# Cliff Rhodes and the Most Important Journey

*A Land at the End of the Working Day story*

## by Peter Crowther

"That which is far off and exceeding deep,
who can find it out?"
*Ecclesiastes*

### 1: The two strangers

"I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW this place existed!" is the second thing the taller of the two strangers says, hands (one brandishing a piece of creased paper) on his hips as he looks around Jack Fedogan's bar, his having blown in with his companion, a shorter man with beer-bottle-bottom glasses, blown in off of the nighttime street on a cold and blustery late autumn evening.

And who could blame him.

The curiously named The Land at the End of the Working Day walk-down bar, situated on the corner of 23rd and Fifth, just a stone's throw from the tired regality of the Chelsea Hotel, is not your average watering hole, not even given the myriad strangenesses that make up twenty-first century Manhattan. And, in truth, there are a lot of folks who don't know the bar is there, finding it only when their need is great -- and that's not always simply the need for beverages . . . such as one of Jack Fedogan's generous cocktails or a bottle of imported beer from his well-stocked cellar or a bottle of his crisp Chardonnay or chewy claret, always grown on the right slope and its vines always facing the

afternoon sun; nor is it just the need to hear some of the best jazz piped over a bar PA this side of New Orleans. There are needs and then there are needs -- and you can take *that* one to the bank.

So the stranger's opening gambit isn't too unusual.

As he walks down the stairs, the glorious harmonies of Stan Getz's tenor and Lou Levy's piano from Getz's *West Coast Jazz* album from 1955 are wafting through a soft fog of cigarette smoke ("smoking ban, shmoking ban," is Jack's attitude) and occasional glass-chinking, and mingling with muted laughter from the table along from the counter and in front of the booths. But once he's spoken, only the music remains . . . while the patrons size him up. And the little guy, too -- the little guy who looks like a cross between Peter Lorre and that mad scientist fella used to be constantly getting on the wrong side of good ol' Captain Marvel.

Tonight, though, it's quiet in the Working Day.

Sitting in a booth at the back of the room is a tall, black man -- he's tall even when he's sitting down . . . even slumped over a little, like he is right now -- who's nursing his fourth Manhattan and repeatedly turning over a pack of Camels on the table in front of him, working slowly but with admirable determination on emptying the pack into the ashtray. So far he's managed to cram seven butts in there and, as the strangers descend the stairs, he's considering starting on number eight. But it won't help the figure on the bottom of his bank statement, the one he received only this morning and which he's been worrying about all day . . . particularly the accompanying letter asking him to come in for a meeting.

Two booths away from him, a woman wearing a little too much pan-stick is checking her face in a tiny mirror she's taken from her purse. She's sitting with her back to the proceedings and is using the mirror to check the new arrivals. It's a process she's worked in bars all around Manhattan -- and, before that, in similar establishments in Philly, Miami and Des Moines. Over time she'll do other bars in other cities, finally winding up several years hence spending the final few

minutes of her life at a table in a sleazy dive out in Queens where the PA spurts Hip-Hop when she really wants to hear The Carpenters or Bread, and where the barkeep calls her 'Lady', spitting it out at her like bad meat. She doesn't know that she's checking the mirror to try figure out the road that lies behind her, the one she's travelled to get where she is today . . . with all the bad decisions and failed relationships hovering over the blacktop like heat haze. But there's no answers in a mirror, just like there's no answers anyplace. Only more questions. She doesn't spend too much time in one place, this 'lady', for that very reason. The more time you spend the more questions you get asked. It's for this reason that she is about to leave the Working Day and, in so doing, provide a springboard for the adventure ahead -- for, after all, as all children know, life is just one big series of adventures.

At the table over by the counter -- the noisy table -- there are other questions being asked and answers given. But these questions are not as difficult, nor the answers as potentially distressing. Minutes earlier, as the strangers are crossing 23rd, big Edgar Nornhoevan is addressing the slender Jim Leafman -- Laurel to Edgar's Hardy . . . Norton to Edgar's Ralph Kramden. Listen:

"Okay, this one," Edgar drawls, wiping beer froth from his top lip, "who said this one? *He has never been known to use a word that might send a reader to the dictionary*."

Jim Leafman, unsung star of Manhattan's Refuse Department, shakes his head. He's been doing a lot of head-shaking this past half-hour. He doesn't like this game -- doesn't know diddly about writers and their creations, or about statesmen (and women, of course) or politicians or Captains of Industry. Jim prefers it when they just tell a few jokes but, with McCoy late -- McCoy Brewer, now gainfully employed by the Collars and Cuffs shirt and necktie emporium down on 21st Street -- he's left to handle Edgar by himself, and he isn't making too good a job of it.

"No idea," Jim says with a shrug as the woman with the make-up weaves her slow and reluctant way past them, then up the stairs and out into the

night . . . which, if she had poetry and not bile in her soul, she might say is calling to her on this particular evening. But she just does what she does, this casualty of life, and doesn't ask questions.

Outside, the two strangers dodge a Yellow and, glancing at the dog-eared parchment held by the taller of the two, they look up through the gloom . . . their eyes scanning the landscape of concrete towers, rain-slicked streets and store-windows.

"There's nothing here," says one of them, the smaller one.

"There must be," comes the reply, though it has more of hope in it than of conviction.

Then, a door opens at the base of one of the buildings and a solitary figure emerges, pulling its coat collar up against the breeze. For a second, the figure seems to see the two men and they think that she -- for it is clearly a woman, they now see -- is about to come over. But no, the figure turns and heads off in the direction of downtown.

They watch her go and then return their gaze to the now darkened area from which she emerged. And they see a dimly-lit sign.

"The Land at the End of the Working Day," the taller of the two men reads, squinting into the gloom, saying almost reverentially. "It's here," he says softly, and they smile at each other and continue across the street.

## 2: Ernest Hemingway was a bullfighter?!

Meanwhile, back in the Working Day, "Well *guess*, for crissakes," is what Edgar snaps at Jim.

"I don't know," Jim protests. "How can I guess if I don't know?"

Edgar sighs, takes a deep sup of his beer and blusters, "Okay, then who did he say it *about*?"

"Edgar, I have no idea."

"I'll give you a clue," says Edgar, and he gets to his feet and mimes a

matador waving his cape groundwards at an approaching bull.

Jim looks around, smiling apologetically, feeling a little like Walter Matthau's Oscar sitting alongside Jack Lemon's Felix, the latter noisily busy unblocking his sinuses.

"Oh, Jesus!" Edgar says, thudding back into his seat. "It was William Faulkner talking about Ernest Hemingway.

"Ernest Hemingway was a *bullfighter*?"

Edgar glares at his friend and pulls another card out of the box.

"Okay, how about this-"

"Why don't I get a go yet?"

"Because you haven't answered one *correctly* yet."

Jim studies his bottle of Michelob, turns it around in his hands a couple times. "That doesn't seem fair to me."

"Okay," Edgar says, his face lighting up as he removes another card from the small box in front of him on the table. "Who said this-" He glances up at the sound of shoes on the stairs leading down into the bar, sees two sets of feet descending, and continues. "-and about whom? *His ears made him look like a taxicab with both doors open*."

"That would be Howard Hughes about Clark Gable," one of the men -- the tall one -- says in a loud voice with just a trace of an accent to it: English? French? German? Edgar can't pinpoint it. And then he turns to face a frowning Jack Fedogan and says: "I didn't even know this place existed."

"We feel much the same about you," Jack grunts, placing a freshly polished glass upside down on the shelf along the mirrored back wall.

"Wonderful place," the man says.

Jack Fedogan nods. "What'll it be?"

"Tell me," the man says, lowering his voice to a slightly conspiratorial level. "Do you have a back room?"

"A back room?" Jack repeats, placing a second glass on the shelf. "You mean a restroom?"

The stranger shakes his head and looks around for some kind of acknowledgement that he's using a standard language. "Ah, such a quaint euphemism -- you may be assured that if I had wanted to urinate or defecate then I would have asked for a room in which to do just that and not one which I desired to use simply for a rest. I would have asked for a toilet or a lavatory, perhaps even a loo or a bog, or a john or a head-" He stops and considers for a few seconds before adding, "Or even a Crapper, named after the gentleman who devised the modern toilet pedestal. But no, barkeeper, I mean simply a back room -- or, perhaps, a room in the back?"

"You been funny?" Jack says.

"Are you laughing?"

Jack shakes his head and, flipping the towel over his left shoulder, leans both hands on the counter rail in front of him.

"Then I think it's safe to say I am not being funny."

Jack nods a few seconds, sizing up the stranger, taking in his clothes, the unfashionable winged collar and foppish folded necktie.

"You some kind of inspector?"

The man shakes his head.

"So-" Jack stands straight again. "-who exactly *might* you be?"

"Ah," the man begins, waving an arm theatrically, "I *might* be Monsieur Aronnax, professor in the Museum of Paris, or Ned Land, the Canadian whaler, about to board the *Abraham Lincoln* on an expedition to find the fabled narwhal that later turns out to be the *Nautilus* . . . which, of course-" He turns to the smaller man beside him. "-would make my diminutive friend here Conseil, the professor's devoted Flemish servant boy."

The small man nods, his eyes closing for the briefest of seconds.

"Or," the tall man continues, turning back to Jack, "perhaps I might be Doctor Samuel Ferguson or Dick Kennedy -- 'a Scotsman in the full significance of the word . . . open, resolute and dogged' -- fresh from five whole weeks travelling the skies in a balloon."

Jack nods at the little man. "And him?"

"Ah, a good point, barkeeper," the tall man says, with a nod and a wink, and he turns to his companion once again and adds, "which would make him Joe, Doctor Ferguson's manservant."

The small man nods again, this time adding a small bow to the repertoire.

"But you're neither of those?" Jack Fedogan says.

"Indeed not," the man says. "Mayhap I'm-"

"*May*hap?"

"Yes, mayhap then I am Phileas Fogg, a phlegmatic -- even Sphinx-like -- Byron with moustache and whiskers-"

"Which would make the little guy Jean Passepartout, yes?" says Jack.

And for a few seconds, silence floods into the Working Day.

Edgar Nornhoevan and Jim Leafman watch, enraptured.

The tall (even while he's sitting down) black man in the end booth lets out a smile -- his first for the day -- as he reaches for the pack of Camels.

### 3: In the presence of a literary man

"My, oh my," the tall man exclaims, "I do believe, my dear Meredith, that we are in the presence of a literary man."

Jack Fedogan shakes his head. "Uh uh, I just remember all my classic literature -- particularly Jules Verne and Thomas Hardy -- from school." And then he says, "You could also be Michael Ardan -- 'an enthusiastic Parisian, as witty as he was bold' -- which, moo-hepp mee-hype, could conceivably make Doberman here Ardan's worthy friend J. T. Maston, fretting over his telescope as Ardan, President Barbicane of Baltimore-based Gun Club, and the industrious Captain Nicholl undertake their journey around the moon."

For a few seconds the silence in the bar -- the *West Coast Jazz* CD being between tracks -- is absolute until the tall man slaps the counter and lets out a throaty roar of a laugh. "Capital!" he exclaims loudly, "absolutely capital.

"So, whyn't we start right from the top," Jack says.

The tall man's smile is warmer now as he holds out a hand. "In reality," he says, "I am Horatio Fortesque, a literary scholar of some repute -- particularly within those circles whose members appreciate the great works of Monsieur Jules Verne -- while my companion here is Meredith Lidenbrook Greenblat."

"Lidenbrook?" Jack says, his voice quizzical against the surety of Lou Levy's piano on 'Serenade In Blue' as he shakes the two men's hands.

"Jack, I didn't know you knew so much about books," is what Edgar Nornhoevan says as he sidles up to the bar, empty glass held in his bear-like hand.

The bartender shrugs, polishes a piece of counter and pushes a couple of shot glasses first one way and then the other. "Verne was always a favorite of mine," he says, making a so-what with his mouth before he adds, "along with Dick Prather's Shell Scott books, John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee and Ed McBain's 87th Precinct yarns. I guess some things you don't forget."

Edgar is shaking his head, looking at Jack head-on but keeping a weathered eye trained on the two strangers right alongside him.

"You need that filling?" Jack asks.

"Oh," Edgar says, looking down in surprise at the glass -- *now where did* that *come from!* -- and then, nodding, "sure, one more."

"And Jim?"

Jim Leafman gets up from the table and shuffles up to Edgar, planting his own glass on the counter. "Guess I'll squeeze another one in," he says, turning to the tall stranger and giving him a sly wink. The stranger chuckles.

"So, you strangers in town?" Edgar asks, immediately feeling like a putz: after all, he silently reasons to himself, this is no two-muddy-cross-streets shanty town circa 1850, it's 21st Century New-goddam-York.

But the tall man doesn't seem perturbed by the question, and he shakes his head. "I've lived in Manhattan most of my life," he says, his voice softening out a little and losing some of the clipped precision he'd sported earlier against

Jack. “Come from South American stock,” says Horatio Fortesque, “Bolivia to be exact, and my name was originally Bill,” he says. “Martinez -- William Martinez,” he says. “Horatio Fortesque seemed altogether a wholly more appropriate name for someone so immersed in the literary world,” he says, aiming the words to nobody in particular and up into the air above the counter.

“Edgar Nornhoevan, Horatio,” says Edgar, holding out his hand. “And this here’s my good friend Jim Leafman,” he says as the stranger shakes first Edgar’s hand and then Jim’s. “We drink here pretty much all the time.”

“I’m delighted to make your acquaintance,” Fortesque gushes . . . with just a little too much butter on the bread as far as Edgar is concerned.

“So, how about your friend?” Edgar says, nodding to the Peter Lorre lookalike standing just in Horatio Fortesque’s shadow.

“I made Mister Meredith Lidenbrook Greenblat’s acquaintance through the internet,” Fortesque says, imbuing the word ‘internet’ with almost W. C. Fields-like pomposity. “In a chat room,” he adds.

Jack Fedogan places two beers on the counter in front of Edgar and looks over at the two strangers. Picking up the slack, Edgar says, “Buy you a beer?”

“Certainly, that’s most kind of you,” Fortesque trills. Then, to Jack, “Do you have imported beers?”

Jack nods as he presses the eject button on the CD player behind him. As he consigns the *West Coast Jazz* CD into its case and removes one of the disks from *Time Signatures*, the four-CD Dave Brubeck restrospective, he says over his shoulder, “What did you have in mind?”

“Something English,” Peter Lorre chirps up, the phrase hissed out rather than actually spoken, and then, correcting himself, “Something British, I mean.”

“I spent some time in England,” Jim Leafman says, reaching for his beer.

“I got Tetley’s on tap,” Jack says, “plus in bottles I got Old Peculier, Black Sheep, Marston Moor, Landlord, Cropton’s Two-”

“Landlord,” says Lorre, drooling.

“Tetleys is fine for me,” Fortesque says and then, turning to face Jim,

"Whereabouts?"

"Pardon me?"

"In England. Whereabouts did you stay."

"Oh," Jim says, taking a deep sup of his beer as he casts his mind back to the days before he worked at the Refuse Department ('Sanitation', he tells most folks) . . . the time he now regards as BC -- Before Clarice -- before he parked up his '74 Olds that, at the time, was two parts yellow and eight parts rust (the rust is now winning the battle), parked it up outside the travelling salesman's apartment building with the .38 sitting in his lap . . . and then seeing the guy walking along the street, the guy who was sticking it to Clarice behind Jim's back, seeing him in his fancy shoes and his fancy pants, fancy shirt and fancy sports jacket, knowing that he smelled of expensive cologne and not sewage the way Jim smelled . . . maybe even, down behind the zipper, smelled a little of Clar-

"It was a long time ago," Jim says, emerging from the beer and the memories, licking his top lip at the residue of the former and blinking his eyes hard three times at the latter.

"I said *where*," Fortesque says, with just a hint of irritation in his tone.

"York shire," Jim says, splitting the word into two, the second part sounding like the areas where the little folks lived in those *Lord of the Rings* movies. "Leeds," he adds.

"How long were you there?" asks Fortesque.

*In your eyes*, sings Carmen McRae, Brubeck tickling the ivories, Eugene Wright on bass and the indefatigable Joe Morello handling the drums. They sound so close they could be right here in the bar and, just for a second, both Jack Fedogan -- who knows the song well, and the original album it comes from (*Tonight Only!*) -- and Fortesque turn around momentarily before settling back to what appears to be a genesis of conversation.

"Oh, around six maybe eight months I guess." Jim looks down at his beer and, without looking back up, he says softly, I was twenty years old."

“Quite a journey for a young man to make,” Horatio Fortesque says, reaching for his pint glass of Tetleys and nodding first to Jack, then to Edgar, and finally to Jim Leafman, unsure as to whom he owes the gratitude.

“Yeah, I guess,” says Jim.

The Lorre-lookalike snakes out a hand and grasps the bottle of Landlord, pours it into the glass alongside it.

“You want to sit down?” Edgar asks.

Fortesque and Lorre nod and the quartet move over to where Edgar and Jim were sitting just a few minutes earlier.

“But it was nothing like a journey I saw a man take night after night,” Jim says, sliding his beer around on one of Jack’s Working Day coasters. “Every night,” he says, “right up until-” And his voice trails off.

## 4: What the hell’s ‘tipsey’?

“I’d been up in Leeds maybe around a week, maybe a little less,” Jim Leafman says, glancing around just in time to see Jack move his counter-polishing a little closer to their table.

Edgar settles back on his chair and glances at the two strangers, who seem relaxed about Jim’s story. He looks across at the tall black man, smoking -- always seems to have a cigarette on the go -- and then back at Jim.

“Got a little job at a newsagent store -- little more than a newsstand -- in the city and rented a small apartment. They call them flats,” Jim explains to his audience and receives nods and blinks to let him know they all understand.

“The place I lived was called Headingley -- maybe three miles from the town center -- a big student area: the Leeds University campus is enormous. Anyway, because it was -- still is, I guess -- such a big student dormitory, Headingley was a really fun place: cheap supermarkets, charity stores filled with used books and record albums -- this was before CDs,” he says.

More nods, more blinks.

"But best of all were the pubs. There were stacks of them -- the Original Oak and the Skyrack, right across from each other next to St. Michael's Chur-"

"Just keep to the point, Jim," Edgar says. He's listened to Jim Leafman's stories before, of course.

Nodding and contrite, Jim carries on. "Anyway, this one night I'm in the pub with this English guy-" Jim is about to attempt remembering the guy's name (it's Phil, a medical student, but he won't remember that until two full weeks have passed and this evening in the Working Day has assumed legendary status) but he thinks better of it. "So, anyway," he says, waving an arm dismissively, "this guy comes in and walks right up to the bar. He's a little guy-" He turns to Meredith Lidenbrook Greenblat and says, "No offence," to which Greenblat leans over the table and nods sagely.

"He's a little guy, balding, skin that looks like he's just shaved, pant legs that could cut steak, shirt collar tight around his neck, buttoned up with a necktie, knot perfectly in place, sports jacket showing linked cuffs . . . the whole works. You notice that kind of get-up, plus the guy looks like one of the two brothers in the Tintin books . . ."

"The Thompson twins," ventures Jack from over behind the bar.

"Seems you know a lot about all kinds of literature," Fortesque says and Jack shrugs self-deprecatingly, polishes another spot.

"Yeah, right -- the Thompson twins," Jim Leafman says with a big grin. "Anyways, the guy doesn't say anything but the bartender pulls him a half-pint and the guy passes him the money for it. Then the guy downs the drink -- in maybe three or four swallows -- wipes his mouth and strides right out."

"But he paid him, right?" Jack Fedogan asks from the counter.

Edgar says, "He paid for the drink, Jack -- let's just get on with the story here."

Jack mutters something Nigel Bruce-style and returns to his polishing.

"Anyway," Jim says after taking a sip of his beer, "I didn't really think anything of it at the time. It was just, you know, a little unusual, right?"

Everyone seems to agree that such action was unusual and Jim continued.

"But it happened again."

"The same night?" the little Lorre lookalike whispers sibilantly.

Jim shakes his head.

"Another night -- maybe the next one but certainly no more than two nights later. And it was a different pub." He stops and shrugs at Edgar's frown. "Okay, we drank most nights -- twenty years old for crissakes."

Edgar sits back in his chair and holds up a hand. "I didn't say nothing."

"You looked," is what Jim says to that.

Edgar takes a deep drink of beer and Jack, leaning over the counter, says, "Will you get on with it?"

"Can we get more beers over here?" says Edgar, having drained his glass.

"Same?" Jack asks, straightening up.

Everyone appears to feel that's a good idea. "They're on me if I can join you," Jack says.

Everyone seems to feel that's an even better idea.

Minutes later, Jack sets fresh glasses on the table and pulls up a chair.

"And it didn't end there," is what Jim says then, and he lifts his glass to everyone's health before taking a long sip. The others wait patiently as he drinks.

"The very next night, in a different pub again -- this one another mile or so out of Headingly towards Leeds -- the guy comes in and sidles up to the bar. Doesn't say anything but the girl behind the bar pulls him a half-pint which the guy sees off in short order. Then he leaves the pub. And when he leaves, he's weaving a little, you know what I mean?"

"He's canned," Edgar announces.

"Let's just say he's . . ."

"Tipsey?" Horatio Fortesque suggests.

"Tipsey?" says Jack. "What the hell's 'tipsey'?"

"Well," comes the reply, "it's what you get when you've had a few drinks

but you're not yet drunk."

Everyone considers this -- Jim included -- while they sip their drinks.

"So," says Jim Leafman, "I go up to the girl -- who's very nice, incidentally-"

"Ulterior motive, hmm," says Lorre, making it sound like Jim had thrown the girl across the bar counter and torn her clothes off. Jim ignores this and continues.

"And I ask her about this guy. You know, I seen him in the first pub -- the Oak, as I recall -- and then another . . . which I think was the-"

"Too much information," says Edgar.

Jim nods. "Sorry. So, it turns out that this guy, his wife died on him years earlier. She was only young, the girl told me, maybe in her mid-forties -- keeled right over while they were eating their meal one evening, head-first onto the plate. So what he did, as soon as the funeral was over and done, was he went out every night to all the pubs in the area that he and his wife had visited and he had a half-pint in each one. The girl tells me this: he walked from his house -- the whole round-trip would be around four miles -- and he went to all the pubs on the left side of the road as he walked in and all the pubs on the right side as he walked back home. Needless to say, when he got home each night he was a little . . ." Jim looks questioningly at Fortesque.

"Tipsey," the stranger offers.

"Right, tipsey. And he had done this seven nights a week, fifty two weeks a year for-" Jim shrugs. "-three, four years?"

"God," is all Jack Fedogan can think of to say, Jack too busy casting his mind back to his beloved Phyllis, gone on ahead on Valentine's Day 1990 and Jack alone these past fifteen years. Alone apart from the Working Day. He takes a drink and glances around at the others.

"And then he stopped," Jim says, basking in the dramatic revelation.

"He stopped?"

Jim nods.

Joe Morello's laugh of relief at the end of 'Unsquare Dance' signals the trio's (Paul Desmond playing only handclaps on the sessions for this particular tune) 'Why Phillis' written by Eugene Wright -- whose wife, like Jack's, was named Phyllis -- and taken from Brubeck's 1961 album Countdown Time In Outer Space.

"Well, go on," Edgar says.

"I'd gotten to watching out for him each pub we went into -- and, like I said, we went into a lot of pubs in those days -- and I saw him a good few times. Then, one night, I was suddenly aware I hadn't seen him inside a pub for a good few nights. You know how that kind of thing creeps up on you? You kind of take something for granted and then, one day, you realise that that something has stopped?"

The consensus was that everyone knew how that kind of thing crept up on you, and Jim continued.

"I'd seen him a couple of times walking out on the street or -- and I thought this was strange right off -- standing outside the pub."

"Standing outside?" Fortesque asks. "Doing what?"

Jim shrugs. "Just standing there -- couple of times I thought he looked kind of wistful." Jim stops and looks around the faces. "We're talking here maybe three, four weeks during which I guess I'd seen him a half-dozen times -- we were always out and about at the same times so it wasn't too unusual

"So, this one night -- we'd only just gone out and we were up near West Park at the pub there -- and I asked the guy behind the bar if the little guy -- the Thompson twin -- had been in recently. 'He died,' the guy behind the bar tells me. I was shocked but, most of all, I felt-" Jim searches the faces around him, looking for the right word or phrase. "-I felt sad. No idea why. It just seemed such a desperately sad life he'd had.

"And then, just casual, I asked the guy behind the bar when it had happened -- when the Thompson twin guy had died. And he says, matter-of-factly -- because why would he be otherwise -- 'Last month.' So I say to him that

can't be. I tell him I just saw the guy, three maybe four times just this past week-week and a half, out on the street. And the barkeeper looks at me like I just fell off of a tree. Says I must have seen someone who looks just like him. And then he goes off to pull somebody a beer."

You could cut the atmosphere with a knife.

Edgar looks nervously at Jack Fedogan, Jack looks at the little Lorre fella, Lorre looks up at Fortesque who is watching Jim Leafman. Every few seconds, one or more of them gives a little shake of their head. Even the usually confident Dave Brubeck sounds a little phased as he drifts into 'It's A Raggy Waltz'.

Then Jim says, "There's more," before draining his glass. "But we need refills and I need the restroom."

## 5: Enter Cliff Rhodes

As Jack goes to the bar, moving faster than he has done all day, the tall black man shouts, "How about another Manhattan," to which Jack nods enthusiastically. Then the black guy gets up and walks across to the table, pack of Camels and ashtray in hand, says, "Mind if I join you? I always liked story-telling."

"Sure," says Edgar.

Jim nods Hi as he stands up.

Lorre says, "Don't be long," and there's something in there -- in those three words -- that sounds unpleasant and menacing.

"Pull up a chair," says Fortesque to the black man, leaning over with his hand outstretched and adding, "Horation Fortesque."

The new arrival nods, shakes hands, and says, "Cliff Rhodes."

Introductions are then made and Jack returns with fresh beers, forgetting to charge anyone for them. Scant seconds later, Jim gets back and introductory sips are made from the replenished glasses before Jack says, "So, go on."

"You hear any of this?" Edgar asks Cliff Rhodes as Cliff swirls the olive

around the Manhattan.

"I'm afraid so," Rhodes confesses. "It's not my habit to listen in on other folks' conversations but, like I said, I'm a sucker for stories."

Edgar waves never mind and slaps Rhodes on his shoulder.

"Well," Jim says, "I tried not to give it any more thought but then, that weekend -- I remember: it was a Saturday evening -- I saw the guy again, and this time I was sure it was him. No question. He was standing outside the Oak just as I walked across the street, standing right there outside the pub, his coat collar up, hands in pockets, still looking as smart as ever, staring through the big window they have -- or used to have -- in that pub.

"So, I took the bull by the horns and I called out to him. 'Hey!' I shouts to him, waving a hand in the air-" Jim demonstrates. "-like this. And he turns around, sees me and . . ." He shakes his head, checking each face individually. "And then he just kind of fizzles up into wispy smoke, smoke that's kind of man-shaped and then isn't, and that's solid for a few seconds, then less solid and then just see-through smoke. And then there's only the big window and the sidewalk, people passing by going this way and that, not one of them appearing to have seen him or seen him disappear."

"What then?" is what Cliff Rhodes decides to say to break Jim's pause.

"Well, then, I guess I just stood there looking at where the guy had been, looking at the other people, people either walking or standing -- outside the Oak was a popular meeting place -- and then I looked through the window into the pub. And that's when I figured out what was going on."

Sips all round followed that. Then:

"I figured that I was the only one seen him because I was the one expected to put things right."

Edgar harrumphs and takes a sip of beer, seeming agitated.

"Put things right?" hisses Meredith Lidenbrook Greenblat.

"Well, way I figured it, there had to be a reason why I'd seen him and seen him disappear while the other people all around him hadn't. And that

reason was to put him out of his misery.

"See, when I looked through that window, I saw what it was that was making the guy so morose: people drinking. And it came to me that ghosts probably can't drink." Jim shrugs. "Maybe he wasn't fully aware he'd died, only that he couldn't go into the pubs and have his customary half-pint in every one. The routine had sunk its claws into him and he'd become so fixated with what he did every night that he wasn't about to let a little thing like death keep him from it. But death was keeping him from drinking."

Jim swirls the beer around in his glass and watches it make patters of froth around the rim. "And I got to thinking that 'someone', whoever or whatever keeps these things in check, had looked around for a likely candidate to put things straight again." Jabbing a thumb into his own chest, Jim Leafman says, somewhat proudly, "And I figured that person was me."

"You knew what to do?" Jack says, leaning closer over the table.

Jim shakes his head. "I didn't *know*," he says, "but I figured someone had to get it through to him that he was dead and that he should let go . . . go off to re-join his wife."

At that, Jack Fedogan grimaces, shuffling in his chair and fighting back a sudden urge to blubber. Without his letting anyone else notice, Edgar places a big ham-hock sized hand on Jack's knee and gives it a squeeze.

Cliff Rhodes, Jim and even Fortesque and the Lorre fella all see the gesture and don't let on, though Jim sees that Greenblat has seen it, has seen the little guy's soft smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, and he reconsiders his opinion of the man.

"So, I went in and ordered a pint. Didn't go to the upstairs room where my regular crowd were, and I didn't stay more than just a few minutes. I just drank the pint and moved on.

"From there, I did the Hyde Park, the Rose and Crown, the Skyrack, the Drum and Monkey, the Travellers' Rest, the Lawnswood Arms, the New Inn and, finally, the Tap and Spile . . . plus maybe a couple of others that I've

forgotten about down the years."

Now Jack's grimace isn't about his missing Phyllis, it's from thinking about all that beer -- eight pints at least and probably well into double figures.

Edgar looks at his friend with newfound respect.

"As you can probably guess, I wasn't too good at the end of it all . . . but we won't go into that." He takes a deep sip and rests his glass back on his coaster, pulling himself tall in the chair -- maybe even almost as tall as Cliff Rhodes, sitting across from him, who wasn't trying hard at all -- and he continues with his story.

"I didn't see the guy again after that, and we were out and about just as frequently as before. The way I figure it," Jim Leafman says, lifting his glass once more, "is that the guy needed to be freed. He'd gotten himself into some kind of loop, going out every night to drink in the various bars that he drank in with his wife, and then-" Jim waves a hand. "-He went and died. And, as we know, dead men don't drink too good."

He is, of course, referring to Front-Page McGuffin and both Jack and Edgar nod knowingly.

"So," Jim goes on, his voice sounding tired and kind of resigned, "he just stood outside each of the pubs waiting for some kind of release."

Edgar snorted. "And that release was you going out and getting hammered?"

Jim shrugged. "Well, I didn't see him again."

"You ever stop to think that maybe you'd imagined you'd seen him?" Cliff Rhodes ventures.

"Absolutely!" says Edgar, loudly.

"And that maybe he wasn't there at all," Rhodes continues. "That he was just either a figment of your imagination or someone who looked a lot like him."

"It comes down to faith," Jack offers, sitting back in his chair a mite. "Either you believe in what you saw and what you did, or you don't. Simple as that.

"His was a journey of faith," Horatio Fortesque says. "The Thompson twin, I mean," he adds. And then, "As was yours," and he pats Jim Leafman on the arm.

"It's a nice story," says Lorre.

"It was a nice story," Jack agrees.

"But then, all stories about journeys are good." Edgar considers his glass for a few seconds and, sensing that there's more to come, the others remain silent. Then:

## 6: The man on the bus

"Back when I was a youngster we lived in Forest Plains," Edgar says, his voice slightly wistful and distant.

Jack says, "Forest Plains? Where's that?"

"I checked the mapbook once and it turns out there are several," Edgar says. "This one is in Iowa, about an hour west from Cedar Rapids.

"My first job -- clerk and then teller at the local branch of First National, long since closed -- was in Branton, a small town around 30 miles due north from home. There was a twice-daily bus went from the Plains straight into Branton, stopping on Main Street, about three minutes' walk from the bank and then at railroad depot where it turned right around and went back to the Plains. Same thing happened on an evening.

"In the morning, it left the Plains at seven forty-three and in the evening it left Branton at six eleven -- funny how you remember the small details," Edgar says, shaking his big head slowly. "It arrived in Branton at a little after or a little before eight thirty in the morning and I'd usually be back home around seven at night.

"My dad bought me a car -- an old Mercury, 1960 model, canary yellow with tail-fins and a bench seat you could've sat a football team on . . . and still had room for the cheerleaders." Edgar slaps his knee. "Jeez, they just don't make

cars like that any more."

"More's the pity," Cliff Rhodes says, the words coming out so quietly that Fortesque and Greenblat exchange frowns. But before they ask him to repeat it, Edgar is up and running again.

"But that didn't happen until I'd gotten through my probation period -- one month -- so's the bank could decide whether they wanted to keep me on. They did and I got the car, but for that first month I used to ride the bus. In and out. Every day.

"The trip in was completely different to the trip back home. The light for one thing -- morning light is just so clear and the meadows and the distant clumps of trees . . . and the little collections of houses, collections too small even to call them villages: Green Hammerton, Poppleton, Starbeck -- I remember them all.

"But the evenings, well . . . they were different. The light, as I already said, was just one thing. Then there was the tiredness of the people for another. Folks have just lost their spark after a day at work. I felt that way myself -- just a little -- and I was only nineteen years old. But the other thing was that there were different people on the bus every now and again."

"Why should that matter?" Fortesque asks.

"Oh, it didn't matter exactly," Edgar says, "But the regular commuters, well . . . they get to know each other. There's a silent acceptance of each of you by the others -- what's the old saying? Misery loves company. You know?

"So the bus in on a morning had, for the most part, the same folks on it as the bus back home at the end of the day. Oh, there were a few folks going to do some shopping in Branton -- the Plains isn't exactly what you might call Fifth Avenue, though there is a mall there now, around four, five miles outside of town -- but back then there wasn't diddly. And there might be a couple of people going to meet a friend or visit someone. But, like I say, most of them were commuting to work and commuting home. But even these occasional users would be on the bus in the morning and the bus in the evening -- they just

wouldn't be on it day after day. You know what I'm saying?"

Jim Leafman watches his friend over hands tented at his chin. "Go on," he says at last, reaching for his beer.

"Well, my first day on the bus going home, there was one passenger who stood out from the rest," Edgar says, after a big sigh. "A boy, maybe fourteen or fifteen years old. He was . . . he was, you know . . ."

"Give us a clue, Ed," says Jack.

Edgar sniffs, turns his beer around on his coaster. "He was not the brightest button in the box, you know what I mean?"

"Special needs," says Cliff Rhodes.

"Educationally challenged?" offers Meredith Lidenbrook Greenblat.

Edgar nods in a Tony Soprano way, takes a drink. "Right, those. You got the picture. So this kid, he's sitting right at the front of the bus staring at the road ahead and at the countryside on either side. All the way from Branton to Forest Plains. I got the seat right behind him so I was able to watch him all the way. And every time we stop -- like to let someone off: nobody gets *on* those evening buses -- every time we stop, the kid turns around and makes this noise -- *wmmgmmm*!" Edgar says, hunching up his shoulders and making his hands clawlike. "And I swear he's trying to tell me something . . . something about the fields and the sky, the far-off trees, the trucks on the Interstate below us when we get into the Plains. He swings those manic arms around, sometimes banging his hand on the bus window, making that noise." Edgar makes the noise again, and then again. And then he lifts his glass, takes a drink.

"We get to the Plains and everyone gets off," Edgar says. "Everyone except the kid. I held back because folks had gotten to standing as we got close to town and so there was no room for me to stand up. But when I did stand up and made my way to the open doors, the kid stayed behind. I looked at him and then looked at some of the other passengers and nobody paid him any attention. And you have to remember that this was my first day, right.

"So that was it.

"Next day," Edgar says, "exactly the same."

"What happened to the boy when you got off the bus that first night?" Greenblat asks.

"He stayed on," says Edgar. "The bus closed its doors and the kid swung right around to look out of the front window and the bus set off again."

"Back to Branton?"

Edgar gives Jim a single nod. "Back to Branton."

"No other passengers getting on?"

Edgar shakes his head. "Not that first night. There might be one or two every so often, but most nights, the bus would go back without picking up any new rides.

"So the next day," Jack says, glancing around to see how the drinks are going. "What happened then?"

"Same thing," is what Edgar answers, and there's a little chuckle in his voice. "I get on at Main Street, kid's already there at the front looking around at the folks getting on. And again, I sit in the seat behind him." He shrugs. "From there, the journey home is exactly the same. The same fields, the same sky, the same Interstate. The same stops, the same flailing arms and hands, and the same *wmmgmmm!* every time. When we get to the Plains, we all get off but the kid stays. Bus moves off and heads back to Branton.

"Next day, same thing. And the next. And the one after that. Same thing the following week. And the one after it and the one after that one. And then-"

"And then you pass your probation period," Cliff Rhodes says, "and your dad buys you the Mercury."

"Canary yellow," says Jack.

"Tail fins," adds Jim Leafman.

"And the big bench seat," says Horatio Fortesque, getting into it now.

After a few seconds silence, the little Peter Lorre lookalike says, "Cheerleaders," making the word sound dirty.

And they all laugh.

"And that's it?" Jack asks.

Shaking his head, Edgar says, "Not quite."

"More drinks!" is what Jack fedogan announces then. "And more music."

"More Brubeck," Fortesque says. "And-" He passes a twenty dollar note across to Jack. "-This round is on me."

## 7: Thick with possibilities

There's shuffling then, and leg-stretching, and visits to the restroom. But nobody speaks. When the music starts again -- Brubeck, Desmond, Wright and Morello getting to grips with Cole Porter's 'I Get A Kick Out Of You' -- it's a relief in that it eats the silence.

Minutes later, the table re-assembles and Jack says, "So, 'not quite'?"

Edgar nods. "Nothing else happened while I had that job. I never took the bus again, and, a little under eight months later, I got my first adviser's job down in Miami." Edgar shrugged his shoulders. "Left home and moved to the coast." He looks across at Jim Leafman and says, "Moved to the Apple in the spring of '84 -- which is fifteen, sixteen years after the Branton clerk job."

"And the Mercury?"

"Ah, that went to that great wrecker's yard in the sky," Edgar tells Jack. "Transmission died on me in '71. My dad died on me in '76. I asked my mother to move down to Florida and then to New York but she refused each time. She visited me a couple times in Miami -- she hated Florida, the heat -- and then New York but she just couldn't get to grips with that either. Too big, I guess. I went out to see her -- birthday, Thanksgiving, Christmas -- but we kind of distanced ourselves from each other.

"Then -- it must have been the fall of '99 -- mum got sick. You remember, Jim?" Jim Leafman nods and glances down at his clasped hands resting on the table. "I went home most weekends, stayed with her, and for a time we had hopes. But-" He shrugs matter-of-factly. "-It wasn't to be.

"We got what mom called her marching orders in the January of 2000. Three to six months, they gave her," he says, his voice sounding a little cracked. "As it turned out, she lasted barely three weeks." Edgar takes a sip of beer while the others watch him. When he starts speaking again, his voice has regained its former strength.

"I lived at home for that three weeks, the plan being to take her out, spend time with her -- say goodbye, I guess -- but, after the first couple of days, she went down fast. I tell you, that couple of days were wonderful . . . particularly the first one, when I took her to Branton. And, at her request, on the bus," says Edgar, pointedly, and then he takes another drink.

"Everything went fine. Didn't recognise anyone and barely recognised the countryside we drove through -- so much building in just thirty-some years. Mom had a fine time in Branton -- seeing where my dad used to work, visiting the cemetery out on the Canal road where her own mom and dad are buried -- but she was tired when it came time to catch the bus back home.

"We got on over at Main Street, standing in line with the suits and the skirts, reading the evening papers the same way people just like them read evening papers up and down the country. It was busy when we got on but there was a seat free where, at a squeeze, we could sit together -- a seat near the front of the bus, behind an intense-looking middle-aged man who was turned in his seat and, with his arms and hands tucked up clawlike around his chest, was staring into the bus interior."

"The same guy?" asks Cliff Rhodes.

"The same guy."

"Jee-zuzz," says Jim Leafman, the words partly eaten up by the big sigh that surrounds them.

"I don't think my mom noticed him right off but I did. The same actions exactly as he was doing thirty years before, the same turning around, the same flailing hands and arms and the same banshee-like wail -- *wmmgmmm!* -- each time the bus stopped and he turned to address his subjects.

"I couldn't believe it.

"Then, we got stuck in a jam -- guys out doing maintenance work on the road up ahead shifting the two directions of traffic into just the one lane, lights controlling that -- you know the kind of thing."

Everyone did and several of them took the opportunity to take drinks. Edgar did the same.

"Then," Edgar says, setting his glass down on the table again, "the guy turns around just as we pull to a stop again and *wmmgmmm!-"* He flails his arms around. *"-wmmgmmm!"* he says, saying it like he's trying to tell me something. So I say to him something like, 'I know, damn traffic!', something like that. And that's when the driver leans around and says to me, 'That's the first time I can recall when someone actually said something to him.' The guy himself chuckles and turns back to face front looking out of the window. And I say to the driver-" Edgar shrugs. "I say something like, 'Oh, really?' I mean, what the hell do you say in response to something like that? And that's when I see the driver is an oldish guy, over sixty . . . and I recognise him. It's the same driver as the one used to drive the bus back from Branton all those years ago. And up to that very second, I hadn't even realised that we'd had the same driver on each of those trips back in the sixties.

"So I say to him, 'He always on the bus at this time?' And the driver nods as he settles back in his seat. 'Rain or shine. He looks forward to it,' he says to me, keeping facing forward. 'Don't know how he's going to take it when I retire,' he says. 'Retire?' is all I could think of to say. I mean, what's strange about retiring, you know? But it was the implied significance of it that puzzled me. And the driver leans back out, arms resting on the steering wheel as we wait for the lights to change again, and he says, 'He's my son.' And he looks across at the *wmmgmmm!* guy, who's jiggling his head side to side excitedly, waving his arms at the windows, and he says, 'Sure wish I knew what he sees out there that excites him so.' And that's when my mom decides to join the conversation," says Edgar.

"'He sees life,' she says. 'He sees the world and the people and all the wonder that it holds, all the promises -- all the disappointments, sure, those too, but the air is thick with possibilities.' And I turn to my mom and I see her eyes are watery. She looks away and watches the *wmmgmmm*! man some more. 'And what you do when you retire,' she tells him, 'is you take the bus just the same, every afternoon, except you sit in that seat-' She nods to where the *wmmgmmm!* man is sitting. '-and not that one you're sitting in right now. And maybe then, when you're able to look around and drink it all in, maybe then you'll see what he sees. And what I'm seeing right now,' she adds.

"And then the lights change before the driver gets to say anything back to that, and we make it around the roadworks and from there on in it's a clear road back to Forest Plains.

"I held my mom's hand all the way, not able to say a word. And when we get to the Plains and we get off of the bus, the driver steps down too and shakes our hands, with the *wmmgmmm!* man watching us from his window. 'I want to thank you, ma'am,' he tells my mom. But she waves him nevermind. 'You look after her,' he says then, turning to me, and I guess he saw something in my face or my eyes just then . . . and he pats me on the shoulder and nods, his mouth sad . . . as though, in that brief exchange, he'd read our minds and knew exactly what the score was. Then he gets back on the bus and we walk home.

"A couple days later, mom goes onto morphine and, as the days pass by, she slips further and further away from me until, at last, she's gone.

"After the funeral," Edgar says, I settled up my mom's house and set off back for Manhattan. But I drove into Branton for one last time before I got onto the Interstate. It was late in the day, after 5.30, and, on a whim, I drove down to the train depot. I couldn't park up but I could see them, the old driver and the *wmmgmmm!* man, standing in line at the bus stop, one of the *wmmgmmm!* man's arms going like a windmill and the driver standing right alongside him, holding onto the hand of the other. And, you know, the driver? He was grinning like a Cheshire cat."

Edgar lifts his glass and drains it. “End of story,” he says.

## 8: The second parchment

Jack Fedogan reaches out a hand and places it on Edgar’s shoulder, jiggling it once before letting the arm drop down by his side again.

After a few seconds of silence, Fortesque speaks. “We’re all on journeys,” he says, “of one kind or another. Some of them are long -- or *seem* long -- and some are short. But they are all journeys. And it‘s the journey that matters, never the destination.”

“Is that why you like Jules Verne?” Cliff Rhodes asks.

“I’m not sure that I follow.”

The black man shuffles around in his chair and moves his hands around in the air in front of him, as though he’s manoeuvring a large package that nobody can see. “Well, I overheard what you were saying earlier -- about your being a big fan of Verne’s work -- and it occurs to me that that’s what Verne concentrated on: journeys.”

“Ah, I see,” Fortesque says. “I hadn’t quite thought of it that way.”

“More drinks?” Cliff Rhodes asks. When the unanimous response is favorable, he and Jack move across to the bar.

“So, what brings you here?” Edgar says, making the question sound unimportant as he tries to regain his composure. Jim Leafman reaches across the table and pats his friend’s arm and Edgar smiles at him, taking hold of Jim’s hand for just a second or two. “You said you’d met up with . . .” He says to Fortesque, looking across at the Lorre lookalike and, with a small sad smile, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, I just don’t seem to be able to remember your name.”

“Meredith Lidenbrook Greenblat,” says Meredith Lidenbrook Greenblat.

Edgar nods in a kind of o*h yes, of course it is* way and turns to Fortesque. “You said you’d met him in a chat room?”

“That is correct,” says Fortesque, tenting his fingers atop a brightly

colored vest which only partly covers the swell of his ample stomach.

"A chat room about . . . Jules Verne, was it?"

Fortesque jiggles his head from side to side and, giving a knowing smile to his companion, he says, "Indirectly, yes."

Jack arrives back at the table with Cliff Rhodes, the pair of them carrying an array of bottles and glasses. And Jack sets down a trio of saucers containing nuts and pretzels. Without any indication of thanks, Edgar picks up a handful of peanuts, throws then deep into his mouth, and says, "So what *was* it about, this chat room?"

"It was about one of Jules Verne's books . . . certainly, as far as I am concerned, his best work and perhaps one of the half-dozen best-ever novels. *A Journey To The Center Of The Earth*," says Fortesque. He waits for a few minutes and then says, "It's really there."

"It's really there?" Cliff Rhodes says, jamming his billfold into his back pants pocket as he sits down. "With the dinosaurs and the giant mushrooms and everything? No way."

Leaning forward across the table, Greenblat says, in that quiet Peter Lorre voice, "The central records in Hamburg do have details of one Alec and Gretchen Lidenbrook living in Bernickstrasse from 1867 to 1877. Number nineteen."

Edgar frowns. "I'm sorry but I don't-"

"It was Axel Lidenbrock who went with his uncle, Otto, a noted professor, in 1863 to the center of the Earth," Greenblat points out. "And the professor's God-daughter was named Grauben."

"And did they live at Bernickstrasse?"

"No," Fortesque answers, "Konigstrasse. But number nineteen."

Edgar laughs, glancing at each of the others' faces in turn. "hey, come on, guys . . . Alex and Axel? Gretchen and Grauben? Brock and brook? *Bernick*strasse and- what was it?"

"Konigstrasse," says Greenblat.

Edgar settles back in his seat and raises his hands palms up. "Well, need

we say goddam *more*. There's not one damn thing that's consistent."

"N-n-n-nineteen," Cliff Rhodes says, beaming a big smile. When Edgar turns to him in puzzlement, Rhodes shakes his head. "Sorry, an old 'song' by Paul Hardcastle. What I meant was, it was number nineteen in each case, the house number -- that's consistent."

"Well, please the fuck excuse me the hell out of here," Edgar says, looking for just a few seconds like he's going to stand right up and either walk out of the bar or haul off and smack someone right where they sit. "It's one thing for Jaunty Jim here thinking he's seeing ghosts staring through bar windows wishing they could get a drink and quite a-fucking-nother to tell me, based on the fact that two couples -- one real and one fictional, all with different names -- living at the same house number in completely differently named streets, albeit in the same town, that there's an underground sea and a bunch of monsters right below our feet. I mean, come *on*, guys!"

Greenblat says, "They married in 1864."

"*Who* did?" shouts Edgar.

"Take it easy, Ed," says Jack Fedogan.

"Alex and Gretchen. They'd been off on a long trip with Alex's uncle for much of the previous year and, when they returned, they were changed."

Edgar shrugs his shoulders. "Hell, we've all had vacations like that, right?"

Greenblat pulls a piece of paper from the inside pocket of his jacket. "Married in 1864," he says, reading from the paper. "Son Henri born 1869, daughter Eloise appeared in 1871. Eloise died in '77. Henri married an English girl, Heather Dalston, in 1904 when he was over there at Cambridge University. Henri and Heath-"

"Look, where the hell is-"

"Drink your beer, Ed," says Jack, "and settle down."

"Henri and Heather moved to Lewes near Brighton in 1908, twin sons Alain and James born in 1910. Heather didn't survive the birth."

He pauses for a minute or so to let that sink in and the others remain

silent.

"Alain married Jacqueline Hay in 1938, no children. James married a Welsh girl, Johanna, in 1942 and they had two children: a son, Robin, in 1948, and, in 1952, Martha-"

"Martha was the name of Lidenbrock's housekeeper," Fortesque interjects.

Edgar almost chokes on the beer he's drinking. "Jesus Christ," he says, fending off Jack's glare with an outstretched arm. "Jack, give me a break here. Did you *hear* that? That's like saying-" Edgar affects a deep and mysterious voice. "-'And they each had four fingers and a thumb on each hand'. I mean, come on, guys -- why is that *significant*? The baby being called Martha? How many Marthas are there flying around this country?"

Jack turns to Fortesque and, seemingly with profound regret, says, "He's right. How *is* that significant?"

Fortesque nods to his companion.

"Robin Lidenbrook was killed in Belfast in 1976. He was in the British Army and was stationed over in Northern Ireland -- a land mine blew him and three others to tiny pieces. Martha, the last in the line, married Michael Greenblat, here in New York, in the October of 1976. Their one son, Meredith, was born the following year. In April." Greenblat looks up from the paper at the faces around the table. Then, very slowly, he reaches into his jacket pocket once again.

"My mother was not a well woman," Greenblat continues as he produces a dog-eared and well-thumbed brown envelope. "She died last year after a sickly life that culminated in a long and wasting illness. She was not a weathy woman, not by any means. But she did have one possession which had been passed down to her over the years. And which she passed on to me."

He stops and opens the envelope, from which he pulls a folded sheet of notepaper.

Edgar Nornhoevan, for whom life comprises the solitary certainty of

death -- possibly from complications of an enlarged prostate -- leans forward.

Jack Fedogan, jazz afficionado and one-time husband of his beloved Phyllis, leans forward.

His disastrous financial situation completely forgotten, Cliff Rhodes also leans forward.

And Jim Leafman, garbage-collecting friend of ghosts and one-time almost wife-killer, shifts sideways in his chair and stares.

With all eyes upon him, Meredith Lidenbrook Greenblat very carefully unfolds the piece of notepaper and, turning it around, holds it up for all to see.

"What is it?" is all Jack, suddenly realising that Dave Brubeck has long since stopped playing, can think of to say.

"Is it stick figures?" Edgar offers. "Hieroglyphics?"

"That, gentlemen," says Horatio Fortesque, "is a replica of the contents of a second piece of parchment prepared by Arne Saknussemm, a sixteenth Century scholar who worked out -- with the help of a book written by Snorro Turleson, a twelfth Century Icelandic writer -- the way to get to the center of the Earth. It was copied thus by either Alec or Gretchen Lidenbrook in the late eighteen-sixties."

Jim shakes his head. "You're losing me here. A *second* piece of parchment? Did we hear about the first and I missed it?"

Jack looks across at Fortesque and raises his eyebrows. Fortesque nods.

"In his book, Verne talks about a piece of parchment falling out of a copy of Turleson's book-" He looks at Fortesque. "What was it called?"

"*Heims Kringla*."

"Right," Jack says, reluctant to attempt a pronunciation. "Anyway, the Professor finds this book in an old junkshop and when he looks at it with Axel, a piece of parchment falls out. It's this parchment -- with its runic symbols -- that tells of a hidden entrance to the center of the earth, and that's what sets off the whole adventure."

"The symbols -- runes," he adds, with a complimentary nod to Jack, "tell

of a secret passageway to the depths of the Earth. The parchment itself was prepared by Saknussemm who made the trip first."

"I remember the movie," says Cliff Rhodes.

Jack chuckles. "Right, I'd forgotten that." He shakes his head. "Pat Boone. Whatever happened to Pat Boone?"

"Yes," says Fortesque with obvious disdain. "There was some serious artistic licence involved in that adaptation as I recall."

"That's show-biz," Cliff Rhodes says, and he raises his glass in silent toast before taking a drink. The others follow suit.

"The first parchment -- the one in Verne's book," says Fortesque excitedly, "tells of the crater of Sneffells Yokul in Iceland and how, when the shadow of the mountainous peak of Scartaris falls across it at a certain time of July, the way is revealed. This was the route taken by Saknussemm after he had written the parchment."

"But what wasn't in Verne's book-"

"Probably because he didn't know anything about it," Fortesque interjects.

"-Was the existence of a *second* piece of parchment, this one suggesting an alternative route."

Jack points at the notepaper as he gets up to bring more beers. "And that's it?"

Fortesque nods. "It's not the actual parchment, as you can see, but it *is* the same information, yes."

"And where is it, this second entrance?" Edgar asks, his tone suggesting that he isn't buying any of this.

Fortesque and Greenblat exchange glances and then face forward. "The corner of 23rd and Fifth Avenue, Manhattan," Greenblat whispers, grinning.

"Right over there," Fortesque adds, pointing to where Jack Fedogan is standing behind the counter. "So, getting back to my original question, do you have a back room?"

## 9: The back room

Jack starts Brubeck off again on the PA and the drinks are set out on the bar counter.

This kind of situation is not uncommon in The Land at the End of the Working Day, as you'll know if you been here with me before. It's like the world knows when all the players needed are already assembled and there's no call for any more to come up onto the stage.

Outside, on the evening streets of Manhattan, the wind blows across the park and buffets the buildings, blowing down the avenues and across the streets, searching out points of weakness. Inside, Jack Fedogan leads his unlikely quintet across the floor and behind the well-stocked bar.

He's closed the front door and turned the sign but he's well-versed in the ways of the Working Day and believes that everyone who needs to be here is here already. Furthermore, a small voice would tell him if he stopped to pose the question, if there *were* someone else to come then he wouldn't have been able to close the door. It's probably as well that Jack doesn't pose that question because that answer would almost certainly prove to be a little disconcerting.

"You know," Edgar says as he follows Jack under the raised wooden, counter-section, "all these years and I've never been behind here?"

"Why would you be?" is what Jack comes back with to that and it's a reasonable response.

"He just doesn't like to feel he's missing out," Jim says, his smile tugging at the words and bending them out of shape.

Jim is following on behind Horatio Fortesque while, behind him, Meredith Lidenbrook Greenblat is on Jim's heels with Cliff Rhodes bringing up the rear.

To the strains of Brubeck's Mexican-sounding piano on 'La Paloma Azul' they drift, a Manhattan Wild Bunch walking in silence. Past the arrays of bottles and glasses, past Jack's collection of polishing cloths down almost to the end of

the bar where Jack pauses as a closed door on his left.

"I still think you're wrong on this," Jack says, turning to face the others as he takes a hold of the door handle. behind him, at the end of the bar, an open door leads the way to Jack's office, a small kitchen and his private restroom.

"Out of his tree, he is," Edgar adds, also turning.

"We'll see," is all that Fortesque has to say on the subject.

Jack pushes the door open onto a narrow corridor, littered along its length with crates and cartons of bottles and cans stacked two, three and sometimes ever four high. As the corridor moves further from the bar, the stacks become higher and, occasionally, wider, the light dimming all the way . . . and, Jim Leafman is sure, it seems to go downwards.

"Down *there*?" Jim asks as he stares into the dimly-lit corridor. "Jack, you can hardly see your hand in front of your face." And just to prove it, Jim steps over the threshold, raises his hand and looks at it, disappointed to discover that he can see it perfectly clearly.

"Never use it," Jack says, neither proudly nor despondently. It's just a statement of fact as far as he's concerned.

Fortesque and Greenblat reach the doorway and they look inside.

"What do you think?" Greenblat whispers croakily.

"Well, according to Snorro Turleson, it's in here," Fortesque says. He reaches into his pocket and withdraws an elaborate-looking compass which he jiggles from side to side, occasionally tapping the case.

"What the hell was here in the twelfth century?" Cliff Rhodes asks nobody in particular as he leans into the corridor and then, almost immediately, back out again.

Jack shrugs. "Indians?"

"What I mean is," Cliff continues, "is what was a man from Iceland doing down here in the US?"

Meredith Greenblat says, "Well, many of the supposedly indigenous human species -- Indians, if you will -- can be traced back to having come down

from the Arctic circle and through Canada to settle here in what was to become the United States. Perhaps-" He raises his eyebrows and jiggles his head from side to side, "-perhaps  Turleson himself visited the area back when it was just a wilderness." He shrugs. "Who knows."

"May we go in?" Fortesque inquires.

Jack waves a hand majesterially. "Go right ahead."

Fortesque starts into the corridor closely followed by Greenblat.

"I must say," Foprtesque's voice echoes back to the others, "it certainly is dark along here."

"You got a flashlight you can give them, Jack?" Edgar says. "The sooner we show this idea to be a looney tune the better."

"Jack, did it ever occur to you that your corridor wasn't the usual kind of corridor you'd expect to find in a Manhattan premises?"

Jack shakes his head to Cliff and then looks down at the rapidly dwindling figures. "And I don't know why," he says. "I guess it is a little strange to have so long a corridor."

"So long a corridor!" Edgar says, "it looks like it goes up into the next state. You reached the end yet?" he shouts into the gloom.

"It's getting warmer," comes back in Fortesque's curious amalgam of accents.

"Hey," says Jim excitedly.

"Don't get too excited," Jack says. "They're probably under the kitchens of the Chinese restaurant two up the street."

"Oh," Jim says, his voice dripping with disappointment.

"There's some kind of markings here," Greenblat shouts.

"The mark of Snorro!" says Cliff Rhodes, who immediately grimaces an apology to a pained-looking Edgar.

The two figures turn a bend about fifty yards distant, and Jim says, "You never checked it out, Jack?"

"Didn't need to. I just stacked boxes in there. Never used it for anything

else," Jack says. As Greenblat, following his companion, disappears from sight, he adds, "I'd better get that flashlight."

Jack retraces his steps and, just for a few seconds, Dave Brubeck's version of Hoagy Carmichael's 'Stardust' waft through from the bar on a gentle cool breeze. And then again, a minute later, when Jack re-appears carrying a long flashlight which he immediately turns on.

"You okay down there?" Edgar shouts.

No answer.

"Maybe they didn't hear you," suggests Jim Leafman.

"Hey! You okay?" Edgar shouts, louder this time.

Still no answer.

Jack arrives with the flashlight and Edgar, already partly into the corridor, takes it from him and moves forward.

Jack follows, then Cliff with Jim at the back.

They pass a crate of Buds, a couple of boxes of Miller Lites, a case of Chardonnay, a tower of Mackeson stout.

"Mackeson stout?" Jim says as he passes it.

"Not a big seller," jack agrees over his shoulder.

And still they move forward.

"I think I can smell the Chinese restaurant," Cliff says.

"Smells good," says Jim.

"All that beer has made me hungry," Cliff says.

By the time they've gone another fifty feet or so, the only light is from Jack Fedogan's flashlight.

"Somehow, Toto," Cliff says, "I don't think we're in Kansas any more."

"I found some scratching on the wall here," Edgar shouts back.

Jack is the first to respond. "What's it say?"

Even unseen, Edgar's shrug makes itself felt. "Just scratches," he says. "And the corridor seems to split here."

Looking back over his shoulder, Jim Leafman is suddenly aware of two

things: the first one is that someone is following through the darkness behind them and the second is a sudden need to pee. “Maybe we should get back,” he says, annoyed at the way his voice seems to sound like a whine.

“Hey, Fortesque!” Edgar’s voice booms. “Can you hear me?”

And still there is no answer.

## 10: A parting of the ways

Turning around to face the way they’ve come, Jim Leafman, who can feel his bladder expanding under pressure, waves an arm into the darkness in front of him. He’s delighted when it doesn’t connect with anything . . . such as one of those scaly mole creatures in that old black and white movie starring John Agar. Suddenly, he backs into something and someone shouts out.

“Jesus Christ, who’s that?”

“Me,” says Jim. “Sorry.”

“You just started walking up the backs of my damn legs,” snaps Edgar.

“I said I was sorry.”

Jim hears Jack say, “Hey, yes: it does split two ways.” He turns around in time to see Edgar shine the flashlight on a short spur to the main corridor which ends in a door. The light judders across to the left and falls on a hole in the wall. In front of the hole is a sewing machine, cobwebbed and dusty, a pair of men’s shoes -- a spider scurries out from one of the shoes and disappears out of the beam -- a pickaxe, a length of what appears to be cable wrapped in a loop, and a clutter of broken bricks, masonry and concrete rubble.

“This is not your average bar back room corridor, Jack,” Edgar says, his voice soft as he kneels down and plays the beam over the hole.

“Which way you figure they went?” Jim asks.

Cliff shouts for Edgar to play the beam over the door again and he goes across and tries the handle. It opens.

“What’s in there?” Edgar asks.

"Not another corridor," Jim moans, increasingly convinced that he's going to need to add to the musky odor down here any time soon.

Pushing the door wide to expose a railed ladder set into the concrete wall beyond leading up to a circular cover some ten or twelve feet above, Cliff Rhodes says, "That must be the street." And, sure enough, the unmistakable sound of a vehicle moving over the manhole cover confirms it.

"They went that way," Jack offers, "they could get their heads knocked off.

Edgar returns the beam to the hole in the wall. "Well," he says, "I'm not even sure anyone could get through here." He reaches in and pulls at a piece of concrete. A soft rumble sounds and then another.

"Ed, I think maybe we-"

The corridor shudders beneath their feet and Jim Leafman grabs onto his crotch with both hands, applying pressure to prevent a sudden dampening of his spirits. Edgar turns the beam fully onto the hole and, way in front of them -- or was it below? -- they hear crashing sounds, and a cloud of dust bellows from the opening.

It takes a few minutes before everyone stops coughing and spluttering. And then it's Edgar who is the first to speak. "Well," he says, "I hope they didn't go that way."

"No, they went up the steps," says Jack.

"Then why didn't they say something?" Jim asks, suddenly aware that he's shivering.

"You said before that they'd get their heads knocked off going up that way," Cliff Rhodes reminds Jack. "Wouldn't it be better if they'd gone through the hole?"

Jack doesn't respond.

"I think they went through the hole," Cliff says.

"Ed?"

"I dunno, Jack," Edgar says. "If we'd thought, then maybe we could have

seen footprints or hand marks." He shines the flashlight beam in front of the hole and the steady dust-cloud still issuing from it. "But I just don't know."

"Maybe they went up through the manhole cover and just-" Jim claps his hands, one hand shooting off in front of the other. "-skidaddled."

"Without saying anything?"

"Well, they went through here," Edgar sighs, "then I reckon they're flattened by now."

"They went through the hole," Cliff says again. "And they're not flattened. They're on their way on a great adventure."

"What makes you so sure?" Jim asks. "That they went through the hole?"

"Or the adventure part," Jack adds.

"Faith," Cliff says.

"Faith? What the hell has faith got to do with it?" Edgar snorts.

Jack leans over in front of the hold, hand over his mouth. "There's no way anyone could get through that," he says, indicating the pile of rubble inside the hole.

"It wasn't like that when we first got here, Jack," Cliff Rhodes says in a measure tone. "And as for what faith has got to do with which way there want," he adds, turning to Edgar, "I can only say that faith has got something to do with everything."

"I think we're gonna start singing hymns," Jack says to Jim Leafman. And then, "You okay?"

"I need to pee."

"Let's go back," Jack announces. "We can't do anything here."

On the way back, Edgar taps Cliff Rhodes on the shoulder. "So, okay, tell me about faith."

"Faith can be interpreted as positive thinking," Cliff begins. "You heard all those stories about people lifting autos off of injured relatives? How you think that happens?"

Edgar sniggers. "That's strength, bud," he says.

"Okay, so how come those same people were unable to lift anything like what they did lift when the need wasn't as great?"

The light of the Jack's outer corridor can now be seen in front of them and tensions ease . . . not to mention the strain on Jim Leafman's bladder.

"Those two guys had faith in abundance," Cliff continues. "The stories about Verne's book, the heritage of the little guy-"

"Meredith," says Jim.

"-Right, Meredith. Maybe he was the descendent of the guy who went in Verne's story -- which calls for an earlier maybe, of course . . . that the story was real. And maybe the parchment was real which means that maybe the second entrance was real."

"If it was, it ain't no more!" Edgar says.

Cliff stops at the doorway back into the main corridor and, placing one foot on top of a crate of Budweisers, he says, "You know, Edgar, you're a downer."

"What the hell's a downer?"

"It's someone who has to poo poo everything that someone else says, or thinks or believes."

"'Poo poo'?"

"See?"

Edgar's mouth clamps shut.

He waits a few seconds, staring at Edgar, and then Cliff Rhodes says, "I think it's my turn to tell a story."

"Can I pee first?" Jim asks.

"I'll get more beers," Jack announces.

## 11: A sense of closure

Sitting back around the table, fresh beers in front of them, the four men listen intently as Cliff Rhodes begins.

"This is probably apocryphal."

"A pock of what?" a now calm Jim Leafman asks.

"An urban legend, Jim. Like the story about the escaped maniac with just one hand and a metal hook for the other . . . and he tries to get into a car while two youngsters are making out-"

"And they think they heard something so they drive off and when they get to the girl's house, the guy finds a hook hanging from her door handle."

"That's the one," says Cliff. "So, years and years ago, the story goes, a hardbitten journalist is driving through the back of beyond, somewhere in the Appalachians. You know, duelling banjos country.

"And he sees a young boy walking towards the road from the field on his right. It's only as he gets closer that he sees that the boy isn't walking through the field, he's walking towards him on water. They're right next to a small lake.

"So, the guy stops his car and gets out, calls for the boy to come over to him -- which he does. Then he asks him how he did that. The boy says, 'Did what?' And the guy says, 'Walk across that lake?' The boy looks back at the way he's just come, frowns and shrugs. 'Just put one foot in front of the other, sir,' comes the response.

"So the guy asks the boy if he does it often. 'Every day,' the boy says. 'You gonna do it tomorrow, too?' he asks. And the boy nods. 'I do it every day,' he says -- because it's the fastest way for the boy to travel from his house to the tiny village down the hillside.

"So the guy tells the boy to be here tomorrow at the same time, because he's going to bring some people to take his picture and put it in a newspaper. The boy is taken aback and he asks the man why he would want to do that. The man's reply is thus: 'Because,' he says, putting an arm around the boy's shoulders, 'what you just did isn't possible. There isn't another person in this whole world can do what you just did. This makes you special. Makes you different.'

"The boy frowns and looks out at the lake. And the man tells him to be

here the next day. Then he drives off."

Cliff takes a drink and carries on.

"The next day, sure enough, the man arrives at the same spot and this time he has a camera crew with him plus his assistant editor. The boy is there as well, sitting on the grass at the far side of the lake looking nervous as hell.

"The man shouts for the boy to come over and he gets the camera crew pointing in the right direction, film running. The boy starts towards them and . . . he wades out into the water. The journalist shouts for him to stop, tells him to go back and try it again. Which the boy does. Same thing.

"This happens a couple more time, during which everyone is getting pissed at the journalist. So the journalist, he goes over to the boy and he grabs a hold of his shoulder, shakes him a little. 'What you doing?' he asks the boy. 'You told me to come over,' the boy answers. 'Buy whyn't you walking on the water instead of through it?' And the boy says, 'You said it was impossible.'"

As Cliff settles back in his chair, his hands still raised up on each side of him, jack nods, smiling. "That's a nice story," he says.

"Is it true?" Jim asks.

Edgar snorts.

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't," Cliff Rhodes tells Jim. "It's a story, just like *Around the World In Eighty days* or *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*."

"Or *Journey to the Center of the Earth*," adds Jack Fedogan.

"Absolutely. And all the stories in *The Bible*, too. Some are true and some aren't. And a lot of others have just become exaggerated over the years. But what they all do is they give hope and they provide answers and encouragement. And that's what journeys do."

"Journeys? Why journeys?"

"Well, Edgar himself said that all stories about journeys are good stories. They reach a part inside us all that other stories don't quite reach. And that's because we're each of us on our own journey.

"Jim, your story about the ghost who'd gotten himself into some kind of

loop -- that was a journey he undertook every night of his life, and the back-story was that he was doing it because he was so sad at the loss of his wife. And Edgar's story about the boy -- and, later, the man -- on the bus, that was a wonderful story, but it's the way it brought a sense of closure to Edgar's mom that makes it all the more poignant.

Cliff pauses and looks around the table. "And that's what Jules Verne was all about. he was about feeding people's need for adventure . . . making sense -- and entertainment -- on the journey we all make to its inevitable conclusion.

"The two men we met tonight -- two adventurers in search of new experiences . . . two men who believed in what they were doing. The worst thing in the world," Cliff says, looking straight across at Edgar, "is for someone to come up to them, or to any of us, and have those hopes, beliefs and dreams flattened."

"Should we call the cops?" Jack asks.

"He didn't mean anything by it," Jim Leafman protests.

"He means for the two guys," Edgar says, slapping Jim's arm and trying to cover up his smile.

Cliff shakes his head. "I found their footprints," he says.

Edgar leans over the table. "What?"

"I found their footprints around the steps. They went out onto the street that way." He shrugs.

Everyone stares at Cliff in silence.

"Why didn't you tell us right away?" Jack asks.

"Because we made a story out of it. We made an adventure. We imagined that Fortesque and little Lorre were already high-tailing it down narrow ledges, striding through fields of giant mushrooms, discovering endless sandy beaches by the side of an azure sea and beneath the rocky dome of a gloriously high cavern before negotiating turbulent waters and watching to-the-death battles

between creatures we only know about in old nature books and Steven Spielberg movies.

"We wanted them to be doing that. We wanted them to have gone through the hole. isn't that right, Jack?"

Wide-eyed, Jack nods.

"Jim?"

Jim Leafman doesn't hesitate in saying "Yes."

And finally, "Edgar?"

Up to that point, Edgar has been staring at his beer. When he looks up, there's moisture in his eyes.

"Ed, you okay?" Jim asks.

Edgar nods. "Thinking about my mom," he says. And then, nodding, "Yeah, I wanted those two looney tunes to have gone through the hole, sure."

"Well," says Cliff Rhodes, lifting his glass to his mouth and taking a long drink, "maybe they did."

"Huh?"

"What?"

"But you-"

Cliff stands up. "I told you a story. I told you a story so's I could get your real reaction. I wouldn't have gotten it if I'd done it any other way. Truth is, I don't know which way they went. Don't know if they were who they said they were and I don't know if anything Jules Verne wrote was based on truth. But I do know this," he adds as he places his empty glass on the table. "It's been a

great night. Telling stories -- that's the most important journey of all."

And as Cliff walks up the stairs towards the waiting streets, the bank problem he had when he came in seems a whole lot smaller.

They're still sitting there, the three caballeros, when Cliff Rhodes shouts down, "Jack, there's a guy says his name is McCoy banging on your door. You want me to let him in?"

They exchange glances.

And smiles.

"Sure," Jack calls out, "let him in." Turning to Edgar and Jim, first one and then the other, he says, "Beers?"

"Well," Jim says, "this is a bar, ain't it? And what's a bar any good for if not beer?"

"And stories," adds Edgar.

"Guys," McCoy shouts from the stairs, "you wouldn't believe the journey I had across town."

Their laughter is so loud it blends in with that of Cliff Rhodes, striding the street, his coat collar pulled up against the Manhattan rain.

***(For Da e, of course)***

***ends: 15,162 words***