

JUMP+ THE +DEVIL

Richard Rathwell

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Montreal, Canada

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RICHARD RATHWELL

Jump the Devil

| | | |
|-----|------------------------------------|-----|
| I | <i>Crawl Space</i> | I |
| 22 | <i>Christmas Tree Hill</i> | II |
| 43 | <i>The Biting of Doctor Condor</i> | III |
| 65 | <i>Tina's Style</i> | IV |
| 88 | <i>Poofear and Refluff</i> | V |
| 118 | <i>Author's Note</i> | |

Jump the Devil

Crawl Space

Jump the Devil

Virgil had two full disability ears. That is why he gave no sign of hearing his daughter when she came into the house and walked across the ceiling. He did not look up. He put down his writing.

Moments later Virgil emerged from the crawl space. He stooped through its half door into the cellar. He slid around his cot and pulled himself up the stair rail. He had to get there before Maureen left.

At the top of the stairs Virgil opened the door to the front room and limped over to the window. He looked out at his garden and hedge. It was where they all played jump the devil.

Virgil turned to squint where Maureen was sitting in her chair. He raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes as if startled. He pulled his left earlobe and smiled.

The ears were the main things in Virgil's life,

Jump the Devil

excepting Maureen. They were magic, brilliant.

The ears originated with a sergeant with whom Virgil had been drinking to celebrate return from duty in the village. A bomb had gone off in another bar further down the street. Virgil was momentarily deafened and spilled his whiskey.

“Put in to headquarters for compensation,” the sergeant suggested. And he did. And they accepted it. Later Virgil found out the sergeant had meant compensation for the drink.

The bomb had nothing to do with the war Virgil was peacekeeping in; it was a misunderstanding among gangsters, but the claim was accepted. The compensation now supplemented his veteran’s pension.

Maureen saw Virgil as a heroic veteran. Virgil told his wife. “She is a good daughter, she has respect.” His wife did not agree. She thought Maureen saw Virgil as a fool.

Maureen smiled at Virgil and held her finger to her lips. She mouthed, “Nice hedge, nice lawn.” Virgil mouthed “Hello” to her. Maureen mouthed “Ha, ha, ha.”

As usual, Virgil silently asked Maureen if she wanted tea. She nodded, and mouthed, “Yes.” Maureen never,

RICHARD RATHWELL

ever talked to Virgil out loud. She always showed respect for his full disability ears. The respect was something special they had between them.

He was withdrawn from combat. And now in retirement, Virgil was provided with gardening as it was thought not safe for him to operate a grass mower or electric trimmer being, as he was, quite deaf. He had a further option of either free maintenance for his house for life or an all expenses paid move to a seaside home with supervised care.

His wife did not want to move. Neither did Virgil. He was not certain Maureen would visit a new place at the seaside.

Professional people called to assess Virgil's ears. They came also, his wife said, to see if he was getting to be crazy in the head. They prescribed him black pills to improve his mood. The ears were thought to have magnified his peculiarities.

The professionals from the Veterans' agency assigned Virgil a task to help them see how his craziness was getting on. He was to keep a journal. Virgil was to write about his soldiering, Maureen's visits, his wife and the disability ears and what he felt about them all. He did his therapy in the crawl space.

Maureen came to chat only, Virgil told his wife,

Jump the Devil

nothing else. And that is what he wrote in his journal. His wife never believed anything Virgil said about Maureen.

But this was true—only to chat. They would remember old times. He would tell her about his tours of duty, what he saw, what he did, what he felt. She would tell him about her life away from home, her two daughters and her two marriages.

Maureen would ask Virgil about the stories behind the souvenirs and presents he had brought home from his tours. She did not, Virgil told his wife, come to ask for money as she used to, even though she knew of his double pension. She only chatted, that's all, mouthing questions, including some about how his wife was doing. His wife did not believe that one at all.

Maureen spent most of her time with him helping him practice his deaf person speaking and facial expressions so he didn't sound like a dummy or look too loopy to people. Virgil's wife did not like him looking loopy.

Maureen would be a mirror. She would mouth back at him to show what his disjointed phrases with grimaces looked like. Sometimes she would make silly faces, puckering her lips to show him how he might look crazier in the head to the professionals. They

would laugh silently.

Virgil never laughed with his wife. When he tried to explain things to her about his tours it came out muddled. He sometimes wept. His wife hated this. She wouldn't listen. She would chastise him with curled, tight lips. He closed his eyes when this happened to show he could not understand her.

Virgil learned how to read lips by watching people at the clinics he attended after his return from peacekeeping. You must stare intently and slightly incline your head. You must blink and wrinkle your nose. You must smile often so people knew you were trying to hear them.

Virgil noted the changes in reactions and lip movements of veterans getting deafer and deafer with age. As they got older, some shook their heads wildly and spat. Virgil resisted that as an affectation and self-indulgence. Instead, he would stare intently as with thoughtful interest. Maureen appreciated this subtlety. She would pretend to clap her hands.

The Veterans' officials were impressed by his mastery of lip reading. It indicated the courage and commitment to independence they wanted. They loved his stare too. It made them want to help him more. They added to his compensations and made

Jump the Devil

him aware of more options for care.

Maureen was a godsend. When she had come back home after her first bad marriage, she realized the ears could bring her father away from the wars permanently. She saw all the financial advantages. She helped him make applications for every possible entitlement. She got clothing allowances, dental work, food vouchers, everything going. She made it all exciting, like a game.

Maureen and Virgil enjoyed practicing deaf person responses to strange or threatening vibrations and to shadows. Shadows were the most difficult to get right. Maureen did marvelous silent arm waving and yelling behind his back and windy, soundless barking. “Boo!” she would shout silently and “Woof!”. They would practice in the crawl space.

Maureen was fantastic at deaf dancing. That is where you pretended you couldn't hear the music or hear the other dancers and looked startled and apologetic when you danced into them. Sometimes you would fall against the cold rock in the crawl space, but carefully.

Virgil wished Maureen had never left home for her marriages. At least she returned for visits and to drink tea.

RICHARD RATHWELL

Maureen mouthed “Boo dad!” from her chair. Virgil did his startled look again. They mouthed laughter.

“Tell me about what you are writing,” she mouthed. She always asked about what he wrote, about the disability ears and sometimes about the village.

Maureen pointed at the window to hurry up Virgil’s answer. His wife could be coming home soon. Virgil’s wife, Beatrice, went out alone to the shops. Virgil could no longer be trusted outside. He would shout at people.

Maureen only came when she was sure Virgil’s wife was out. Maureen’s visits became more infrequent as his wife became ever less mobile because of her terrible tormenting legs and her martyrdom to her back. When Maureen visited, she would always leave well before his wife returned.

Virgil often had time only to make Maureen a cup of tea and tell her a part of something about what he was writing in his journal. Virgil could still make tea on his own very well. His wife, if she was home, would not let him near the kitchen for safety reasons.

Virgil smiled at Maureen and wagged his finger in admonition at her question about the village. “First,” he mouthed, “the tea.”

When he made tea for Maureen, Virgil still used

Jump the Devil

the kettle he received as a present on his wedding day. The antique kettle was worth something now because of the classic ship's whistle sound it made when it boiled. They didn't make these any more. Maureen had loved that sound as a child. She would whistle back.

Virgil used the good, thin, rose teacups reserved for special guests. His wife hated it when she came home and found those teacups dirty on her living room table. She became fearsome with critical observations. Virgil would turn a disability ear towards her. He would say this was the only use those cups ever got these days. That made Beatrice angrier.

Often Maureen would leave before the tea had boiled because his wife's returns from the shops were so unpredictable. It was as though she wanted to surprise them. A false alarm, a shadow across the window, a wind in the trees on the street could set her off like a slapped child.

The old kettle took time to boil. Virgil would put tea right in the kettle the old way to stew. One must do that to make tea properly. On some visits, while tea was boiling, Virgil hurried downstairs to record Maureen's visit in his journal. He needed to record her questions and his answers before he forgot them. This is what he had been instructed to do.

RICHARD RATHWELL

Virgil was worse at remembering lately. He could remember where the tea things were, and things like that, but he couldn't remember all the things his wife told him to do.

He could remember things as far back as the peacekeeping. He remembered some things about the village before whiskey with the sergeant. He remembered the bomb, the screaming, and the ears.

He remembered not to hear things behind him. He remembered most things about Maureen and her visits in time to write them down.

Virgil remembered that after Maureen's last visit his wife demanded that when Maureen came next time, Virgil had better insist on something being done about the skin bag in the crawl space. Maureen was to take it away. He was to accept no excuses from her about it. "She's never liked us and she never respected the house."

His wife believed the bag in the crawl space was the last straw to be tolerated of Maureen's wickedness. Maureen had always been a bad child.

To his wife the bag was smelly, dirty, unacceptable and a dangerous hazard. She said it smelled of smoke and ashes. It may have bugs. It didn't matter to her it was genuine animal skin. You could not get a bag

Jump the Devil

like that around here. She said the professional people knew about the bag and thought it was dangerous too.

It wasn't. The crawl space was the cleanest place in the house, the safest. No wind or earthquake could get at the crawl space. It was dry and had no spiders, not like Beatrice said. Besides, Beatrice was never in the crawl space. And what did she know about skin bags anyway? The bag was no one's business but his and Maureen's.

Every time he asked Maureen to take away the skin bag she mouthed refusal and asked him where he thought she could take it to. She did again this time. He must write her answer down. It may be important to the professionals. He would go downstairs.

Virgil went to the kitchen and put on the tea to boil. He then went down to the crawl space to write about Maureen's refusal about the bag. He would also write about her pointing at the window. He would write down the answer he had wanted to give about the village.

The Veterans' professionals especially wanted him to write down his answers to Maureen about the village. They wanted to know what Virgil thought about when he answered.

Virgil steadied his journal on his lap. Was his wife

upstairs? There was a sudden draft. Had the door at the top of the stairs closed?

Virgil began to shout.

“I am in charge here! Everyone out or I shoot! Put your hands up!” It was what he liked to shout at the charity people to show he had forgotten who they were. It very much bothered Beatrice when he did that.

When had he come down? He looked at the skin bag and smiled. He had just come down to write about the skin bag, Maureen and his wife.

His wife’s problem was not with the skin bag in the crawl space. Her problem was Maureen. After all, it was Virgil, and Virgil alone, who used the place and he didn’t mind the bag being there.

Virgil had told his wife many times that he thought it would be wrong to do anything with the bag that Maureen had not agreed to. He would not even agree to open it to say what was in it. It was against his principles. It would be like reading someone’s diary. He wrote that in his journal for the head doctors several times and underlined it.

His wife said she knew Maureen wanted something of her wickedness to remain in the house. His wife had cleared the house of everything else of Maureen’s.

Jump the Devil

She had removed all traces such as Maureen's wall posters and her stuffed toys from the top floor. She had painted Maureen's purple bedroom wall white. Beatrice liked a clean, tidy house with some style, a house one could be proud of, something nicer than anything similar on the street.

The Veterans' doctors had spoken to his wife about Virgil's urine smell, dirty clothes, and his bruises. They had spoken to her about the crawl space. They had written a report and given her a copy. His wife got very angry with Virgil about this damage to her reputation.

His wife told the Veterans' people the problem with Virgil was the stairs, the door and getting to the bathroom because of Virgil's trick hip. She was making it up about his hip to fool the doctors. Her main problem was herself and him.

In the beginning, when he was first writing in the journal about how he felt about his wife, Virgil had tried to be funny. "The more I get her, the more I want to forget her," he wrote.

When he had shown that to the head doctor, Virgil said he forgot what he had meant. This was in case it showed something about his disability ears and crazy head. He worried they might take him from the house

and crawl space.

Virgil loved the crawl space. It was a unique thing to this house. It was one of a kind. The house was built on the edge of a rock left by a glacier. That is why the crawl space. Virgil loved the idea of that.

His wife had asked the municipality about the rock. They wouldn't give planning permission to remove it. It would require dynamite and disturb the natural heritage.

The crawl space was used originally for an iron boiler, now defunct. All that remained of its life was a single red warning light, which indicated it was off. There was new gas boiler and heating system put in upstairs for Beatrice. What more did she want?

The rock was clean and cold. It had a flat space. It was perfect for writing the journal on.

His wife said she didn't want him keeping the journal or showing it to the head doctors any longer. He was not to write anything more about her or about Jack and Maureen. That was personal and family business. That was sons and daughters. That was family secrets. His writing was becoming too crazy.

Who was upstairs? If she had come home Beatrice would close the door to the stairs, sometimes she bolted it. She bolted it for watching television so Virgil

Jump the Devil

would not bother her concentration. She opened it only at certain times during commercials to prevent peeing on the stairs. She opened it if she went out for fire safety. She bolted it at night. Beatrice did not want to be disturbed by the murmuring, snoring and smells.

In the beginning of their marriage he would go down and sit on the rock and smoke cigars. Cigars were not allowed upstairs except for Christmas. Uniforms, duffle bags and souvenirs from duty were not allowed upstairs either, especially the feathered masks which carried dust and bugs.

The cigar smoke went out a screened vent to the rear garden. Before he lit up he would smell the flowers. It was lovely. He would look at the little tree he had planted there. The flowers and tree were still there. He always knew now where he was from the scent of the flowers. And in the autumn evenings the light from the vent crept across the floor and up the rock. Then it would fade. Night would leave only the glow of the old boiler's off-light.

Neither his wife nor Jack ever went into the crawl space during the time the family was together. Not ever, because Beatrice had forbidden it to the children. It was his space. She wanted nothing to do with it.

Maureen began to go in secretly when she was

a child but not often. Virgil would say it was the rabbit hole and she was Alice. He would be different characters at the tea party. She would ask who he was and he would make a face or do a walk to show who. He was sometimes the March Hare and sometimes the Dormouse. The Mad Hatter would frighten her. She would curtsy to the Dormouse. Daughters were lovely things at that age.

Virgil remembered he was down now to write in his journal while the tea boiled and also to think about his feelings and answers to Maureen about the village. He would see about the door in a minute.

Beatrice used to allow the people from the veterans' charity into the house to talk about Virgil's crazy head. They would all sit in the front room. Beatrice watched everyone carefully. She listened and frowned. She hated it when the topic was something that was in the journal. She did not know what was coming next.

After their last visit, Beatrice told Virgil they would never be permitted again. He was disgracing her. Not in her house. Not in her living room. And no-one, absolutely no-one, relative or stranger, was to go down the stairs. The crawl space was a disgrace.

"But it is only a storage place," Virgil mouthed,

Jump the Devil

writing in his book.

At first he stored things he had got from the army, including his dress uniform. He had given this to Maureen when she was in her teens and growing. She had tailored it to her measurements because the look was in fashion.

Virgil remembered that Beatrice had been very upset about that. She had quite a fit when Maureen was modeling it for them. It was one of those things Beatrice had about her, those strange fits.

Virgil had always been very diligent about storage. He was proud of that and the way he used space. Unused things had been arranged around the rock in layers, each one labelled on a tape. They could be used later. At one time, the stored items were so numerous the rock was obscured. Virgil could hardly get through the half door. In the dark the piles of boxes looked like people. Sometimes he could see their faces.

The boxes, suitcases and souvenirs had disappeared. The kids asked for some things to use when they moved out. That had saved them money. Most had been thrown out though. His wife kept asking him to clean up. The skin bag was the only thing left.

The crawl space became empty enough for hide and seek after Maureen's first marriage. It was perfect

for deaf dancing.

Virgil remembered the rules of how he was supposed to write in the journal. He was not to let anyone else write in it, especially not Beatrice. Beatrice had tried to make him put some things in.

He had asked the doctor if he could let Maureen write a few things in the journal for accuracy's sake. The doctor had said that he wasn't to, absolutely not.

There were some things in the beginning of the journal that made the charity people ask strange questions. Virgil could not remember writing some of them. He did not recognize the hand. Who had?

Was Maureen gone? Was the door bolted? Sometimes she would come and go before he even got upstairs. He could only feel she had been there. There was a scent. He would write in his journal: "I think Maureen came again." She was never to come downstairs, they said. He looked at the skin bag. The skin bag had been his once. It closed with a rope through brass eyes. These glinted in the light of the vent as his shadow was cast on the rock.

The rock looked like the one on the approach to the village. Virgil could not remember when he had given the bag to Maureen or when she had left it for storage.

Jump the Devil

Virgil remembered he had suggested to Maureen several times that Beatrice wanted the bag be removed. Maureen said this was O.K., if that was the way Virgil really wanted it. Did he? He did not know what to write.

Beatrice said if Maureen wouldn't take it, he should put it out the door for rubbish, and Maureen too for that matter. He should get it over with.

Virgil was down in the crawl space. He was writing in his journal. Was the ship's whistle blowing? He, of course, couldn't hear it.

Or, was Beatrice in the house? She would know Maureen had been there. She wouldn't like that. She was peculiar in the head about her house.

The kettle could sound like screaming people. Like the ones he used to see in the crawl space.

He, of course, could not hear that now the whistle of the kettle had been replaced by a whispering, snapping cackle.

Christmas Tree Hill

Jump the Devil

The lower driveways are the worst because they make one believe one is tipping over and falling. Not that such a thing could actually ever happen, not according to Woozer anyway, but it could.

One can achieve a good speed going down Christmas Tree Hill, especially since Woozer modified the electricals in the motor. The mobility scooter whizzes and wobbles and goodness it can get quite out of control towards the bottom. That is, if one is not careful in planning one's descent.

Although the mobility scooter has four good, solid wheels, once in awhile one or two will pop right up off the ground. It is like being in an airplane. Then the whole thing comes down with a bump.

When the scooter goes over an imperfection in the pavement like that, especially near the bottom of the hill where the most important people live, it is quite thrilling.

Jump the Devil

One did feel things were too settled at home before the dear scooter came. We were all going nowhere.

Down we go. My God, feel that!

Woozer says he started up the computer program in the scooter's engine to make it faster. He is quite the computer expert, our Woozer. Remapped it, he said. Remapped! One wishes you could do that to one's own brain, or more to the point, to poor old Dad's.

Goes as fast as one wants now, it does. That must be the horsepower Woozer put in. It also has gripping brakes, real callipers, says Woozer, and although they take time to warm up, with them, the scooter has all the features needed for a safe and superior ride. Woozer says one must try to get as much out of the machine as you can; it is safe at any speed. Alright, we are trying Woozer!

The callipers are actually frightening. They feel like invisible hands are grasping the wheels and flinging them about. The horsepower does snort and dear scooter spits gravel out back. One wonders what the neighbours think.

Our Christmas Tree Hill was lovely once, but it was built up badly towards the top. Greed is to blame,

and municipal neglect. The hill has horrible—rocky, wild parts between the proper bottom houses and the crowded apartment buildings up the hill.

The nicer houses downhill are resplendent in warm cherry brick. They are decently detached, well-hedged and surrounded by shady trees. They all have beautiful, peaceful gardens. In the backs of many are barbeques for summer.

There they have the high curbed, gated driveways, hard on the mobility but lovely to see.

One has to have been very lucky in life to have such a house.

Higher up, smaller and not as nice perhaps, but appropriate for modest needs, is ours, only a little worse brick than the ones below. If someone from below came up here, they would see we have managed a nice lawn and hedge as good as any.

And, don't we have a nice small garden? It's big enough so one can have one's flower beds if not quite a barbeque. One never really wanted one anyway—such smoky things. But, there is a bird feeding station on a gay pole and also a nice little tree as well—a guaranteed real Russian Olive, perfect for squirrels to frolic in.

It is a pity that the squirrels like to get into the bird

Jump the Devil

feeder and steal, selfish little beasts. They fornicate there. But, they are still better creatures than the people who live further up the hill as Woozer says.

“Mama Bea,” Woozer says, “just avert your eyes from them and think of Old Verge.”

Oh dear, what a bump.

Look at that garden there! It is like a tropical paradise, all ferns and tulips. One certainly needs to keep up a good front lawn and hedge on this street.

At least one has won that battle. No more silly wildness on the lawn at our house. It must be kept a decent street even as far up as us with all the decorum and standards.

The top of Christmas Tree Hill is concrete flats, scrub and rubbish. The white gravelled paths are gone where one used to be able to walk one's dog before Fluffy died. One hates to see it.

To think Woozer used to walk up there with our Mo after Sunday dinner!

The mobility scooter does not do well going up the hill. It is best downhill. It goes like the devil downhill, clattering and hissing. The rider is tempted to ring the bell but not past the doctor's house.

The Scooter came as a great freedom for going out when Dad couldn't do things. It is good for going

to the shops. One couldn't ask Woozer to drive us and replace Dad for that too on top of everything else he does.

But the scooter is not perfect. It is hard going home up the hill, despite Woozer's horsepower. Poor scooter trundles with a horrible whining noise, wheezing like an old man. It has no springs and so is hard on one's lower parts. So contrary to what Woozer says about using the horsepower, the rider still must pause several times going downhill to be kind to one's self.

The scooter can't stay too long at the bottom shops. The charge is limited and the electricity seems to leak away, perhaps going from the wheels into the ground which is quite anti-social. It must be dangerous when it pools, especially for cats. Has Woozer thought of that?

One has to consider consequences. Woozer should know that.

We had little trouble with Woozer over the years. He was good to our Mo, despite her problems. It started to go bad with him with the arrangements for the funeral. Of course, Mo would have looked terrible in an open coffin, after all that dietary trouble and those strokes. She had gotten just like a dried

Jump the Devil

grasshopper and her face was like a hairless cat's, the lip was so split. Woozer would carry her around for their visits to us in a blanket. She spoke so softly she was impossible to hear.

Perhaps it was better to cremate her. It was an end to it. But Woozer should have told us. We would have liked to be there as she went into the flames. There was not an urn or a memorial or anything. Dad was very upset. But, one had to leave it to Woozer after all; he was the husband.

Dad was constantly giving Woozer something for Mo's treatment from his disability money. All that foolishness, the cosmetics for the lesions, for the drugs and for the therapy, every last expense of it is gone for nothing but ashes.

Woozer never said where Mo's ashes went. Dad can't imagine why not, but one supposes foreigners like Woozer have their customs. Their religion makes them peculiar. Woozer did his mother the very same way.

All Woozer did for Dad's remembrance was to give him a little bag. He said Mo wanted dad to have it. It was some old smudged thing. Dad couldn't bear to open it.

Woozer became respectful to Dad after Mo went.

RICHARD RATHWELL

He called him Rambo. Sometimes he mowed the lawn for him and once he offered to clean the cellar. He repainted Mo's room.

Woozer stayed in town when he actually didn't need to be because, as he said, Mo had left him a hundred thousand in insurance. He could have moved to the seaside. But he said he couldn't leave because of his memories. He said he worried about our old age now Mo was out of the picture and her brother had left us alone.

One must say Woozer has helped keep the house nice, doing a little bit every spring to a plan. It's become a complete refurbishment, only the downstairs is left. Woozer knows better than anyone what the house means to me.

He phones nearly every month with new ideas. He buys materials from our savings. "Why not use them while you are alive," Woozer says. He takes care of the papers and brings them for Dad to sign. He thought of a clever way of signing over things to avoid death taxes. Dad hates death taxes but was never good at things like that.

Dad couldn't work out how Mo's insurance worked. She had a diagnosed terminal illness. How would you be accepted for insurance? But, Woozer

Jump the Devil

had found a way, perhaps with another diagnosis. He is clever.

Dear Mo, you must be proud of Woozer now.

Gaining speed again and a good thing too, must get on with it.

Dad cannot be left alone. Sometimes he tries to make tea when he is alone and leaves the hob on. He doesn't listen to me these days even after he gets a slap. But does that mean he should be placed in a care home? And is one expected to follow him. One thinks not. What would he do when his support was gone? Find someone new?

There is the church. Pause here, Mama Bea. This used to be the top of the street before the apartment developments for undesirables began higher up. It is still lovely from here down. But it is where the difficult curbs begin.

The trees start getting taller. The fallen leaves scrunch under the wheels. The scooter slides and slithers when it has rained. This is where the church squirrels at our bird feeder come from. It is where they were married, Woozer and Mo.

Dad was a fright that wedding day flopping about in his hush puppies, desperately snapping photos with a disposable camera purchased to save on wedding

costs. Snap, snap, ferociously like he was trying to restore and preserve his daughter's virginity on film. He scurried to the back of the church with a snapping sound like a kind of small dog. Then, disgracefully, he darted out for a smoke and to weep.

He was a fool about Mo. That was her second marriage after all. She was never happy with men, our Mo.

Woozer thinks Dad's doctors are going too far in interfering with Dad's fundamental rights. They pry. They think of sneaky ways to enquire about private things. We shall not have any more of that. Disgrace upon disgrace.

Who can be expected to watch an old person every day and to look after every other thing as well?

The church wall here has beautiful stonework. You must be careful not to scrape the scooter on it as the main slope begins. The scooter has lovely red paint. Woozer calls it Scarlet O'Hara.

He's a Holy Roller, Woozer is, right to his bowels. Regular as clockwork too. He does church on Sunday morning, then to the pub up the main road, then home to the telly and his religious books all covered in halos. He gets them from places all over the world. America. Nigeria. He is crazy about the blood of Christ and sin.

Jump the Devil

Down we go! Whoosh like a Doodlebug. Just like the blitz!

The maple leaves are wonderful just before winter. They are crimson and orange, like my hat was when Dad was doing his courting.

Our son Jack was soloist in the church choir. The whole neighbourhood heard him sing "To Be a Pilgrim." We were proud. Boys are fine, lovely things at that age. They listen. But, Jack became terrible later with bad behaviour, deceit and lies. He would say dreadful things about everything and everyone, including his own family. Speeding up on the final slope the wheels go tick, tock and the engine whines. Woozer says the remapping rationalizes essentials. One doesn't know quite what he means by that.

These are the nicest front gardens. It looks like a contest.

But, it gets difficult to pilot because of the curbs. Off the pavement, scrape past a gate, up onto the pavement again speeding all the while.

Woozer has made it so it can go like this without touching the pedals. He says he disconnected the dead man's feature. He says it saves on energy saving. One is glad of that.

You never see anyone in those gardens. They are

silent.

There is the driveway where Jack hid behind a car. Somebody very rich lives there. There is the spot where Dad hit him, just there, where they have the water feature. Dad never liked the boy.

Dad was always conservative. He thought Jack was dope smoking and becoming communist. Dad knew the signs. He didn't mind Mo's being an unmarried mother but hated Jack's disgraceful behaviour, especially his dreadful mouth. Jack liked to show people up, to criticize them. Did he think he was better than us?

Funny, Dad asked suddenly at dinner just yesterday if Jack still wore cowboy boots.

It was Mo's death anniversary yesterday so dad was upstairs. We had pictures out. Woozer was there of course and was he surprised. "Imagine Old Verge remembering Jack's boots," Woozer said.

Dad then asked about the money. He gave Woozer money for Mo's funeral and a headstone and never got it back. Remember that? Wonder what happened with it. Woozer always had a hold on Dad because of Mo.

Poor Dad began to water at the eyes. He did that because of his Mo Day cigar. He only gets one on Mo's day. It is only once a year after all. He has one or two

Jump the Devil

puffs. One has a very good flower deodorant.

Dad has to be stopped from trying to go outside with his Mo cigar because of the neighbours and also because of the squirrels. Dad shouts at them like they were people. One doesn't want more disgrace in front of the neighbours. If one can't be with one's dignity in one's house, what is the use?

The fight went up and down the street and ended in the churchyard, if one remembers properly. It was on the Christmas before Woozer. Mo was back with us again. Dad was sleeping in the cellar. Jack had come home for Christmas with us and he was on the foldout bed. Mo's two little girls from her bad, younger times were with Mo in the spare room. Mo wanted it that way so she could watch them.

But they sneaked out of the house after midnight. They wanted to see Santa in the sky with the reindeer they said. Those girls were always trouble. They were playing leapfrog and shouting in the garden. Jack raised the alarm.

When we came out the girls were on their backs singing "You better watch out." You can't do that sort of thing in our neighbourhood. Mo, that was your fault. One must be careful of one's daughters especially at that age. You know that. There is no telling what they

might get up to.

Dad gave the stroppy one, Alice, a good slap and grabbed the littlest one by the ear. Jack tried to stop it and the girls started screaming.

That is when Jack said those dreadful things. Bad father was the best of it. Jack pushed Dad from the girls and hit him. Dad fell down and vomited. He got up to hit Jack but Jack had run off down the street.

Vomiting in our front garden! What a disgrace! One should never marry an older man; they sick up so easily. Although, Mo, you didn't do that badly with Woozer at first, did you? He did take on those fatherless girls.

Where are those poor little things now, Mo? Woozer gave them up. The social took them away. Woozer said it was better for them as due to his mourning he couldn't care for them properly.

There is a new flowering hedge right there, past the monkey-puzzle looking over the old graves. They are messy trees those monkey-puzzles.

Mo didn't say a word to Dad after he chastised those girls. She just grabbed them each by the hand and walked down the street to the crossroads where the bus stop is. Dad cried out, "Please don't go Maureen."

As Mo passed where Jack stood in the churchyard

Jump the Devil

gate, Jack shouted back up the street, "No more, dad." Oh dear, did I say that out loud?

Then Jack called Dad a terrible name and so Dad ran to the churchyard to shut him up. Dad should have remembered his disability and left it alone.

They fought up and down the street. One hopes none of the neighbours heard the shouting or saw any of them behaving in such a horrible way. One couldn't live with that.

It is better not to get angry and bitter, better to forgive and not hold a grudge, not to go over and over things. It is better to forget. Woozer says that.

Dad came back up to our house bloody and limping. Jack had kicked him in the garden with the water feature.

Dad made himself tea and went into the cellar. Mo, did you go to Woozer's mother's house with the children? Woozer's mother hated those children. But then again she was dead already so it would have been alright.

Jack never cared about us. He never came back after that business about Mo's daughters.

There is the young artist's house. Linda Sunflower she calls herself professionally. She is an important artist it is said. She was married to a lawyer and got

the house after the divorce. It hardly seems fair. She has wonderful maples in front.

Jack asked her up to our house for tea that Christmas week earlier, before the fight. And, she came. We had to send Jack out quickly to get tea and milk.

She brought a painting of Christmas Hill to sell to us at a special price. Jack told her that the shadows in her painting went in the wrong direction. He should have been slapped right then. She was still the lawyer's wife and was right from down the street. But one couldn't, of course. One can't keep the right sort of friends with such bad manners.

Jack would say anything. He knew about Dad's breast cancer from his listening in when he shouldn't. He mentioned it right in front of Linda. It was after it was explained to Linda that dad's coughing came from a war wound from peacekeeping.

Jack then said that it was possible that Dad's hearing problem came from a pub fight and not from an insurgent's bomb in a village. He didn't make it sound like a joke but he laughed very loudly and so did Linda.

One often sees Linda in the garden shop at the bottom of the hill. One ignores her. Her maples have

Jump the Devil

gotten shabby. Look at them, drooping and stained. One never liked her anyway, too much of an artistic type. Woozer bought a painting from her of the church in moonlight just after Mo died.

Dad was certain that Jack came home that Christmas after our money. One always has to be kept on one's guard about sons especially when they start to get older. The newspapers are full of children killing their parents for money and their houses.

Dad thought Jack was doing something dodgy. His job didn't sound right. Dad knows the foreign places where Jack went. Dad had been to some doing a real job killing terrorists. Jack was just some kind of dogooder. Woozer says Dad was right about Jack.

Mo didn't have dodgy jobs and she was not a single mother for long. She worked from an early age until her first marriage and right through that too. She was in Woozer's little office until her divorce. And then she married Woozer.

She turned out respectable. No one could say anything against her. One would never let them. A mother must be a tiger about the reputation of her family.

There's the church well behind us now. Lovely place. Wish you were here, Mo.

Sometimes one almost hits the rubbish bins. They shouldn't be out so far in the street. It spoils the look.

Wasn't Mo's marriage to Woozer a pleasant surprise? Her looks were going, Woozer's mother had died, Woozer was going to lose his mother's house and the troubles in his firm had begun. And, there were the girls.

The cat from number twenty-four watches me go by in the scooter from its steps. Its ears go back. It hates the scooter noise.

Dad lost it after Mo. There's really three of him these days and you can't put them together. First, there's him when he has to come up in his smelly pants, dribbling for food and asking what has happened. Then, there is the downstairs weeper through the floorboards. Then, there is the mid-night shouter.

How can one be expected to put up with that sort of palaver in their own home? Our place is kept clean and proper. It is no one's business how we live. It will always be one's own house and not theirs.

There is the house with the glass conservatory. That is very elegant. That type is to be seen advertised on TV for a special price. Woozer could probably get one cheaper.

Woozer would come by on Sundays after the pub

Jump the Devil

to see Dad's progress. But he hasn't lately.

There's a piece of pine branch on the pavement. Not from this far down on the street, surely. We are maples.

Here is the Georgian-look house. Has a little hillock of its own off the main slope and an authentic cobbled drive. Maybe it is a doctor in there; probably is. Looks like a doctor with multi-paned windows and all that whiteness. He might be the same one who reported Dad.

And, someone on this street saw Dad jumping in the yard yesterday. That was reported as well. We got a phone call. They are like that around here. They don't talk to you but they are there looking, judging, trying to find out your business, taking away your dignity.

One may have paused here a bit too long. Talking to one's self. Talking to dear scooter, talking to Mo. It will be Dad next. I know, I know. Well why not? It is a free country. One is due one's respect.

Off we go! The mobility has signal lights but they never are used. They are fussy things. Why should one? The disabled have the right of way. It is up to the fancy car drivers to be alert.

One can see right down to the crossroads from here. At this time of year, just at dusk, you can see all

the headlights and tail lights in strings like Christmas lights. One can see them as far as the pub's parking lot.

We are whispering along. This is the best time of the day on the hill. There is an orange glow coming through the crowns of the trees casting shadows on the tarmac. It crackles black smoke and sparks to heaven. One might think it is a barbeque but it is too high up the street and too late in the year.

When she got very sick, Mo used to have respite care to relieve Woozer. Woozer would go to that pub with Mo's friend Megan from work. Now he goes with Linda.

The bumps hurt at this speed but one must go faster to be in time. Won't Woozer be surprised how one can pilot the scooter?

There he is leaving the pub, driving Megan home or maybe Linda. Maybe both. Regular as clockwork and reliable, speeding along in that snappy car Dad loaned him some money for. The one with the blue headlights.

We should all reach the crossroads at exactly the same time.

The Biting of Doctor Condor

There must have been a bad bite. Something had gestated. He wasn't imagining it. There were wet, frozen pebbles tumbling in his veins. There was a sugary sense of euphoria, a smell of orange blossoms, of piss, of diesel.

Doctor Condor diagnosed it as the precursor of a very bad fever. It necessitated a change of plan.

Fever is a complicated thing. Everyone has their own way of having a fever. It varies by body weight, age and gender. It has many processes. It can start with headaches or with shivers. One can collapse or become manic. One can slowly become inarticulate and lose all sense of place.

Doctor Condor's version developed as a sudden displacement into a vast room with throbbing, retreating walls. There was a constant disembodied, echoing noise of coursing blood. The room darkened. The air misted. The ceiling inflated into a dome at a

Jump the Devil

great speed. The bed shrank suddenly into an earthy plot of white flowers. As he shrank, his leg hairs closed into a net of metal mesh tightening around his knee joints.

The bite had probably occurred early during his stay in the hotel. It could have been fourteen days ago. That was the gestation time of some fevers. Or, then again, it could have been yesterday. There could have been bites on both occasions. It could have been an invisible bite, a painless one on top of another very apparent throbbing one.

He remembered a burrowing jigger bite on his foot and a shallow bite on his neck like that from a small scorpion, the kind which crawled under the shirt collar. As far as Doctor Condor knew, the effects of such convergence of two fevers had never been studied. Perhaps he might, if the patient under examination recovered.

He tried to rise. He fell back. Why here for God's sake? Why now?

It was a very dangerous place. But, that was officially why he was here, to assess how dangerous it was. How safe, how healthy. His agency wanted a final report before deciding to fund the project further or close it.

This was a bad posting. This was a bad place. He shouldn't have asked for this assignment. It had been for stupid reasons—one-upmanship, curiosity.

It was an unhealthy, even dangerous hotel. There wasn't a mosquito net provided by the Gola International anywhere. The window of his room was without glass, despite bats. The stinking, green smoking chemical coils Annie lit for guests in the evening usually burnt out half way through the night.

If you got up from bed to relight a coil, you chanced stepping on one of the bristly floor creatures, some of them poisonous caterpillars that looked like cat tails. Some were spiders on their way to your socks.

The thin blanket provided was tiny; it could barely cover vital parts. It didn't help to drench the blanket in repellent. That only caused violent coughing. One should not cough. It was better to be silent in the night here for there were things prowling outside the window.

He did rise earlier to try to relight the coil, spurred on by the unusual volume of insect whine. Through the window, he saw dozens of shadows cast onto the boulders on the hill opposite. He remembered that in the inflating moonlight they were a movie of leaping black goats.

Jump the Devil

It was nearly dawn. Achawa Alice was clattering dishes in the bar. She always did the dishes first and then she washed the hotel linen in the tin sink. Jack liked Alice. She seemed more compatible, more familiar than the others. She was smart and funny.

Perhaps some of the fever was the drink. He had drunk quite a bit at the reception last night. Why not? It was a wonderful time. Annie sang. There had been a gift for him, a traditional skin bag with an embroidered inscription. It read: "We Love You Doctor Condor, Good Luck Going Home."

He loved the name Condor, something flying and free, able to soar for ages and ages above everything, never touching down. He had adopted it for professional reasons when he started his career, changing the spelling from his father's name.

Doctor Condor sounded less common than plain Jack Cantor. It sang. Any prospective boss would believe that someone with that name would be a high flier, always think outside the box and lead from the front as well as all those other management things.

Last night, the Mayor of Gola had said a road near the abandoned abattoir would be renamed "Doctor Condor Road." The name would be changed from that of the former president of the country.

For the reception, Alice made the traditional local leaf salad to go with bush meat. Jack hadn't let on about the salad. It had contained bugs. Alice seemed anxious and emotional enough as it was. But, that was what the reception was about. He was leaving. A banner on the bar wall read "Reception for The Grateful Leaving of Doctor Condor."

The highlight of the reception was the two boxes of Schnapps found in the bombed general store. Wonderful stuff! Their plastic triangular pouches were piled into festive shapes to represent what the ruined hospital might look like when rebuilt with some new project money. That would be with the project money he said would come to Gola after he delivered his report to headquarters at home.

Jack had felt precursors to fever during the reception before the Schnapps. He had shivered. He couldn't find words. He was sweating as he spoke like the nervousness felt before choir performances at home. He had felt a depressive hollow distance. It reminded him of coming home after a stag night to a bad marriage or of getting bad news.

There was now an ocean crashing in his ears.

Jack lay back in his bed. He would shout at Alice for water in a minute.

Jump the Devil

The parasites must be breeding, overcoming his blood cells in their great hordes, slaughtering them. They would be transforming themselves into soft grubs encased in carapace.

This work was not for him.

When he got home, he would find a new job. One of the directors at headquarters wanted to get rid of him from this one. He would succeed. That bastard Rousseau was telling everyone that Condor was going bush mad again. Rousseau had told him they had all heard things in headquarters.

Rousseau was saying that two yellow should mean a red. Headquarters already bailed him out after the messy business with the staff member in Egypt. Thank God the husband hadn't found out, let alone the beneficiary community. There was a child named Fatima. Luckily his secretary had remarried a decent Muslim man who thought the child was his own

There were other complications. Doctor Condor had been asked to pass a medical test as part of his contract renewal. He had not taken it. That would be doubly difficult now. His liver would become a raisin pudding after this new outrage. His references had not checked out.

How would this fever develop? He'd better watch