hand, motionless as if waiting for his next cue. She seemed perplexed as she watched him bound to victory with Frenzied Freak. Johnny had apparently picked up her uncertainty and was observing her discreetly out of the corner of his eye.

Then to everyone's complete surprise Ariane suddenly proposed, "Oh Johnny isn't it time for you to go up and roll out our sleeping bags like you usually do for us?"

"Uhh! Guess so. Oh yes just like usual", the two boys repeated in mechanical unison."

The two boys looked at each other for reinforcement. "Is the world going mad?" thought Sarah. The thought of Johnny and Andrew making up beds without a major protest was wildly improbable. "What has come over Ariane now? What did someone put in those Spagett-E-O's? Or is this some sort of pre rehearsed play and only I have been left out of the secret?"

Johnny nodded assent and followed by Andrew, with the coveted laptop computer tucked under his arm, trooped up the stairs without further question.

As soon as they had left the room Ariane walked over to the door with a casual demeanour and closed it firmly behind them, then she turned excitedly back to the table.

“Don’t you see something unusual about your two little brothers? No, I mean, even more weird than usual? Your brothers or whatever they are aren’t like your brothers at all; they’re learning a script as they go along. They’re studying us, and they’re copying everything we’re doing or think they should be doing. They’ve already figured out the Frenzied Freak conundrum which nobody had come close to solving in all these past weeks. That was easy for them. They’ve been watching us all evening, how the boys do everything, how they behave. Now they’ve come back to take their places. I’ve had that eerie sensation all along that we were being closely watched.”

“But what has happened to the real Johnny and Andrew?” Sarah seemed intrigued by the possibilities. “Perhaps their minds have been sucked out by these watchful spirits who think that they could provide better versions.”

“Oh Ariane! You’re such a dramatist!” But Mavis looked worried as if she could see some point in what Ari was saying.

“Either that or they’ve been possessed by demons ... and rather impressionable ones at that” Sarah felt temporarily attracted to new and much more malleable versions of brothers, the kind that might go off dutiful to her command and make the beds. She was unwilling to

dismiss the sudden unexpected turn of events without assessing possible advantages.

“Or perhaps we have all been munching on Zombie mushrooms,” Stuart suggested.

“No, I’m serious, those creatures are not your brothers, why look at the way they figured out Frenzied, it was as if they had a whole totally different perspective on the laws of chance. They could see patterns which are not apparent to normal human beings, let alone your brothers. I mean, we think that all these games are based on a chaos principle that nothing is ever predictable, but let’s face it, if we’re dealing with a machine here, it’s a limited creation. A machine can only mimic an appearance of unpredicted chaos or what appears to be chaos to the human mind. Ultimately it is all discoverable. All you need a more sophisticated machine.”

“But is there any room for co-incidence? I mean it seems unlikely that it was a coincidence that the popcorn has exploded around this room twice in one night.” Mavis flung her arms out to suggest the sudden chaos.

“Well I think that a lot of coincidences aren’t really what they appear to be at all - for instance when you meet someone coincidentally that you have been





thinking about only a little before as if you foresaw the meeting or willed it to happen. I think that there are a lot of other patterns in all the information that we're taking in that we don't understand as straight cause and effect but which make the outcome, like the apparently chance meeting quite inevitable. It's as if we are unconsciously tuned into an invisible environment that we're only faintly aware of, yet it keeps cropping up as a sense of *Déjà vu*."

"For instance we can't see radio waves, but it doesn't mean that they're not there or any less real than the light waves you can see." suggested Mavis.

"But if we are really dealing with some sort of malignant robotic automata up there - there might be some advantages to consider in the Jon and Dude case - I mean we might as well not dismiss this out of hand without considering possible silver linings. Perhaps we should try out a productive angle and reserve judgement till later. Certainly they're plausible; they're not going to frighten Mum and Dad out of their wits. In fact it might be just what they were hoping for!" Sarah was only too attuned to the down side of daily life with her brothers.

"No," said Ariane, "if ever there was a case for distinguishing Good and Evil, this is it - and they're Evil."

Matt, Stuart and Owen's jaws dropped in unison at their cousin's crisp pronouncement.

"But of all the people, why would they choose Johnny and the Dude to mimic? Surely someone should have warned them."

"Probably because of the laptop. Probably they think that Frenzied Freak is the norm that everyone aspires to and they saw in your brothers the zenith of that aspiration," suggested Mavis.

"And success in monopolising it too," added Stuart.

"Perhaps it's something that their kind of robotic intelligence can relate to."

"What we've should do is set a trap - a clever trap that only a machine could fall into." Ariane buried her head in her hands pensively.



## WORLD OF COINCIDENCES

**M**eanwhile Johnny and Andrew who had stood stunned as their reflections seemed to peel themselves away from the mirroring luminescence and wander off, began to move into the pulsating network of luminous cells and interconnecting galleries. The walls that surrounded them seemed to throb with iridescent light forming half recognizable patterns, shapes that seemed vaguely dreamlike and identifiable like the suggestive shapes of clouds on certain days or of leafless tree branches.

“It all looks a little like the world of the Doom-Nads” croaked Johnny as he peered down a long luminous corridor past galleries of side chambers. There was no trace of where their independent reflections might have hidden themselves in this maze, though they were aware of what seemed to be silent cinder-like shadows flitting by in the distance.

“We’d better watch out or we may get totally lost in this maze”. A practical suggestion, but Andrew looked





totally lost already.

They passed through a splendid glowing portal into a golden luminous grotto. There in the middle lay the missing windsurfer which had blown off the dock earlier in the day.

“Kind of a strange coincidence that this should turn up here only moments after we were talking about it.” Johnny peered into an adjoining area and whistled.

“Look, there is the tiller arm that you were looking for yesterday. It was here all along.” Andrew rushed over in disbelief.

“And look, there is that walking stick that you were adapting to fit instead as a tiller arm when you couldn’t find the proper one. This is ridiculous. What are all these things doing here in a heap? Are they just being conjured up in our minds in some kind of dream state?”

“But Jaw, that’s the same stick that we just saw smashing through the glass in the front door, half an hour ago, it’s impossible that it has got over here already.”

Johnny picked up the stick and examined it closely. It felt quite firm in his hand. He knew its feel only too well now.

“This isn’t just a series of coincidences. Everything here seems to be interconnected. Each cell seemed to be surrounded by groups of other cells which are somehow strangely related.”

Johnny and Andrew moved on excitedly from room to room continually encountering relationships of one object to another in their immediate vicinity, links that they had never really recognized before but seemed somehow correct through some kind of dreamlike logic. Yet all seemed tangible and real at the same time. Johnny held onto his walking stick, something comfortingly familiar.

They realized that they were becoming increasingly lost in this maze of light. It was as if they had entered a world tied together by an endless string of coincidences which when examined closely proved not coincidental at all.

“I think that we should follow the brightest of the passages, seeing that we seem to be totally lost already. We might as well find out where all this light is coming from.”

“There doesn’t seem to be anything to prevent us. Whatever this is it doesn’t seem intent on hurting us.”

“Perhaps it’s just intent on losing us?”

No sooner had Andrew uttered these words than a great black form lunged out of one of the side galleries. It must have been lying in wait. The space seemed to fill up with flailing limbs and appendages. It was clearly identifiable as a Doom-Nad. With an unexpectedly high pitched whining sound two claw-like mandibles reached out and grabbed Andrew around the waist. They seemed to be pulling him into a spiralling vortex of light mounted on its undercarriage.

Johnny hadn't a moment to think about what he was doing, he just raised his stick and brought it down full force over the antenna covered head of the predator. There was a frenzied thrashing of uncoordinated limbs. Andrew broke free of its vise-like grasp. The crippled creature attempted to grasp out again for its persecutor but its malevolent pincers probed the air in vain. The two boys retreated into a side alcove and watched its death throes.

"Is it really alive or do you still think it's some sort of machine?" whispered the Dude.

The twitching remains looked very mechanical. The two boys watched as the vortex of light energy in the undercarriage of the creature began to fade and disappear. The crumpled remains became inert and crumbled away as the light faded entirely.

“It looks like you hit it in exactly the right area, where it is most vulnerable, where all the antennae are.” said the Dude, retrieving his rain hat and pulling down the brim over his eyes. “

“It looks more than a little like one of those Doom-Whelps in Frenzied Freak,” croaked Johnny, still rather overcome by his fortuitous success in disarming it.

“Well, what can we do now, except follow the directions of the brighter lights and hope to avoid any more of these creatures lurking in the shadows?”

They proceeded cautiously down the gallery, peering into side caverns to see what else might be hidden in the dim light. They made out the obscure forms of objects, some of them long forgotten friends, old bikes, kites, the stolen skates, all connected with their past lives. Who knew what mysteries lay in the maze of caverns beyond? But their brave desire to wander freely and explore at random had been eradicated by the encounter with the sudden appearance of that monster.

As they cautiously rounded a corner into a side gallery, always following the brighter light, Johnny grasped the Dude’s shoulder which made him start back in horror. Up ahead they could see another Doom-Whelp lying in wait.

“We’ll have to try the same tactic. You go ahead and attract its attention and I just lurk here in the side niche and knock him in the antennas,” Johnny explained reassuringly.

“But isn’t it my turn to have the walking stick, while you do the attracting?”

“No, that stage of our plan comes a little later.” Johnny was adamant. Andrew moved reluctantly toward the lurking creature, attempting to whistle a distracting ditty. “O.K. Mister Doom-Nad , I can see you.”

The creature pounced with the same voracious, frenzied movements as before. Again the cavern filled with the hysterical, high pitched buzzing sounds like a demented cicada, which seemed to emanate from the energy spiral in its undercarriage. Johnny brought the walking stick down with a thunk over the creature’s antennae, just as it was introducing Andrew’s head into the whirling vortex maw.

“Teamwork ! How’s that for teamwork?” he shouted expansively!

Andrew collapsed to his knees on wobbly legs. “I think that it’s your turn now on the front line.”

“It’s just like that part in Frenzied Freak when we

enter the Vale of Doom, and get caught in a deadly competition to outwit the demonic Nads. These creatures are just machines. They can obviously copy patterns and collect our past history but they are not at all intuitive. They're vulnerable because of that. But who knows what the motivations of their creator might be. Who is controlling them and what it is that he is trying to get from us?"

"It's just like Frenzied Freak too! Who knows the motivations of its creator for that matter?"

"Well if we don't know, why are we still going in the direction of the light? Maybe we should be going the other way."

The boys glanced back at the gloomy cavern that they had passed through. This looked the considerably less inviting option. So cautiously they advanced along the gallery skirting the walls ever ready to retreat into a side chamber if detected. Johnny had to explain to Andrew yet again that his turn had still not come to wield the walking stick.



## SETTING THE TRAP

“**B**ut what kind of trap could we set, and what would it prove? It might just stir things up needlessly.” Sarah looked dubious about Ariane’s determination to confront the situation before advantage had been fully studied. It all sounded far too hypothetical.

“Well the one thing that a machine can’t undertake is the truly unexpected. And that’s something that your brothers tend to excel in I would think. A machine can copy the image of the unexpected as for instance in Johnny’s recent scene of showering the room with popcorn. It can come up with a devious set of rules to give the semblance of erratic human behaviour, but when it comes to poetic intuition like the lines you are drawing in your mushroom sketch, the machine will never figure out how to do that. The machine will never decide that one mushroom sketch is better than another without a very complete and rigid rule book for reference.”



“But the question remains whether human beings can come up with the totally unexpected - or are even our accidents predictable? Perhaps we’re just like machines as well, only messier, and responding to a huge variety of influences which give the illusion of individuality and free decision.” Mavis was unhappy mulling over this idea.

“Perhaps we can will them back to the typical erratic behaviours of Johnny and the Dude by just imposing our expectations on those creatures that are at this very moment doing what is quite unexpected. They are obviously capable of learning very fast.”

“Perhaps what we should do is play along, but make our expectations of what is normal totally impossible.” Chris suggested.

“Yes, but what kind of thing can we do?” Chris looked very perplexed. He was shuffling nervously through the various incomplete decks of cards, trying to locate all the aces.

“If we were able to create some sort of never-ending operation, like a ‘do-loop’ for a computer - that could really flummox a machine. It would just keep repeating the same operation over and over again into a total breakdown mode.”

“But what kind of exercise?” Mavis’ and Ariane’s eyes focussed simultaneously on the cards cascading from Chris’ hands and everyone in the room mouthed the same words at exactly the same time ... “Murder Rummy!”

“Yes! How about that? A tournament between the two robo-boys, like a duel to the death, where one or the other has to win all the cards. With these card decks in the condition they are, that should take just about forever.”

“But Johnny and Andrew think they are above all that not that they have a laptop,” Owen added plaintively.

“These robo-brothers seem programmed to pick up on the expectations we project. That’s obvious from their following Ariane’s request so unquestioningly. Somehow what we need to do is project our own expectations and assumptions onto them so that they will just embark on a Murder Rummy tournament without question.”

“Surely we could come up with something a little more useful, like perhaps cutting down all the dead trees on the island for firewood ..?”

“Or digging a root cellar in the solid granite under the cottage?



“That would be interesting to explain to our parents.”

“No, that might be a little too fraught with pitfalls, - too many opportunities for them to pick up contradicting intelligence and spin out of the loop. We should keep it painfully simple, and what could be more painfully simple than Murder Rummy?”

“Well, we can only try it and see what happens,” proposed Ariane. “When those robo-brothers come back down again, we have got to all have it firmly in our minds that they normally play Murder Rummy until one or other of them wins outright. It’s what we all expect.” Chris rubbed his hands together in glee. Owen gave Matt a kick under the table.

The chaotic sounds of rummaging and moving of beds around upstairs began to die down. Then there was a thundering of heavy feet as the two boys descended the creaky stairs. Johnny entered with his laptop still under his arm. Andrew followed. They stood expectantly observing the group.

“Well, I guess this is the night of the big tournament you were planning. Are you both ready for it?” Sarah announced as confidently as possible. “I guess its my turn to make the popcorn now,” she added.

“Oh yes, it’s tonight isn’t it?” Robo-Johnny looked

clown at his laptop wistfully. Perhaps that's all he really wanted to do - to get his hands on the laptop and play with it like he had seen the boys doing earlier in the evening. The thought crossed her mind.

Chris, Stuart and Owen played out one last hand demonstrating as fully as possible the very rudimentary rules. The robo-brothers seemed to get the hang of it immediately and sat down at the corner of the table. Emma plodded over to Johnny, sniffed, whined and moved off perplexed that she had not received her customary biff on the head.

Robo-Johnny started to deal as Mavis placed Andrew's official Treasurer's Record Book in front of him with a first column for scoring neatly ruled off. As an afterthought Sarah went off to the kitchen and returned with a huge sack of slightly grubby popcorn retrieved from the bin. Then the rest of the group bid a cheerful 'good night' and trooped off upstairs leaving the two boys crouched over a table scattered with cards. They decided to bed down together in sleeping bags in the big room at the far end of the house.

No one felt at all sleepy. At first they feigned sleep, listening to the constant howl of the wind about the house and the angry slapping of the waves down in the channel.

In the distance their ears tuned to faint noises from the dining room where they could hear the game progressing in its own inevitable course punctuated by the occasional petulant thump as a fistful of cards was dropped onto the table.



## PLAYING THE GAME

**E**xhausted in their wanderings through the network of cells, the two boys felt that they must have dispatched dozens of these hideous creatures by now. Andrew's turn had still not come to wield the stick and there had been some very close calls in which he felt himself blacking out and setting off on a voyage down the shimmering spiral of energy, only to be pulled out and revived after what seemed to be an eternity by a triumphant looking Johnny. His brother was becoming quite pleased with his strategic techniques for dispatching these Doom-Whelps and had developed a special stylish stalking stance and flourish of the

stick accompanied by a high-pitched battle cry.

As they proceeded again towards the light Johnny and Andrew became aware of a murmuring of voices in one of the galleries. The voices sounded familiar and seemed to be calling out numbers petulantly.

The two boys entered a radiant cavern illuminated by overhead stalagmites of crackling light energy and found themselves face to face with their two escaped mirror images, huddled over a corner of the blue dining table and playing Murder Rummy. The images were totally absorbed in what they were doing, stopping only occasionally to note down some astronomical tally in their notebook.

“What are they doing?” whispered Johnny, “This certainly isn’t us. We haven’t played Murder Rummy in centuries – or at least not since last summer.”

“They seem to be much too preoccupied to bother with us anyway,” said Andrew as he eyed Robo-Johnny’s hand.

“Hey Dude,” whispered Johnny, “We saw these reflections trying to copy us awhile ago in the clearing - what do you think would happen if we served them some of their own medicine and tried to copy them copying us? That should get them really confused.

Imagine copying someone who was trying to copy you? Like in working through Frenzied Freak?”

“Well , we could try,” said Andrew dubiously. ‘But how would we get the right cards.”

“We don’t have to have the right cards. We can just make them all up - after all we’ve always been quite good at that.”

Johnny and Andrew entered the cell and pulled up the chairs opposite their mirror images, and each grabbed a fistful of cards from the pile. Their Robo-images looked up and observed them carefully but continued to deal out their hands.

Johnny and Andrew observed them with equal care, then followed every gesture as closely as possible, pretending that they were mirror images themselves and taking every cue from their opposite number. Before long they were really warming to the challenge, tossing down their cards at the same time and with considerable aplomb, shouting gleefully over purported victories, even though the numbers they threw down were all wrong. Their reflections seemed to become increasingly restless. They stood up and began to walk around the table. Johnny and Andrew instantly did likewise. They all sat down in opposite seats. So did Johnny and Andrew.





Suddenly as if they had communicated silently with each other the two doppelgangers leapt up, gathered up all the cards, scattered them to the winds and rushed out of the space to disappear among the flitting black shadows in the gallery beyond.

As Johnny and Andrew rose to follow them, the shimmering lights around them began to dim, and the cell structure quietly evaporated into the night. The two boys found themselves again out in the storm and alone in the blustery dark clearing. They found Andrew's dim flashlight still glowing on the ground beside them feebly probing the darkness of the glade.

"Oh, they forgot their scorebook - in fact, come to think of it, it looks rather like your Treasurer's Record Ledger." Johnny picked up the soggy notebook and handed it over to Andrew who stared at it puzzled.

"But where has our windsurfer gone?"

"Well it must be down by the pothole rock, where it seemed to be in the next cell. Anyway we can't do anything about that until tomorrow."

Johnny, still wielding his stick, and Andrew made their way back to the house. They were surprised to find all the lights burning in the dining room, cards lying everywhere about the room. Everyone had obviously

gone to bed. “How typical of Sarah to forget to put out the lamps. She’s always on another planet. What would she do without us to watch out for her?” said Johnny as he turned down the wicks. The two boys mounted the stairs to their bedroom. Andrew glancing down at the Treasurer’s Report in his hand laid out the ledger on the wood box in passing.

The two boys peered into the other bedroom, counted the right number of forms rolled up in various sleeping bags. Thinking the arrangement excessively crowded, they crossed the hall to their own bedroom. Within minutes they too were sound asleep.



## MORNING LIGHT

**T**he next morning the sun rose in a clear blue sky. The frightening turbulence of the previous day had disappeared completely, though the front rocks were strewn with fallen branches. The deckchairs left out in the rain had been blown off into the gulch below.

Everyone began to get up slowly, reluctantly as the sun's rays pierced obliquely through into the dim upstairs room.

The boys set off early to retrieve the sailboard. Johnny and Andrew seemed to know exactly where it would be found and they were overheard discussing it noisily on the front rock while Sarah was still lying upstairs in bed.

She heard Ariane call out from the front window. "Hey Johnny, who won your game of Murder Rummy last night?" She held her breath and there was a long silence - then a sudden hoot of derision followed by the

clattering sound of a number of folding chairs dumped on the rock. She turned away from the light, reassured and curled herself tighter under her warm blanket.

Sarah came down later to find Chris clearing up the shards of broken window glass from the front door. The huge sack of popcorn in the dining room was quite empty. But there was not a single playing card to be seen.

“What was that all about?” she wondered as she drifted dreamily into the kitchen.

During the morning Sarah came across the Treasurer’s Report in the wood box. As she flipped through the leaves, she found that the whole volume had been neatly ruled into columns and covered with tiny numbers that reached staggering scores. The numbers poured over the last pages and completely obliterated the rear cover of the record. She stared at it in horror considering how long it would take to complete so many rounds of Murder Rummy. Then letting the Record drop back into the wood box, she turned towards the door. The day looked so fresh, inviting and beautiful. She hesitated a moment, turned back and picked up the Record again. Lifting the fire screen she tossed the strange document into the fire and shuddered as if shaking off a bad dream. She watched it blacken, the pages curling back gradually, scorching around the

edges then consumed by flames.

She still had a vague sense of some tremendous missed opportunity.



