

There is a box. Inside that box is a door...
and beyond that door is a whole world.

THE WORLD HOUSE



“Strange and wonderful.” — *Garry Kilworth*

GUY ADAMS



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Advance Praise for
THE WORLD HOUSE

"A fearless grand adventure of escalating escapades and escapes so hair-raising that [Adams'] deranged imagination is barely able to contain them all. I knew we were in trouble as soon as the ostrich appeared. It's a fearless, hurtling hell of a debut."

Christopher Fowler

"Playful, intriguing and a barrel of laughs, *The World House* is a quirky, tumbling box of delights full of adorable eccentrics on a wild, wild ride. It really knocked me in the lobes! Great fun!"

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"An extraordinary feat of imagination. It is wonderfully bizarre, it is brutal, funny, disturbing and vivid throughout. It is populated by a genuinely entertaining and believable group of characters. Guy Adams has a hit on his hands. I want more."

James Barclay

"Guy Adams is either barking mad or a genius, I haven't decided. His truly fantastic debut is like being caught in a theme park with a killer clown – fun, adventure, the odd cream pie – and a sharp knife when you're not looking."

Mark Chadbourn

"An audacious, joyous roller-coaster of a book, and yet what makes it such a triumph is that even in its wildest excesses it never loses sight of the little people. *The World House* is a novel with lashings of heart and soul."

Mark Morris

an excerpt from
THE WORLD HOUSE
Guy Adams

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that, tell your friends...

CHAPTER ONE

They had threatened to break his legs if he didn't find them the money owed. It wasn't an inventive threat but the best never are. What's the point of intimidation if it's not easily imagined? You want the recipient to get their head around the concepts on offer, to feel the sensation of bones splintering inside their legs like shattered lead in a dropped pencil. With a *great* threat the pain starts the minute you finish talking.

For Miles Caulfield it had done its job, his every thought filled by men with lump hammers and an eagerness to use them. Perhaps that's what had happened? He couldn't be sure. His body felt distant, something important he owned but hadn't seen in a while, like a childhood memento stashed in the attic.

It was dark, with a smell so familiar as to have been beneath his notice for a moment: the muskiness of old things. Was he in the shop then, rather than his flat above? Perhaps they had dragged him down here amongst the junk and cobwebs to check

his till. To work their way through his shelves and display cabinets for something of worth. If so they needn't have bothered; the sign outside promised "the antique and collectable" but he would hardly be receiving leg-breakers at his door if any of it was valuable. It was a shop dedicated to the battered and broken, the discarded and worthless. He now realised that included the owner. Probably it always had.

So he was surrounded by the smell of old things but there was something not quite right about it. He had spent countless hours sitting amongst his own stock, flipping through a newspaper or completing a crossword. The sorts of pursuits one might involve oneself in when not distracted by the intrusion of customers. It didn't smell like this. This was real age, the sort of dust that might contain fragments of God. He tried to move again but his body was so remote to him that the simple act of twitching a limb was telekinesis. They must have done one hell of a job on him.

"They'll kill you, you know," Jeremy had said as they sat on the wooden bench teasing the ducks with the steaming contents of their takeaway containers. "It won't be quick either, I've seen enough movies, they'll make an example of you. Probably cut your dick off and stick it in your mouth."

Miles, a hunk of meat and bread turning to mush in his mouth, put the rest of his burger down and swallowed reluctantly. "Thanks for that."

“Just saying.” Jeremy mixed a slurry of ketchup and mayonnaise with a pinch of fries and popped them in his mouth. “That’s the kind of thing these people do.”

“We’re talking about Gordon Fry not Tony Soprano.”

“Just think of me when you’re gagging on your own bell-end.”

“Fuck’s sake...” Miles dumped his food in the bin and lit a cigarette to fumigate his mouth.

Jeremy gave him a dirty look, wafting the smoke away from his face. “I’m eating here, do you mind?”

Miles felt a tickle in his nostrils. In the absence of any other physical sensation he fixated on it. The feeling spread, like leaking oil, from his sinuses to his face. His cheek began to prickle against the wool of a carpet. That settled it, he definitely wasn’t in the shop. His floor was bare boards, all the better to wipe up after the tourists dripped their ice creams and trailed their muddy footprints. The dust bristled in his nostrils like static. He sneezed.

“Bless you,” Jeremy said, working his way through the contents of Miles’ shelves. “We’ve known each other long enough for me to be honest, haven’t we?”

Miles shrugged. “Apparently.”

“This really is all crap, isn’t it?” Jeremy picked up a tatty looking child’s doll, one of its eyelids fluttering at him while the other stayed in place over its sun-damaged blind eye. “You have an entire shop filled with rubbish nobody wants.”

"Some of it's collectable."

"Jesus, Miles, but no, it really isn't. You'd have more chance learning how to shit money than make it from this stuff."

"Remind me why we're friends again?" Miles asked.

"Because I'll always tell you the truth." Jeremy smiled, making the doll wave its chipped hand at Miles.

"Nobody's ever been friends for that. I know I haven't got any good stock, OK? If I did I wouldn't be in this situation. All the good stuff went ages ago."

Jeremy shoved the doll back on a shelf, causing a few items to tumble to the floor.

"Careful!" Miles shouted, "It may be crap but it's all I've got."

He walked over to pick the items up, ducking beneath the arms of a shop-window dummy who modelled a German steel helmet on her flaking bald head.

"Sorry." Jeremy, contrite at last, stooped down to help. "This is quite nice," he said, holding up a rectangular wooden box. "Where's it from?"

Miles, still angry at his friend, pointed at the Chinese writing burned into the pale wood. "Sweden, where do you think?"

Jeremy rolled his eyes. "No need to be sarcastic. Knowing you it's from one of the takeaways in town. How much do you want for it?"

"I don't want your money," Miles snapped, snatching the box off him. "I still have some pride left."

"That's all you'll have soon. Much use it'll be."

Miles sat down on the floor, energy deflated, his arms filled with worthless junk. "About as much as the rest of this shite, I imagine."

Jeremy sat down next to him. "I'd lend you the money if I had it, you know that."

"Then you'd be an idiot." Miles dropped the stock, the box falling into his lap. "I'd only gamble it away."

"Really?" Jeremy looked at him. "Even now, with the threat of a pair of broken legs – or worse – you'd blow it all if I gave it to you?"

Miles turned the box over in his hands. "In a heartbeat."

He promised himself it was the dust in his eyes making them water, not the memory of that conversation. Inch by inch his nerves were reporting in. His left thumb twitched. A spasm trickled along his arm. Immediately he tried duplicating the sensation. For a moment it was beyond him, but then he began to flex the muscle in the ball of his thumb. He would have grinned were his mouth not so numb. Soon his whole hand was twitching at the end of the wrist. There was hope yet.

"You haven't given up?" Fry had asked as Miles stepped into the bar. He gestured to the barmaid to pour him another glass of wine but didn't offer Miles a drink. "I fucking hope not, there's no fun – or profit for that matter – in my debtors just offering their necks up for the noose. Where's the sport in that, eh?"

“I need more time,” Miles replied, inching towards the barstool next to Fry but not quite daring to sit on it.

“Oh Christ,” Fry sighed, scooping peanuts from a ramekin on the bar, “you’re going to be a fucking cliché.” He popped the nuts into his mouth, slapping his fingers together to knock away the salt. “Please, save me from the ‘more time’ conversation. I really haven’t the energy for it. It’s been a long day. I just want to work my way through this wine and then find some blonde cunt to treat like shit for a few hours. Is that so much to ask?”

Miles opened his mouth to speak but Fry held up a finger to stop him. Miles watched the bar lighting bounce off the grains of salt stuck to Fry’s manicured nail. He had the ludicrous notion of licking them off.

“If you were about to say, ‘I can get the money,’” Fry continued, “then you should be warned that my response would have been to smash the stem of this wine glass and put your fucking eyes out with it. It’s an even bigger cliché than ‘I need more time’. Jesus...” he took a sip of his wine “...feel like I’ve wandered into an episode of fucking *Minder* or something. You can’t have any more time and I sincerely hope you can get me my money as I’ll turn you into a spastic if you don’t.” He beckoned the waitress over. “Get this twat a ten-quid chip for the tables,” he told her before turning back to face Miles. “Take the tenner, piss it up against the wall – just to show I’m not an unfriendly sort of fucker – and then come back tomorrow with my money or I’ll smash your

kneecaps, all right? It's perfectly simple: cause and effect, black and white, you pay or we hurt you."

The barmaid returned with the gaming chip. Fry took it off her and tossed it to Miles. "There you go. From small acorns great big pissing fortunes grow – you might even win me my fucking money back."

Miles stood there for a moment, wanting to fling the chip back at Fry and be the bigger man. He was still imagining what that might feel like when he handed it over to the croupier on the blackjack table and took the cards she dealt.

He had one good hand but the other still refused to move. That was OK. If he could get the feeling back in one then logically it would return in the other. He scratched at the carpet. It was deep and expensive but matted with dust. Any money here was old and long undisturbed. His neck loosened and he found he was able to rub his face on the pile, a friction burn developing in his cheek. There was a noise from somewhere to his right and he clenched his hand, automatically preparing to defend himself. It came again: the rustling of feathers.

After he had played (and lost) his ten pound chip, he spent the last few quid in his pocket on rolling tobacco and cheap wine. He sat in the darkness of his shop, rolling thin cigarettes and quaffing the wine from the bottle. The amber sheen of the streetlights made everything in the shop look unfamiliar and two-dimensional. He shuffled his way through the

stock, turning it over in his hands before hurling it across the room. A chipped decorative plate went first. Originally it had celebrated the Queen's Jubilee, now it rejoiced at nothing more than vented anger, shattering against the wall and showering the floorboards with china fragments. Then the child's doll that Jeremy had played with. Miles wrenched its limbs from its sockets, flinging them over his shoulder before dropping the rattling plastic skull to the floor and cracking open its smiling face with the heel of his shoe. Then a pewter tankard turned into a makeshift hammer to pound a selection of thimbles to dust in their wooden display case. He reached for the Chinese box, meaning to reduce it to splinters, but stopped as its surface rippled in the light of the streetlamps. He fumbled it in shock, dropping it to the floor. It must have been a combination of the cheap wine and lighting, but he could have sworn it had moved. He

stared at it, daring it to repeat its trick. It refused. He took a swig of wine and rolled another cigarette, staring at the box, not trusting it enough to take his eyes off it.

That rustling again as something moved past him in the darkness. He managed to windmill his arm across the floor, ignoring the pins and needles. He tried to put his weight on it to turn himself over but his palm beat uselessly at the floor, the nerves shot. He tried again, fighting against the elbow's inclination to bend uselessly. He placed his palm gently against the

carpet and fought to stiffen his arm. Once convinced it would hold him, he pushed. A thin strand of saliva pulled from the corner of his mouth as he flipped successfully on to his back. He wiped his lips with a tingling but functional hand. He still couldn't see anything so he flexed his fingers again and burrowed in his jeans pocket for a cigarette lighter. He snagged his fingers on the disposable lighter's flintwheel just as he sensed something draw close. He heard foot-falls on the carpet, felt the vibration of its weight through the boards. There was a slight displacement of air as something leaned over him. Pulling the lighter from a nest of loose change and pocket fluff he spun the wheel and found himself staring into the black eyes of an ostrich.

The delusion, if that's what it had been, had taken all the energy out of Miles' anger so he took the box upstairs to stare at in some degree of comfort. The wine was done but in a twist of good fortune he found half a bottle of cheap-shit calvados in the kitchen cupboard. He'd bought it when trying to impress a date by his ability to cook. It burned all the way down his throat, whether with alcohol or regret was impossible to tell.

He placed the box on the stained coffee table in the lounge, turned on all the lights and sat down on the carpet to roll another cigarette. While he packed strands of tobacco, tangled as pubic hair, into the centre of his cigarette paper he tried to remember where he had bought the box. After a

while the auctions and house clearances had a habit of blending together. An endless parade of tatty banana-boxed "treasures", things once precious reduced to funky-smelling trinkets wrapped in decades-old newspaper. He had a vague memory of a house near Coventry, the stink of a dying man's piss, and ticks in the upholstery. Hadn't there been a whole chest filled with decorative boxes? The spoils of a youth in the navy? He picked up the Chinese box, meaning to open it. The lid wouldn't shift; possibly the wood was warped or the hinges rusted. Now the box was so close to his face he became aware of a noise, a gentle ticking from inside it. He held it next to his ear and listened. It was a precise but unrhythmic clicking, not clockwork, more the sort of noise a beetle might make. He turned the box over in his hands, shaking it and rubbing his thumbs along its edges. The ticking grew louder. Suddenly, something sharp stung his palm and he dropped the box. Rubbing at the sore flesh on his hand he watched a red weal, like an insect bite, begin to develop.

He pulled his mobile out of his pocket and called Jeremy. The phone rang out a few times before his friend's voice groaned into the receiver. "Miles? Bloody hell... do you know what time it is?"

When his friend spoke, the box stopped its noise, as if shy.

"No," Miles admitted, glancing at his watch. He'd lost a few hours somewhere along the line: it was nearly two in the morning. "Sorry... didn't realise it

had got so late. Listen, that box..."

"Are you drinking?"

"Of course I am, what else is there to do in my current situation? I'd be eating heroin like toffee if I had any. You know the box you were looking at? The Chinese one?"

"Please tell me you didn't wake me up to sell me antiques."

"Don't be stupid, there's something..." How to pin it down without sounding mad? "There's something weird about it. When I was looking at it I thought it changed shape. Now it's ticking."

"You really have been drinking, haven't you?"

"Jesus!" Miles' exasperation made him clench his teeth "It's not the bloody wine, all right? I'm pissed but I'm not hallucinating... There's something seriously weird going on."

"I'll tell you what's weird," Jeremy replied. Miles could hear him getting out of bed and turning on a light. "That's the fact that you've got a bunch of thugs waiting to pay you a visit and you're just sat in your flat messing about with stock. If you can't find the money – and of course you can't – then get out of there, for fuck's sake. Come round here, or even better get yourself to a train station and bugger off somewhere. What about that friend of yours in London? Gary something... go and kip on his floor for a few weeks."

"And then what?"

"I don't bloody know!" Jeremy's voice distorted in Miles' ear. "Stay there, I suppose! Anything's better

than just sitting around waiting for them to come knocking on your door.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Miles muttered, hanging up. A few seconds later Jeremy rang back but Miles ignored it.

He wouldn’t run, though he couldn’t have told Jeremy why, not without sounding pathetic. He had just sunk too low. Movement, thought, self-preservation... they all required energy, they needed him to care. Right now, the only thing he could sum up any enthusiasm for was this damned box. It began ticking again.

“What are you about?” he muttered. A throbbing pulse of drunkenness surged through his head as he moved, his brain bobbing like a boat in a storm. He nudged the box with his foot, nervousness vanishing alongside the last few crumbs of his giving a shit. He rubbed at the mark on his palm but it didn’t hurt. He sat down on the floor, his back against the nicotine-stained paintwork that he had promised himself he would touch up for the last three years.

The box flipped over and landed on its base. Miles stared at it, unsure how to respond. The ticking continued to grow in volume, an angry jazz rimshot that made his left eyelid twitch.

The ostrich cricked its neck, startled by the fire from the lighter, and there was a dry, tearing noise like a baguette being broken in half. A cloud of dust sprinkled from its throat and it opened its beak with the creak of a pair of rusted garden shears. The heat from

the flame singed Miles' thumb and he let the light go out. Panicking in darkness all the more dense for the flame's absence, he blew on his thumb and spun the flint wheel, desperate to reignite it, sparks leaping into the dark and vanishing quickly. Finally, the flame lit and the ancient bird gave a startled squawk. It reared its head back and, with another cry, thrust it forward, stabbing at Miles' hand. Now, without thinking about it, Miles found he was able to move a little more, the upper part of his body rolling to one side as he tried to avoid the angry pecking. The beak punched the small of his back as he pulled himself out of the way, his legs dragging uselessly behind him. He lashed back with his right arm, catching the bird on the side of its head with his fist. The bird gave another squawk and retreated in a rustle of feathers. Miles kept pulling himself along the carpet, clouds of dust stinging his eyes. A dull throb pulsed in his lower back from where the bird had hit him. His hand smacked against a wooden pole. He ran his fingers up and down it, feeling its bulges and contours. It was a table leg, stout enough to be Regency (the absurdity of his trying to date the thing by touch, given his current situation, was not lost on him but it was hard to break the habit of a lifetime). He pulled himself past it, rolling on to his back and feeling the underside of the table above. Hopefully it might offer some protection. The ostrich was trotting to and fro some distance away; he could hear its scaly feet pounding the old carpet. It wasn't alone – the whole room seemed to be coming to life: there

was creaking and hissing; a sound like someone tapping on a window; a shuffling of something large pulling itself along the floor; a low growl... The scent of age was growing stronger too, sweet and dusty, making him want to sneeze or vomit, perhaps both. Something jumped on to the table he could hear its claws tapping as it walked along the wood. *Tap... tap... tap...*

He woke to a knocking on the door and, for a second, thought the sound must be coming from the box. He was still sat in the corner of his room, unaware of the moment when he had lost consciousness. Daylight shone through the windows, making him squint. The knocking came again, echoing along the stairwell that led from his flat to street-level. His door wasn't used to visitors and there was only one man he could imagine eager for his company (or, more precisely, his wallet). Surely he still had a few hours to find the money? He checked his watch as the knocking came a third time, staring at its hostile face and the late afternoon it swore he had woken into. The person at his door ran out of patience and started rattling at the lock.

Now that the threat was solidifying, becoming an actuality rather than an abstract, he realised he hadn't been scared at all. Fear, *real* fear, was the surge of nausea he felt right now, curdling the cheap red wine in his stomach and turning his lower jaw to jelly. How could he have imagined that he could just sit here and take what had been promised to

him? Getting to his feet he slammed a hand to the wall to steady himself as his legs buckled and his stomach ejected the previous night's self-pitying booze in an arc across the paintwork. There was no time for cleanliness and he ran through to the kitchen and his back door. The rear of the flat boasted a wooden balcony with a row of steps that would see him in the delivery area behind the building; from there it was a short jog to the street.

The person at the front door was working the lock. Miles could hear the careful investigation of metal on metal as the tumblers were forced to roll over and let the intruder in. He pulled at the handle of the back door, spitting some of the filth from his mouth in anger as he realised it was locked. He yanked the kitchen drawers open, hunting for the key. He found it, still wearing the rental agency address tag on a length of old, thick string. He shoved it into the lock. He heard the front door open behind him as the key turned, heavy feet beginning to ascend the stairs. The back door was stiff and the wood cried out as he wrenched it open. If he could just get on to the street he had some hope of giving his pursuers the slip. Surely they would be wary of attacking him in plain sight?

"Don't be a dickhead," Gordon Fry said, standing on the balcony just outside Miles' door. "Give us a bit of fucking credit, yeah?"

The feeling of safety offered by the table began to wane. Miles couldn't begin to imagine what was

pacing up and down above him but the sound of its claws, tapping and scratching on the polished wood, was all he needed to know to be afraid. The growling was getting closer too, though the animal must surely be sick as the noise was too harsh to come from a healthy throat. Perhaps it was also lame; certainly it was dragging itself rather than walking towards him. There were more birds, tuneless whistles and squawks and the occasional whoosh of air as they flew past the table, stirring the dust with the beating of their wings. Sometimes the noise would stop with a dull thud as they found the perimeter of the room, beaks pounding into wood-panelling like inaccurately thrown pub darts. There was a dry rattle, a maraca shaken in the dark.

Miles, terrified of snakes, found a cold sweat beginning to form on his forehead as he imagined its dry belly curling its way along the greasy carpet. He held the lighter in his hand and wondered whether to strike it. He couldn't decide whether it might attract the creatures or scare them off. He rubbed his thumb indecisively along the flint wheel as the noises drew nearer...

After so long insisting he wasn't going to run, it now seemed he couldn't stop. It was completely pointless, of course; he could hardly lose them in a one-bedroom flat. Fry knew this and took his time stepping into the kitchen, closing and locking the door behind him, casually poking through a couple of the cupboards out of sheer nosiness. The two men that he

had brought with him – who had proven so adept at forcing locked doors – also knew their quarry was going nowhere. They followed Miles into the lounge as casually as if they had been invited, perhaps to discuss Our Beneficent Lord or the benefits of solar panelling as an alternative energy source. Miles wasn't fooled by their nonchalance, nor did he think for one minute that the heavy-looking canvas bag that one of the men dropped on to the sofa contained promotional literature. There was the chink of metal against metal as the objects inside the bag tumbled together. It was a deceptively prim noise, like the tapping of champagne glasses during a wedding toast.

The men had the sort of bland appearance that was only found in the true professional: long wool overcoats, pink muscular heads razored baby-arse smooth. They showed no sense of eagerness for the task ahead but no concern either. Miles, on the other hand, was so concerned that he was close to losing all physical control. He was shaking violently as he watched Fry enter the room nibbling on a chocolate biscuit he'd found in the kitchen. His legs desperately wanted him to run and he didn't altogether disagree, just had no idea where or how. Fry, noticing the purple spray of wine-laced vomit that bruised the wall in the corner of the room, grimaced and threw what was left of the biscuit on the floor.

"Heavy night, was it?" he asked. "If it weren't for the fact that you were trying to fuck off over the back wall I'd hope it was in celebration of getting me my money."

Accepting there was no way he would walk out of the room, Miles started trying to talk his way out instead. His jaw was shaking so much with nerves that he couldn't get his words out straight. Fry punching him in the face didn't help.

"Think how I feel," Fry said, the small amount of feigned civility he had offered gone, "coming all the way over here, only to hear the bad – if not altogether surprising – news that I'm deeply out of pocket." His cheeks were reddening as he got angrier, pounding his shiny leather shoes into Miles' legs and belly. "Hardly fucking fair, is it? I lend you some money, you don't pay it back and now I'm supposed to be the bad man for taking it out on you. Well, *fuck you!*" He gave him one more kick to the arse, sending a wave of pain through the base of Miles' spine. "Thieving fucker."

Miles was hunched, foetal, trying to protect himself from Fry's kicks – though, Lord knows, in a few moments he would likely look back on them as the gentlest of kisses. Despite the fear, despite the sight of one of the bald men unzipping the canvas bag and pulling out a pair of wooden blocks, despite Fry wiping at his spittle-covered chin with his coat sleeve and looking sorely tempted to resume his attack, despite all that... Miles became aware that the wooden box was ticking again. He twisted his head to look at it, his interest, once again, somewhat inappropriate to his circumstances.

Fry certainly felt snubbed, stepping over Miles to snatch the box from the floor. "Worth something, is

it?" he asked, shaking the box in his hands, maybe to silence the ticking. Miles found himself scared to see the box manhandled in such a fashion, though he knew he was due for heavier treatment.

"Fucking *fucker!*" Fry shouted, verbose as ever, slamming his hand to his mouth as if to shove the words back down his throat. Miles glimpsed a trickle of blood on the man's lips and realised he'd caught himself on the box. "Cunting thing," Fry mumbled, sucking his wound. He threw the box at Miles, who instinctively grabbed it.

And promptly vanished.

Miles gritted his teeth, waiting to feel the gentle curl of the rattlesnake against the soles of his feet. The floor vibrated with the pounding of the ostrich, and he heard a whistle of air and a rattle from the snake that suddenly went distant as it was snatched in the bird's mouth. Miles bent double with relief, his stomach churning. Above his head, the clawed creature began hopping up and down and yapping. This made Miles feel doubly relieved. He was damned if he was going to cower in fear of what sounded like an asthmatic terrier. Emboldened, he spun the lighter's flintwheel and screamed at the sight of a tiger's wide-open mouth a foot or so from him. The big cat growled and again Miles had a moment to wonder what was wrong with the animal that it could sound so ruptured. With a reflex action he shoved the lighter towards it and was startled to see that it froze as the light of the flame drew close. Its wide-open

jaw, its sharp fangs... utterly still, like a paused piece of film footage. Suddenly aware how close his fist was to the animal's mouth, Miles moved it away a few inches. As he did so the tiger came back to life, freezing again as he returned the lighter to where it had been. So... as long as he held the flame right to its eyes the animal wouldn't move. Right... of course... not a safety tip he had ever picked up from wildlife documentaries but he couldn't argue with the evidence. He held the lighter as close as he dared, his thumb beginning to burn.

He could hear the ostrich running towards the table but didn't dare shift his attention away from the tiger and its shiny yet dead eyes. The flame of the lighter danced secondhand in its pupils. His thumb grew hotter but he reasoned that the pain of a burned thumb was nothing compared to having the whole hand bitten off. There was a flicker of movement from his right that he hoped wasn't the ostrich wanting to pick another fight. Surely nothing was likely to advance while the tiger stood so close? His thumb continued to singe. There was movement again and the... wait... how could he see anything anyway? He turned his head slightly, enough to see the room taking shape around him as gas lamps in the walls glowed brighter while he watched. His thumb slipped off the lighter and the flame died. The tiger, with a fresh growl, hurled itself at him only to slump almost instantly, its fangs fixed around the arm he had raised to defend himself. It was a rug, which explained why it had sounded so lame in the

darkness, though not how it could have come to life with hunger on its mind. He threw it to one side and crawled out from under the table, getting shakily to his feet.

Gripping the edge of the table to steady himself, he looked around what appeared to be a Victorian-style billiard room. The space was filled with stuffed creatures. The ostrich frozen mid-step, stiff rattlesnake held in its beak. A deer rearing up on withered back legs. The creature he had heard above him was nothing more intimidating than a raccoon, its tail threadbare, a hole where one of its eyes had tumbled from its dry socket. There were deep scratches in the table surface, and cobwebs that had hung between a set of crystal decanters had been torn apart, caught in the raccoon's ears and raised paws.

Miles walked over to a case fixed on the wall. The glass was cracked from the pounding of the fat, flightless bird within. Its beak still poked from the white-ice of broken glass.

He moved around the room and saw tarantulas that had been marching in formation across the baize of the billiard table; distorted heads of horned game that had been howling noiselessly, their voice-boxes lost to the taxidermist's trash bin; a small iguana, half-peeled with age and damp, mouth clamped on the cold and empty egg of a pheasant; a peacock, with tail furred and head cocked to one side, appearing almost as curious as Miles about its surroundings. Saddest of all, a large black bear, no longer forced

into a majestic or threatening stance, curled in the corner of the room, a single heavy paw covering its eyes.

He ran over to the far side of the room, grabbed the heavy glass knocker and turned it in both hands, desperate to get out. The door swung open, bringing him face to face with a short woman wearing an old-fashioned bobbed hairstyle and nothing else. There was a pause as each took in the presence of the other and then the woman screamed. Miles found his adrenalin spent. It's not that a man can't panic in front of a naked woman – he can and frequently does – more that he mustn't let it show.

“It's all right!” he insisted, “I won't hurt you.”

To his credit he sounded perfectly genuine but she kicked him square in the balls anyway, just to be sure.

