Angelmaker

Nick Harkaway was born in Cornwall in 1972. He is the author of *The Gone-Away World* and *The Blind Giant*. He lives in London with his wife and daughter.
Visit his website at www.nickharkaway.com.

ALSO BY NICK HARKAWAY

FICTION

The Gone-Away World

NON-FICTION

The Blind Giant

Praise for *Angelmaker*

'A puzzle box of a novel as fascinating as the clockwork bees it contains, filled with intrigue, espionage and creative use of trains. As if that were not enough to win my literary affection, Harkaway went and gave me a raging crush on a fictional lawyer. Still, I will hand *Angelmaker* to people and tell them to read it for the dog. That way they can discover the multitude of additional reasons to read it on their own.'

Erin Morgenstern, author of *The Night Circus*

'This brilliant, boundless mad genius of a book runs on its own frenetic energy, and bursts with infinite wit, inventive ambition and damn fine storytelling. You finish reading it in gape-mouthed awe and breathless admiration, having experienced something very special indeed.'

Matt Haig, author of *The Radleys*

'You're in for a treat . . . Dickens meets Mervyn Peake in a modern *Mother London*.'

William Gibson

'An absurdist triumph . . . Entertaining and imaginative . . . A novel that seems like an unlikely and wonderful collaboration between Ealing Studios and Mervyn Peake . . . Harkaway's prose style is effervescent and witty . . . Harkaway manages the ideal blend of paying homage to a very British sense of decency and fair play, while at the same time idolising the rule-breakers.'

Stuart Kelly, *Scotland on Sunday*

'*Angelmaker* is an intricate and brilliant piece of escapism, tipping its hat to the twisting plots of John Buchan and H Rider Haggard, the goggles-and-gauntlets Victoriana of the steampunk movement and the labyrinthine secret Londons of Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair, while maintaining an originality, humour and verve all its author's own . . . 500 pages of chases, subterfuges and double-crosses that sometimes resemble *Count of Monte Cristo*-era Dumas seen through the prism of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. New twists and turns are produced with showmanlike relish . . . Harkaway's story is a joyously old-fashioned one at heart . . . *Angelmaker* must have been huge fun to write, and it is huge fun to read. It offers a wonderful example of how restrictive our thinking on genre can be: a fantasy espionage novel stuffed with energetic, elegant writing that bowls the reader along while reflecting profitably on the trends of the times. Gleefully nostalgic and firmly modern, hand-on-heart and tongue-in-cheek, this is as far as it could be from the wearied tropes that dominate so much of fantasy and SF. I can't wait to see what Harkaway does next.'

Daily Telegraph, five stars

'What kind of a mind dreams up *Angelmaker*, a nutty, sprawling sprint to save the world from a sinister cabal of veiled monks who want to unleash a clockwork book that could bring an end to conscious life in the universe . . . It could only be Nick Harkaway: bonkers, brilliant and hilarious . . . Effervescent, clever and entirely fantastic.'

Sunday Times

'Nick Harkaway's joyfully reckless invention is as intricate as clockwork . . . Edie has a tangled history, the uncovering of which is one of the chief pleasures of Nick Harkaway's novel . . . Because, frankly, simple plot synopsis quails in the face of *Angelmaker* . . . But however much psychologists may be tempted to pick apart Harkaway's patrimony, I find it far less interesting than the simple fact that *Angelmaker* is one of the most enjoyable books I've read in ages . . . Like his debut *The Gone-Away World*, this is a joyful display of reckless, delightful invention, on a par with the rocket-powered novels of Neal Stephenson, if in rather more ironically diffident English form. Ideas come zinging in from all corners, and do so with linguistic verve and tremendous humour. Even the bad-tempered pug is funny and accurate in every detail . . . If *Angelmaker* perhaps starts a bit slowly, and you have to agree to be cheerfully confused by the plot for a good while before it starts making sense, then those are small concerns. Once it gets going, it's brilliantly entertaining, and the last hundred pages are pure, unhinged delight. What a splendid ride.'

Patrick Ness, *Guardian*

'A jigsaw of pulpish tropes . . . But *Angelmaker* is a magnificent, literary, post-pulp triumph. Harkaway is something like a great big Labrador, bouncing up and down in front of you, demanding "Look at this! Look at this!", until you are infected with his joyous enthusiasm for, well, for everything . . . Enmeshing his enthusiastic discourses into the narrative as skilfully as Joe Spork manipulates his beloved clockwork gears . . . an entertaining tour-de-force that demands to be adored.'

Independent on Sunday

'A riotous fantasy involving automaton monks, East End villains and a plot to end the world. The real miracle is that it hangs together so brilliantly . . . It's an ambitious, crowded, restless caper, cleverly told and utterly immune to precis . . . [Makes] *Don Quixote* look sedentary. The octogenarian lady spy and the secret military prison, the serial killer and the guild of undertakers, the bumptious civil servants and the chairman of the Royal and Ancient . . . A stingier novelist could find material here for a decade's output, but Harkaway is anything but stingy. The miracle is that it all hangs together so well . . . Among Harkaway's many enthusiasms is an attachment to the recherché, or just the slightly odd . . . This is, no doubt, a hyperactive bit of storytelling, but despite all the hybridity and genre-bending, *Angelmaker* doesn't feel gimmicky. On the contrary, it feels agreeably old-fashioned. There is some well-managed Dickensian plotting, for one thing . . . With its lovingly handmade "Ruskinite" technology, there's something in *Angelmaker* that sets it apart from steampunk's usual fetishisation of industrial Victoriana. From its frantic oscillation between plausibility and fantasy emerges an odd, unique composite that deserves its own moniker . . . *Angelmaker* turns out to be a very timely novel about belatedness . . . Joe is in one sense a 21st-century everyman, indebted to a previous generation, disenfranchised by a conspiratorial state . . . *Angelmaker* turns out to be a solid work of modern fantasy fiction, coupling credit-crunch anxiety with an understandable nostalgia for the mythical days of "good, wholesome, old-fashioned British crime".'

James Purdon, *Observer*

'Harkaway's brilliance in this novel of adventure, love and intrigue is that he enjoys these stories and makes us remember how much we enjoy them. There is the stuff of nightmares here, but told in a light-hearted way that makes the reader grin with pleasure. It is also a fascinated homage not only to the pulp fiction of the past but also to a lost alternate England of craftsmanship: fast steam trains and back-room boffins whose gadgets beat fascism.

This is a complicated story in which every single detail is there for a reason, yet it has a heart. Harkaway gives us escapes that are exhilarating and romances at once tender and sexy. Its villain is a fascinating monster of the old school, given new access to power by ruthless bureaucrats. It gives us a London where every alley is a path to danger, every tunnel a cave of miracles. Harkaway has given us, for the second time, a box of delights.'

Independent

'Trying to categorise this big, wildly imaginative novel is enough to tie the brain in knots; it's a comedy, a thriller, a crazy fantasy . . . Harkaway has created a wonderfully entertaining, unguessable kaleidoscope of a novel. And e-book readers will miss the additional pleasure of a hardback that looks as gorgeously ornate as its contents.'

Kate Saunders, *The Times*

'Another fizzingly imaginative melodrama . . . A wildly, irrepressibly exuberant new-weird/ fantasy/ thriller /comedy.'

Daily Mail

'A must for fans of John le Carré and Jasper Fforde . . .'

Elle

'A story of technology and morality. It's a wonderfully strange, rich piece of work – extremely entertaining and exciting – and has a wonderfully comic aspect to it as well.'

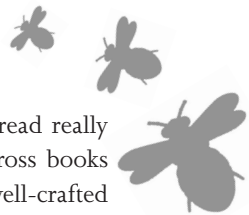
William Gibson, *New York Times*

'A rare kind of writer . . . A kind of bastard child of Wodehouse, Conan Doyle and Dumas . . . His second novel, *Angelmaker*, does not disappoint . . . His writing: enthusiastic, elegant, engaging, and a bit like a car chase through a library . . . There is something elegantly nostalgic about *Angelmaker* . . . It's a gleefully postmodern book in its weaving together of genres with imagery from comic books, film and TV, and its richly imagined setting of a London with underground passages and secret markets.'

The Scotsman

'A plot that moves speedily and unpredictably. Generically, it defies categorisation, leaping between comedy, steampunk fantasy, romance, *Bildungsroman*, social critique and Second World War spy thriller. In another novel, this might suggest that the author hasn't quite decided what it is that he's writing, but not here. *Angelmaker* is complicated and unusual and has little respect for traditional novelistic boundaries, but its confidence equals its ambition, and not for a moment do we doubt that Harkaway knows what he is doing . . . Original as it is, *Angelmaker*'s debt to Dickens is clear, and goes beyond an extensive cast list and characters with surnames like Titwhistle and Cummerbund. Harkaway shares Dickens's eye for the ridiculous, as well as his ability to move from absurdity to pathos within the space of a sentence . . . *Angelmaker* is an adult version of Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy . . . For all this novel's fiendish plotting, its verbal acrobatics, and its philosophical and scientific riddles, its chief delight is its protagonist's transformation from mild-mannered nobody to a hybrid of James Bond and Robin Hood. *Angelmaker* may be crammed with machines, but its heart is unmistakeably human.'

Literary Review



'Sometimes I forget how transfixing it can be to read really great writing . . . On occasion, though, I come across books which are simply filled with sentences that are so well-crafted that I want to savour them. I re-read sentences, sometimes out loud, because they're so enjoyable. A lot of books are fun to read for the plot; a smaller percentage display this artful mastery of the language. And precious few manage to do both. *Angelmaker* falls into that last category. Harkaway plays the English language like a mad virtuoso: he hits all the right notes but isn't above throwing in a bit of ornamentation and jazzing things up . . . If you appreciate a well-constructed sentence . . . then you should read *Angelmaker* for the writing alone. But (as they say) wait, that's not all! Ideally I could just convince you to read the book without telling you anything about the plot (which is extraordinary) . . . *Angelmaker* is like a Quentin Tarantino movie written by Neil Gaiman: larger-than-life characters, dry British humour, a heavy dose of the weird, and a bit macabre; horrendous things wrapped up in gorgeous language. It's also a great, action-packed book . . . An impressive book . . . It's the sort of book you want to let steep in your brain a bit before you take another taste . . . I can't wait to see what he comes up with next.'

Wired

'A joyously sprawling, elaborately plotted, endlessly entertaining novel filled with adventure, comedy, espionage, and romance, *Angelmaker* also deals with intriguing questions of free will and the nature of truth without stopping to take a breath. As if the book is made of clockwork, the pages turn themselves.'

Dexter Palmer, author of *The Dream of Perpetual Motion*

'*Angelmaker* is a refreshing oddity, and doesn't dilute [Harkaway's] fondness for the weird. It's a very British bastardisation of Chuck Palahniuk, Douglas Adams and China Miéville . . . *Angelmaker* is a success . . . [Harkaway's] writing style is the perfect foil for the killers, monks and other absurdities that throw themselves at Joe and Edie . . . Joe is a likeable protagonist, and his struggle for the quiet life, despite being thrown into a maelstrom of killers, scientists and a looming apocalypse, is oddly quite relatable. A fun read.'

Sci Fi Now

'A big, gleefully absurd, huggable bear of a novel . . . Harkaway's prose is playful and beguiling, with a keen satiric edge, and that makes all the difference. Harkaway isn't simply a funny writer; he adroitly *uses* humour to slide us gently into a given scene or character, and then invites us to settle in and root around a bit, the way you wiggle your toes once you've slipped on a comfortable boot . . . Harkaway has written a pleasantly roomy book, a grand old manor house of a novel that sprawls and stretches and invites you to do likewise on any one of its richly tufted fainting couches . . . In passage after passage, *Angelmaker* opens up, making room for the reader, until we aren't merely empathizing with Joe Spork's plight but feeling it keenly . . . That's the power of sheer, doughty *agreeableness*. Antiheroes who reflect our basest, ugliest selves are thick on the ground, and that's unlikely to change. All the more reason to applaud Harkaway for creating Joe Spork: not only like us but likable, a hero who serves not as a dark mirror but as a funhouse one.'

Slate

'Distinctive, creative and blessed with the kind of imagination that leaves his novels bursting with invention, Nick Harkaway certainly isn't an everyday author. His head-spinning debut *The Gone-Away World* mixed apocalyptic literary satire with off-the-wall SF and pulp adventure, and his follow-up shows no signs of him taking his finger off the button marked "Deeply Strange" . . . Demented . . . A dizzying read, packed with madcap intrigue and oddity . . . For all the wild adventure, this is a dense, determinedly literary novel . . . Contains plenty of cultish pleasures for readers willing to take on the challenge.'

SFX

'Harkaway's celebrated debut, *The Gone-Away World*, offered a gonzo take on postapocalyptic fiction, but it was really just a warm-up act – a prodigiously talented novelist stretching muscles that few other writers even possess – for this tour de force of Dickensian bravura and genre-bending splendour . . . Yes, there's espionage here, along with fantasy and more than a little steampunk, but there's also an overlay of gangster adventure, a couple of tender romance plots, and some fascinating reflections on fathers and sons and the tricky matter of forging a self in the shadow of the past . . . Harkaway's novel is at its core a powerful meditation on the anxiety of influence . . . This is a marvellous book, both sublimely intricate and compulsively readable.'

Booklist

'Nick Harkaway's novel is like a fractal: when examined at any scale, it reveals itself to be complex, fine-structured and ornately beautiful. And just like a fractal, all of this complexity and beauty derives from a powerful and elegant underlying idea.'

Charles Yu, author of *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*

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For Clare,
like everything else.

The gangster is the man of the city,
with the city's language and knowledge,
with its queer and dishonest skills
and its terrible daring,
carrying his life in his hands like a placard,
like a club.

Robert Warshow

I

The socks of the fathers;
mammalian supremacy;
visiting an old lady.

At seven fifteen a.m., his bedroom slightly colder than the vacuum of space, Joshua Joseph Spork wears a longish leather coat and a pair of his father's golfing socks. Papa Spork was not a natural golfer. Among other differences, natural golfers do not acquire their socks by hijacking a lorryload destined for St Andrews. It isn't done. Golf is a religion of patience. Socks come and socks go, and the wise golfer waits, sees the pair he wants, and buys it without fuss. The notion that he might put a Thompson sub-machine gun in the face of the burly Glaswegian driver, and tell him to quit the cab or adorn it . . . well. A man who does that is never going to get his handicap down below the teens.

The upside is that Joe doesn't think of these socks as belonging to Papa Spork. They're just one of two thousand pairs he inherited when his father passed on to the great bunker in the sky, contents of a lock-up off Brick Lane. He returned as much of the swag as he could – it was a weird, motley collection, very appropriate to Papa Spork's somewhat eccentric life of crime – and found himself left with several suitcases of personal effects, family bibles and albums, some bits and bobs his father apparently stole from *his* father, and a few pairs of socks the chairman of St Andrews suggested he keep as a memento.

'I appreciate it can't have been easy, doing this,' the chairman said over the phone. 'Old wounds and so on.'

'Really, I'm just embarrassed.'

'Good Lord, don't be. Bad enough that the sins of the fathers shall descend and all that, without feeling embarrassed about it. *My* father was in Bomber Command. Helped plan the firebombing of Dresden. Can you imagine? Pinching socks is rather benign, eh?'

'I suppose so.'

'Dresden was during the war, of course, so I suppose they thought it had to be done. Jolly heroic, no doubt. But I've seen photographs. Have you?'

'No.'

'Try not to, I should. They'll stay with you. But if ever you do, for some godforsaken reason, it might make you feel better to be wearing a pair of lurid Argyles. I'm putting a few in a parcel. If it will salve your guilt, I shall choose the absolute nastiest ones.'

'Oh, yes, all right. Thank you.'

'I fly myself, you know. Civilian. I used to love it, but recently I can't help but see firebombs falling. So I've sort of given up. Rather a shame, really.'

'Yes, it is.'

There's a pause while the chairman considers the possibility that he may have revealed rather more of himself than he had intended.

'Right then. It'll be the chartreuse. I quite fancy a pair of those myself, to wear next time I visit the old bugger up at Hawley Churchyard. "Look here, you frightful old sod," I shall tell him, "where you persuaded yourself it was absolutely vital that we immolate a city full of civilians, other men's fathers restricted themselves to stealing ugly socks." That ought to show him, eh?'

'I suppose so.'

So on his feet now are the fruits of this curious exchange, and very welcome between his unpedicured soles and the icy floor.

The leather coat, meanwhile, is a precaution against attack. He does own a dressing gown, or rather, a towelling bathrobe, but while it's more cosy to get into, it's also more vulnerable. Joe Spork inhabits a warehouse space above his workshop – his late grandfather's workshop – in a dingy, silent bit of London down by the river. The march of progress has passed it by because the views are grey and angular and the place smells strongly of riverbank, so the whole enormous building notionally belongs to him, though it is, alas, somewhat entailed to banks and lenders. Mathew – this being the name of his lamentable dad – had a relaxed attitude to paper debt; money was something you could always steal more of.

Speaking of debts, he wonders sometimes – when he contemplates the high days and the dark days of his time as the heir of crime – whether Mathew ever killed anyone. Or, indeed, whether he killed a multitude. Mobsters, after all, are given to arguing with one another in rather bloody ways, and the outcomes of these discussions are often bodies draped like wet cloth over bar stools and behind the wheels of cars. Is there a secret graveyard somewhere, or a pig farm, where the consequences of his father's breezy amorality are left to their final rest? And if there is, what liability does his son inherit on that score?

In reality, the ground floor is entirely given over to Joe's workshop and saleroom. It's high and mysterious, with things under dust sheets and – best of all – wrapped in thick black plastic and taped up in the far corner 'to treat the woodworm'. Of recent days these objects are mostly nothing more than a couple of trestles or benches arranged to look significant when buyers come by, but some are the copper-bottomed real thing– timepieces, music boxes, and best of all: hand-made mechanical automata, painted and carved and cast when a computer was a fellow who could count without reference to his fingers.

It's impossible, from within, not to know where the warehouse is. The smell of old London whispers up through the damp boards

of the saleroom, carrying with it traces of river, silt and mulch, but by some fillip of design and ageing wood it never becomes obnoxious. The light from the window slots, high above ground level and glazed with that cross-wired glass for security, falls at the moment on no fewer than five Edinburgh long-case clocks, two pianolas, and one remarkable object which is either a mechanised rocking horse or something more outré for which Joe will have to find a rather racy sort of buyer. These grand prizes are surrounded by lesser ephemera and common-or-garden stock: crank-handle telephones, gramophones and curiosities. And there, on a plinth, is the Death Clock.

It's just a piece of Victorian tat, really. A looming skeleton in a cowl drives a chariot from right to left, so that – to the Western European observer, used to reading from left to right – he is coming to meet us. He has his scythe slung conveniently across his back for easy reaping, and a scrawny steed with an evil expression pulls the thing onward, ever onward. The facing wheel is a black clock with very slender bone hands. It has no chime; the message is perhaps that time passes without punctuation, but passes all the same. Joe's grandfather, in his will, commended it to his heir for 'special consideration' – the mechanism is very clever, motivated by atmospheric fluctuation – but the infant Joe was petrified of it, and the adolescent resented its immutable, morbid promise. Even now – particularly now, when thirty years of age is visible in his rear-view mirror and forty glowers at him from down the road ahead, now that his skin heals a little more slowly than it used to from solder burns and nicks and pinks, and his stomach is less a washboard and more a comfy if solid bench – Joe avoids looking at it.

The Death Clock also guards his only shameful secret, a minor, practical concession to the past and the financial necessities. In the deepest shadows of the warehouse, next to the leaky part of the wall and covered in a grimy dust sheet, are six old slot machines – genuine one-armed bandits – which he is refurbishing for an

old acquaintance named Jorge. Jorge ('Yooorrr-geh! With passion like Pasternak!' he tells new acquaintances) runs a number of low dives which feature gambling and other vices as their main attractions, and Joe's job is to maintain these traditional machines – which now dispense tokens for high-value amounts and intimate services rather than mere pennies – and to bugger them systematically so that they pay out only on rare occasions or according to Jorge's personal instruction. The price of continuity in the clockworking business is minor compromise.

The floor above – the living area, where Joe has a bed and some old wooden wardrobes big enough to conceal a battleship – is a beautiful space. It has broad, arched windows and mellowed red-brick walls which look out onto the river on one side, and on the other an urban landscape of stores and markets, depots and back offices, lock-ups, car dealerships, Customs pounds, and one vile square of green-grey grass which is protected by some indelible ordinance and thus must be allowed to fester where it lies.

All very fine, but the warehouse has recently acquired one serious irritant: a cat. At sometime, one mooring two hundred yards up was allowed to go to a houseboat, on which lives a very sweet, very poor family called Watson. Griff and Abbie are a brace of mildly paranoid anarchists, deeply allergic to paperwork and employment on conscientious grounds. There's a curious courage to them both: they believe in a political reality which is utterly terrifying, and they're fighting it. Joe is never sure whether they're mad or just alarmingly and uncompromisingly incapable of self-delusion.

In any case, he gives any spare clockwork toys he has to the Watsons, and eats dinner with them once in a while to make sure they're still alive. They in their turn share with him vegetables from their allotment and keep an eye on the warehouse if he goes away for the weekend. The cat (Joe thinks of it as 'the Parasite') adopted them some months ago and now rules the houseboat by

a combination of adept political and emotional pressure brought to bear through the delighted Watson children and a psychotic approach to the rodent population, which earns the approval of Mr and Mrs W. Sadly, the Parasite has identified the warehouse as its next home, if once it can destroy or evict the present owner, of whom it does not approve.

Joe peers into the piece of burnished brass he uses as a shaving mirror. He found it here when he took possession, a riveted panel from something bigger, and he likes the warmth of it. Glass mirrors are green, and make your image look sick and sad. He doesn't want to be the person he sees reflected in a glass mirror. Instead, here's this warm, genial bloke, a little unkempt, but – if not wealthy – at least healthy and fairly wise.

Joe is a big man, with wide shoulders and hips. His bones are heavy. He has a strong face, and his skull is proud beneath the skin. Passably handsome, perhaps, but not delicate. Unlike Papa Spork, who had *his* father's genes, and looked like a flamenco dancer, Joe is most unfairly designed by nature to resemble a guy who works the door at the rougher kind of bar. He gets it from his mother's side: Harriet Spork is a narrow creature, but that owes more to religion and meals high in fibre than it does to genetics. Her bones are the bones of a Cumbrian meat-packer and his Dorset yeoman wife. Nature intended in her design a hearty life of toil, open fires and plump old age attended by a brood of sun-touched brats. That she chose instead to be a singer and more latterly a nun is evidence of a certain submerged cussedness, or possibly a consequence of the strange upheavals of the twentieth century, which made rural motherhood look, at least for a while, like an admission of defeat.

From somewhere in the warehouse, there's a curiously suffused silence. A hunting silence: the Parasite, having declared war almost immediately upon making his acquaintance, enters each morning via the window that Joe props open to stop the place getting stuffy when the central heating comes on, and ascends to balance on the

white moulded frame around the kitchen door. When Joe passes underneath, it drops onto his shoulders, extends its claws, and slides down his back in an attempt to peel him like an apple. The leather coat and, alas, the skin beneath – because the first time this happened he was wearing only a pyjama shirt – carry the scars.

Today, tiring of a.m. guerrilla war – and sensitive to the possibility that while he is presently single, he may one day bring an actual woman to this place, and she may wish not to be scalped by an irate feline when she sashays off to make tea, perhaps with one of his shirts thrown around her shoulders and the hem brushing the tops of her elegant legs and revealing the narrowest sliver of buttock – Joe has chosen to escalate the situation. Late last night, he applied a thin layer of Vaseline to the coping. He tries not to reflect on the nature of a life whose high point is an adversarial relationship with an entity possessing the same approximate reasoning and emotional alertness as a milk bottle.

Ah. That whisper is a silken tail brushing the mug tree with its friendly, mismatched china. That creak means the floorboard by the wall, that pitter-patter is the animal jumping from the dresser . . . and that remarkable, outraged sound must be the noise it makes bouncing off the far wall after sliding all along the coping, followed by . . . yes. An undignified thump as it hits the floor. Joe wanders into his kitchen. The Parasite stares at him from the corner, eyes spilling over with mutiny and hate.

'Primate,' Joe tells it, waggling his hands. 'Tool user. Opposable thumbs.'

The Parasite glowers, and stalks out.

Having thus inaugurated Victory Over The Cat Day, it is in the nature of his world that he should immediately be overtaken on the ladder of mammalian supremacy by a dog.

To get to his first appointment, Joe Spork elects to take a shortcut through the Tosher's Beat. This is in general very much against

his personal policy. He resolutely travels by bus or train, or even occasionally drives, because taking the Tosher's Beat is an admission of parts of his life for which he no longer has any use. However, the discovery of another garden full of Vaughn Parry's victims has brought a great deal of discussion in broadsheets and free papers regarding the nature of human criminality, and this is a conversation he devoutly wishes to ignore.

At the same time, certain recent events have given Joe a mild but undeniable case of the willies, and the Tosher's Beat has a feeling of security and familiarity which the streets above never really achieve. Blame his childhood, but shady alleys and smoke-filled rooms are more reassuring than shopping centres and sunlit streets. Although, even if Joe himself were not determined to be someone new, those days are over. Most of the Old Campaigners died early. The roly-poly court of crooks he grew up with is just a memory. There are a few still around, retired or changed and hardened, but the genial knees of crime on which the young Joe Spork sat, and from whose vantage he was initiated into the secrets of a hundred scandalous deeds, are all withered and gone.

Meanwhile, Vaughn Parry is England's present nightmare. Above and beyond Islamic extremists with rucksacks and policemen who shoot plumbers nine times in the head for being diffusely non-white, the great fear of every right-thinking person these days is that Parry was not unique, that there lurk amid the wide wheat fields and bowling greens of the Home Counties yet more bloody-handed killers who can unlock your window catches and sneak into your room at night, the better to tear you apart. Parry is in custody for the moment, held in some high-security hospital under the scrutiny of doctors, but something in him has cut the nation deep.

The upshot of this has been a scurrying of the middle classes for shelter, and a less-than-learned discussion of historical villains and in particular of Joe Spork's safe-cracking, train-robbing, art-thieving

father, the Dandy of the Hoosegow, Mathew 'Tommy Gun' Spork. Joe has a greater horror of this chatter than he does of the Tosher's Beat. Under normal circumstances he shies away from the idea that he is what a certain class of crime novel calls an *habitué of the demi-monde*, by which it is implied that he knows gamblers and crooks and the men and women who love them. For the moment, he is prepared to acknowledge that he still lives somewhat on the fringes of the *demi-monde* in exchange for not having to talk about it.

Inevitably, in crafting a thumbnail sketch of himself, he finds that it has turned into an obituary, to be held in readiness. *Joshua Joseph Spork, son of Harriet Peters and Mathew 'Tommy Gun' Spork the noted gangster, died childless before the age of 40. He is survived by his mother, now a nun, and by a small number of respectable ex-girlfriends. It must be acknowledged that his greatest achievement in life lay in avoiding becoming his father, though some might assert that in doing so he went too far towards his grandfather's more sedentary mode of being. There will be a memorial service on Friday; guests are requested to bring no firearms or stolen goods.*

He shakes his head to clear it, and hurries over the railway bridge.

Between Clighton Street and Blackfriars there is a cul-de-sac which actually isn't a cul-de-sac. At the very end is a narrow gap and a pathway which leads to the railway line, and immediately on the left as you face the tracks there's a doorway into the underworld. Through this little door goes Joseph Spork like the White Rabbit, and down a spiral stair into the narrow red-brick tunnels of the Tosher's Beat. The corridor is absolutely black, and he scrabbles in his pocket for his working keyfob, from which depends a small selection of keys and passcards, and a torch roughly the shape and size of a pen lid.

The blue-white light shows him walls covered in grime, occasionally scarred with someone's only immortality: *Dave luvs Lisa* and always will, at least down here. Joe breathes a sort of blessing

and passes by, stepping carefully around knots of slime. One more door, and for this he wraps a handkerchief around his mouth and smears some wintergreen ointment under his nose ('Addam's Traditional Warming Balsam!', and who knows why a balsam is exciting enough to merit that exclamation mark, but it is to Mr Addam). This one requires a key; the toshers have installed a simple lock, not as a serious barrier to entry, but as a polite statement of territoriality. They're quite content that people should use the road, but want you to know you do so by their grace. The Tosher's Beat is a webwork, but you can't just go where you will. You need permissions and goodwills, and sometimes a subscription. Joe's keyfob will grant him passage through perhaps twenty per cent of the safe tunnels; the others are held aggressively by official and unofficial groupings with a desire for privacy – including the toshers themselves, who guard the heart of their strange kingdom with polite but effective sentries.

Ten minutes later he meets a group of them, bent double over the noxious ooze and combing through it in their rubberised suits.

Back in the day – when London was pocked with workhouses and smothered in a green smog which could choke you dead on a bad night, or before that, even, when open sewers ran down the middle of the streets – the toshers were the outcasts and opportunists who picked over the ghastly mix and retrieved the coins and jewels lost by chance. Even now, it's amazing what people throw away: grandma's diamonds, fallen down inside their box, and Auntie Brenda taken for a thief; rings of all descriptions, cast off in a passion or slipped from icy fingers on a cold day; money, of course; gold teeth; and on one occasion, Queen Tosh told the infant Joe at one of Mathew's parties, a bundle of bearer bonds with a combined value of nearly ten million pounds.

These days, toshers wear gear made for deep-sea divers – well, the filth itself is bad enough, but there's worse: hypodermics and other gruesomenesses, not to mention the chemicals which are changing the world's male fish into females and killing all the

toads. The average corpse lasts a fortnight longer than it used to, pickled in supermarket preservatives. The work gang look like astronauts from another world, landed badly and picking through what they take to be primordial muck.

Joe waves to them as he hurries by on the raised pavement, and they wave back. Don't get many visitors, and still fewer give them a thumbs-up in the approved Night Market style, knuckles to the roof and thumb-up pointed at forty-five degrees. The leader returns the gesture, hesitantly.

'Hi,' Joe Spork says loudly, because the helmets don't make for easy comprehension. 'How's the Cathedral?'

'Clear,' the man says. 'Tide gate's shut. Hang on, I know you, don't I?'

Yes, he does: they played together as children in the velvet-hung torchlit corridors of the Night Market. The Tosher Family and the Market are cautious allies, tiny states existing within and beneath the greater one that is Britain. Gangster nations, however much diminished now from what they were when Joe was young. The Night Market, in particular, has suffered, its regents unable to inspire the kind of rambunctious, cheeky criminality which was the hallmark of Mathew Spork and his friends: a court without a king. *But let's don't talk about those days, I'm in disguise as someone with a real life.*

'I've just got one of those faces,' Joe mutters, and hurries on.

He slips through a door into the old Post Office pneumatic railway (at one stage, Mathew Spork owned a string of Post Office concessions around the United Kingdom, and used them to distribute and conceal all manner of unconventional wares), then down a side tunnel and a flight of stairs and into Cathedral Cave. Dug as the foundation of a medieval palace which was never finished, subsided now into the mud of London's basin, it's wet and very dark. The arched stone has been washed in mineral rain over so many hundreds of years that it's covered now in a glutinous

alabaster, as if this place were a natural cavern. When London's Victorian sewers overflow, as they do more and more in these climate-change days, the whole thing is under water. Joe suppresses a shudder of claustrophobia at the thought.

A rickety metal gantry leads through the room and through into the lower reaches of the railway, and then abruptly to an ancient goods lift which comes up near the riverbank: a highway for smugglers, ancient and modern.

The whole journey takes less than half an hour. You could barely do it faster in a car with an open road.

The dog's name is Bastion, and it is without shame or mercy. Any dog worth the name will sniff your crotch on arrival, but Bastion has buried his carbuncled nose in the angle of Joe's trousers and shows no inclination to retreat. Joe shifts slightly, and the dog rewards him with a warning mutter, deep in the chest: *I have my mouth in close proximity to your genitals, oh thou man who talks to my mistress over coffee. Do not irk or trifle with me! I possess but one tooth, oh, yes, for the rest were buried long ago in the flesh of sinners. Behold my jaws, upper and lower in righteous, symmetrical poverty. Move not, man of clocks, and heed my mistress, for she cherishes me, even in my foul old age.*

It's a tiny animal, the shrunken remains of a pug, and as if poor dentition is not enough, it has absolutely no natural eyeballs. Both have been replaced with substitutes made in pale pink glass which appear to refract and reflect the interior view of Bastion's empty sockets. This ghastly decision lends considerable sincerity to the growling, and Joe elects to allow the animal to continue drooling on his groin.

Bastion's owner is called Edie Banister, and she is very small, and very wiry, and apparently goes back slightly further than the British Museum. She has a tight cap of silver hair through which, in places, the freckled skin of her scalp is visible. Her face – proud eyes and strong mouth suggesting powerful good looks in her day

– is so pale that Joe imagines he can actually see the bone through her cheeks, and the wrinkles on her arms are folded around one another like melted plastic, all scrunched up in unpredictable directions. Edie Banister is *old*.

And yet she is profoundly alive. Over the past few months, she has found reason to call upon the services of Spork & Co. on several occasions. Joe has come to know her a little, and in this respect she reminds him of his grandfather, Daniel: she is almost vibrating with rich, distilled energy, as if the process of living all those decades has made a reduction of her spirit which is thick and slow in her chest, but sweeter and stronger for it.

Bastion wears his age less well. He is uglier than anything Joe has seen outside a deep-sea aquarium. He seems an unlikely companion for a woman like Edie Banister, but the world, Daniel once observed, is a great honeycombed thing composed of separated mysteries.

Joe has cause to know this for the truth. When a child, he inhabited a variety of secret places, courtesy of his bad dad, and though he has very firmly left those places behind, with their daring characters and picturesque names – the Old Campaigners, the Sinkhole, Kings Forget – he has discovered that every aspect of life is a strange gravitational system of people-planets, all orbiting unlikely suns such as golf clubs, theatres, and basket-weaving classes, falling prey to black holes like infidelity and penury. Or just fading away into space, alone.

And now they come to him in their droves. Dotty, aged, and absent-minded, they file through his doors clutching little pieces of broken memory: music boxes, clocks, fob watches and mechanical toys they once played with or inherited from their mothers, uncles and spouses, now gone to dust and ash.

Edie Banister offers him some more coffee. Joe declines. They smile at one another, nervously. They're flirting; the elephant in the room – apart from Bastion's unremarked grip on Joe's nether parts – is a laburnum-wood box about the size of a portable record

player, inlaid with paler wood around the edges. It is the reason for this latest visit to Edie Banister's home, the reason he has locked up early and come out to Hendon, with its endless rows of almost-pretty, boring houses decorated in little-old-lady chic. Coquettish, she has drawn him here repeatedly and disappointed him, with bits of spavined gramophone and an unlikely steam-punkish Teasmade. They have played out a species of seduction, in which she has offered her secrets day by day and he has responded with quick, strong hands and elegant solutions to the intractable problems of broken machinery. All the while, he has known she was testing him for something, weighing him up. Somewhere in this tiny set of rooms there is something much more interesting, something which sweet, ancient Edie clearly believes is going to knock his socks off, but which she is not quite ready to reveal.

He trusts devoutly that what she has in mind is clockwork rather than flesh.

She wets her lips, not with her tongue, but by turning them briefly inward and rubbing them together. Edie Banister comes from a time when ladies were not really supposed to admit to having tongues at all; mouths and saliva and the oral cavity proposed the possibility of other damp, fleshy places which were absolutely not to be thought of, most particularly by anybody who had one.

Joe reaches down to the box. Touches the wood. Lifts it, weighs the burden in his hands. He can feel . . . *moment*. A thing of importance. This sweet, dotty old bird has something stupendous, and she knows it. She's been leading up to showing it to him. He wonders if today's the day.

He opens the box. A Golgotha of armatures and sprockets. In his mind, he assembles them quickly: that's the spine, yes, the main spring goes here, that's part of the housing and so is that . . . dearie me. Much of this is just so much dross, extra gears and the like. Very untidy. But all together, the useful parts . . . Oh!

Yes, good: early twentieth century by the style and materials, but quite refined in its making. An artisan piece, a one-off, and they always get more, especially if you can link them to a known craftsman. All the same, it's not . . . well. Not what he was expecting, though he has no idea what that was.

Joe laughs, but quietly, so as not to waken the canine volcano burbling between his thighs.

'This is very fine. You realise it could be worth quite a bit of money?'

'Oh, dear,' Edie Banister says. 'Do I need to insure it?'

'Well, perhaps. These automata can go for a few thousand on a good day.' He nods decisively. On a bad day, they can sit like a dead fish on the auctioneer's pallet, but never mind that for now.

'Can you fix it?' Edie Banister says, and Joe brushes aside his disappointment and tells her that of course, yes, he can.

'Now?' she asks, and yes, again, because he has his kit, never leaves home without it. Soft-arm clamp to hold the housing. Another as a third hand. Tensioners. There's no damage, actually, it looks as if someone took it apart on purpose. Quite carefully. *Snickersnack*, as it were, the thing is assembled, except . . . hmph. There's a bit missing – ain't it always so? It would crosslink the legs . . . hah! With a piece like that, this would have a veritable walking motion, almost human. Very impressive, very much ahead of its time. He's seen a robot on the television which works the same way, and is considered a brilliant advance. This could almost be a prototype. No doubt somewhere the ghost of a dead artisan is fuming.

He glances at Edie for permission, ignites a tiny blowtorch, heats a strip of metal and twists, crimps, folds. *Snickersnack* again. He blows on it. Crimps once more. Yes. Like that, around there, and . . . so. *Consumatum est*, as his mother would have it.

Joe looks up, and Edie Banister is watching him, or perhaps she is watching her own life from a great distance. Her face is still, and for one ghastly moment he imagines she has expired

right there. Then she shudders and smiles a little fey smile, and says thank you, and he winds the toy and sets it marching, a wee soldier trump-trump-trumping around the table and rucking up the cloth with miniature hobnail boots.

The dog peers back at him: eerie blind hound, stubby ears alert, straining to look through glass eyes. *Not perfect, horologist. It drags one foot. But it will suffice. Behold: my mistress is much moved. This, for your pains. And now – begone.*

Joe Spork hurries away, suddenly quite certain she wanted something else from him; she has some other secret, a grander one which requires this endless testing of J.J. Spork before it can be unveiled. He wonders a bit wistfully how he failed, considers going back. But perhaps she's just lonely, and recognises in him a fellow isolate.

Not that he's alone the way she is.

And not that he's alone now, not entirely. In the corner of his eye something flickers, a dark shape reflected in the windows of a passing bus. A shadow in a doorway. He turns and looks both ways before crossing the road, very alert as he sweeps the street to his left. Almost, he misses it completely. It's so still, it's hard to make out; his eyes are seeking joints and movements where there are none. But there, in the shadowed porch of a boarded-up bakery, it seems that someone watches: a bundled figure in a dress or a heavy overcoat, with a veil like a mourner's. A beekeeper or a widow, or a tall, thin child playing at being a ghost. Or most likely an old burlap sack hanging on a rack, deceiving the eye.

A moment later a long green estate car nearly runs him over. The angry maternal face behind the wheel glowers at him resentfully for being in the world, and the watcher – if there really was one – goes right out of his head.

Moody and unsettled, Joe stops in at the corner shop to see whether Ari will sell him some cat poison.

When Ari arrived in London, he called the shop *Bhred nba'a*. He had come to the conclusion from watching English television that the people of London were fond of both puns and corner shops, and he reasoned that a combination must inevitably be a big success. Bread and butter became *Bhred nba'a*, and it emerged almost immediately that although Londoners do indeed admire both puns and convenience, they're not keen on shop owners who appear to be taking the piss out of them while looking foreign. Correct use of the apostrophe to denote a glottal stop was not a defence.

Ari learned fast, and shortly painted over the offending sign. It's not clear to Joe whether his name actually is anything like Ari, or whether he has just selected a comfortably foreign-yet-English noise which doesn't startle the natives with complexity or suggestions of undue education.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ari is reticent on the poison issue. Ari regards cats as lessons in the journey through life. Cats, he explains, are divine messengers of patience. Joe, one shoulder still sore from a near miss two weeks ago, says they are Satanic messengers of discord and pruritus. Ari says this is possible, but by the workings of the ineffable divinity, even if they are Satanic messengers of discord and pruritus, they are *also* tutors sent by the Cosmic All.

'They are of themselves,' Ari says, clutching this morning's consignment of organic milk, some of which is leaking through the plastic, 'an opportunity for self-education.'

'In first aid and disease,' mutters Joe Spork.

'And in more spiritual things. The universe teaches us about God, Joseph.'

'Not cats. Or, not that cat.'

'All things are lessons.'

And this is so close to something Grandpa Spork once said that Joe Spork, even after a sleepless night and a bad cat morning, finds himself nodding.

'Thanks, Ari.'
'You are welcome.'
'I still want cat poison.'
'Good! Then we have much to teach one another!'
'Goodbye, Ari.'
'*Au revoir*, Joseph.'