

Oryx  
and  
Crake a novel

margaret atwood

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## Mango

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Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat. He would so like to believe he is still asleep.

On the eastern horizon there's a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow. Strange how that colour still seems tender. The offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette against it, rising improbably out of the pink and pale blue of the lagoon. The shrieks of the birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic.

Out of habit he looks at his watch – stainless-steel case, burished aluminum band, still shiny although it no longer works. He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is.

“Calm down,” he tells himself. He takes a few deep breaths, then scratches his bug bites, around but not on the itchiest places, taking care not to knock off any scabs: blood poisoning is the last

thing he needs. Then he scans the ground below for wildlife: all quiet, no scales and tails. Left hand, right foot, right hand, left foot, he makes his way down from the tree. After brushing off the twigs and bark, he winds his dirty bedsheet around himself like a toga. He's hung his authentic-replica Red Sox baseball cap on a branch overnight for safekeeping; he checks inside it, flicks out a spider, puts it on.

He walks a couple of yards to the left, pisses into the bushes. "Heads up," he says to the grasshoppers that whirl away at the impact. Then he goes to the other side of the tree, well away from his customary urinal, and rummages around in the cache he's improvised from a few slabs of concrete, lining it with wire mesh to keep out the rats and mice. He's stashed some mangoes there, knotted in a plastic bag, and a can of Sveltana No-Meat Cocktail Sausages, and a precious half-bottle of Scotch – no, more like a third – and a chocolate-flavoured energy bar scrounged from a trailer park, limp and sticky inside its foil. He can't bring himself to eat it yet: it might be the last one he'll ever find. He keeps a can opener there too, and for no particular reason an ice pick; and six empty beer bottles, for sentimental reasons and for storing fresh water. Also his sunglasses; he puts them on. One lens is missing but they're better than nothing.

He undoes the plastic bag: there's only a single mango left. Funny, he remembered more. The ants have got in, even though he tied the bag as tightly as he could. Already they're running up his arms, the black kind and the vicious little yellow kind. Surprising what a sharp sting they can give, especially the yellow ones. He rubs them away.

"It is the strict adherence to daily routine that tends towards the maintenance of good morale and the preservation of sanity," he says out loud. He has the feeling he's quoting from a book, some obsolete, ponderous directive written in aid of European colonials running plantations of one kind or another. He can't recall ever having read such a thing, but that means nothing. There are a lot of blank spaces in his stub of a brain, where

memory used to be. Rubber plantations, coffee plantations, jute plantations. (What was jute?) They would have been told to wear solar tops, dress for dinner, refrain from raping the natives. It wouldn't have said *raping*. Refrain from fraternizing with the female inhabitants. Or, put some other way . . .

He bets they didn't refrain, though. Nine times out of ten.

"In view of the mitigating," he says. He finds himself standing with his mouth open, trying to remember the rest of the sentence. He sits down on the ground and begins to eat the mango.

## Flotsam

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On the white beach, ground-up coral and broken bones, a group of the children are walking. They must have been swimming, they're still wet and glistening. They should be more careful: who knows what may infest the lagoon? But they're unwary; unlike Snowman, who won't dip a toe in there even at night, when the sun can't get at him. Revision: especially at night.

He watches them with envy, or is it nostalgia? It can't be that: he never swam in the sea as a child, never ran around on a beach without any clothes on. The children scan the terrain, stoop, pick up flotsam; then they deliberate among themselves, keeping some items, discarding others; their treasures go into a torn sack. Sooner or later – he can count on it – they'll seek him out where he sits wrapped in his decaying sheet, hugging his shins and sucking on his mango, in under the shade of the trees because of the punishing sun. For the children – thick-skinned, resistant to ultraviolet – he's a creature of dimness, of the dusk.

Here they come now. "Snowman, oh Snowman," they chant in their singsong way. They never stand too close to him. Is that from respect, as he'd like to think, or because he stinks?

(He does stink, he knows that well enough. He's rank, he's gamy, he reeks like a walrus – oily, salty, fishy – not that he's ever smelled such a beast. But he's seen pictures.)

Opening up their sack, the children chorus, "Oh Snowman, what have we found?" They lift out the objects, hold them up as if offering them for sale: a hubcap, a piano key, a chunk of pale-green pop bottle smoothed by the ocean. A plastic BlyssPluss container, empty; a ChickieNobs Bucket O'Nubbins, ditto. A computer mouse, or the busted remains of one, with a long wiry tail.

Snowman feels like weeping. What can he tell them? There's no way of explaining to them what these curious items are, or were. But surely they've guessed what he'll say, because it's always the same.

"These are things from before." He keeps his voice kindly but remote. A cross between pedagogue, soothsayer, and benevolent uncle – that should be his tone.

"Will they hurt us?" Sometimes they find tins of motor oil, caustic solvents, plastic bottles of bleach. Booby traps from the past. He's considered to be an expert on potential accidents: scalding liquids, sickening fumes, poison dust. Pain of odd kinds.

"These, no," he says. "These are safe." At this they lose interest, let the sack dangle. But they don't go away: they stand, they stare. Their beachcombing is an excuse. Mostly they want to look at him, because he's so unlike them. Every so often they ask him to take off his sunglasses and put them on again: they want to see whether he has two eyes really, or three.

"Snowman, oh Snowman," they're singing, less to him than to one another. To them his name is just two syllables. They don't know what a snowman is, they've never seen snow.

It was one of Crake's rules that no name could be chosen for which a physical equivalent – even stuffed, even skeletal – could not be demonstrated. No unicorns, no griffins, no manticores or basilisks. But those rules no longer apply, and it's given Snowman a bitter pleasure to adopt this dubious label. The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of

blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints. Mountain tribes were said to have chased it down and killed it when they had the chance. They were said to have boiled it, roasted it, held special feasts; all the more exciting, he supposes, for bordering on cannibalism.

For present purposes he's shortened the name. He's only Snowman. He's kept the *abominable* to himself, his own secret hair shirt.

After a few moments of hesitation the children squat down in a half-circle, boys and girls together. A couple of the younger ones are still munching on their breakfasts, the green juice running down their chins. It's discouraging how grubby everyone gets without mirrors. Still, they're amazingly attractive, these children – each one naked, each one perfect, each one a different skin colour – chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey – but each with green eyes. Crake's aesthetic.

They're gazing at Snowman expectantly. They must be hoping he'll talk to them, but he isn't in the mood for it today. At the very most he might let them see his sunglasses, up close, or his shiny, dysfunctional watch, or his baseball cap. They like the cap, but don't understand his need for such a thing – removable hair that isn't hair – and he hasn't yet invented a fiction for it.

They're quiet for a bit, staring, ruminating, but then the oldest one starts up. "Oh Snowman, please tell us – what is that moss growing out of your face?" The others chime in. "Please tell us, please tell us!" No nudging, no giggling: the question is serious.

"Feathers," he says.

They ask this question at least once a week. He gives the same answer. Even over such a short time – two months, three? He's lost count – they've accumulated a stock of lore, of conjecture about him: *Snowman was once a bird but he's forgotten how to fly and the rest of his feathers fell out, and so he is cold and he needs a second skin, and he has to wrap himself up. No: he's cold because he eats fish, and fish are cold. No: he wraps himself up because he's missing his man thing, and he doesn't want us to see. That's why he*

*won't go swimming. Snowman has wrinkles because he once lived underwater and it wrinkled up his skin. Snowman is sad because the others like him flew away over the sea, and now he is all alone.*

"I want feathers too," says the youngest. A vain hope: no beards on the men, among the Children of Crake. Crake himself had found beards irrational; also he'd been irritated by the task of shaving, so he'd abolished the need for it. Though not of course for Snowman: too late for him.

Now they all begin at once. "Oh Snowman, oh Snowman, can we have feathers too, please?"

"No," he says.

"Why not, why not?" sing the two smallest ones.

"Just a minute, I'll ask Crake." He holds his watch up to the sky, turns it around on his wrist, then puts it to his ear as if listening to it. They follow each motion, enthralled. "No," he says. "Crake says you can't. No feathers for you. Now piss off."

"Piss off? Piss off?" They look at one another, then at him. He's made a mistake, he's said a new thing, one that's impossible to explain. Piss isn't something they'd find insulting. "What is *piss off*?"

"Go away!" He flaps his sheet at them and they scatter, running along the beach. They're still not sure whether to be afraid of him, or how afraid. He hasn't been known to harm a child, but his nature is not fully understood. There's no telling what he might do.

## Voice

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"Now I'm alone," he says out loud. "All, all alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea." One more scrap from the burning scrapbook in his head.

Revision: seashore.

He feels the need to hear a human voice – a fully human voice, like his own. Sometimes he laughs like a hyena or roars like a lion – his idea of a hyena, his idea of a lion. He used to watch old DVDs of such creatures when he was a child: those animal-behaviour programs featuring copulation and growling and innards, and mothers licking their young. Why had he found them so reassuring?

Or he grunts and squeals like a pigoon, or howls like a wolvog: *Aroo! Aroo!* Sometimes in the dusk he runs up and down on the sand, flinging stones at the ocean and screaming, *Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!* He feels better afterwards.

He stands up and raises his arms to stretch, and his sheet falls off. He looks down at his body with dismay: the grimy, bug-bitten skin, the salt-and-pepper tufts of hair, the thickening yellow toenails. Naked as the day he was born, not that he can remember a thing about that. So many crucial events take place

behind people's backs, when they aren't in a position to watch: birth and death, for instance. And the temporary oblivion of sex.

"Don't even think about it," he tells himself. Sex is like drink, it's bad to start brooding about it too early in the day.

He used to take good care of himself; he used to run, work out at the gym. Now he can see his own ribs: he's wasting away. Not enough animal protein. A woman's voice says caressingly in his ear, *Nice buns!* It isn't Oryx, it's some other woman. Oryx is no longer very talkative.

"Say anything," he implores her. She can hear him, he needs to believe that, but she's giving him the silent treatment. "What can I do?" he asks her. "You know I . . ."

*Oh, nice abs!* comes the whisper, interrupting him. *Honey, just lie back.* Who is it? Some tart he once bought. Revision, professional sex-skills expert. A trapeze artist, rubber spine, spangles glued onto her like the scales of a fish. He hates these echoes. Saints used to hear them, crazed lice-infested hermits in their caves and deserts. Pretty soon he'll be seeing beautiful demons, beckoning to him, licking their lips, with red-hot nipples and flickering pink tongues. Mermaids will rise from the waves, out there beyond the crumbling towers, and he'll hear their lovely singing and swim out to them and be eaten by sharks. Creatures with the heads and breasts of women and the talons of eagles will swoop down on him, and he'll open his arms to them, and that will be the end. Brainfrizz.

Or worse, some girl he knows, or knew, will come walking towards him through the trees, and she'll be happy to see him but she'll be made of air. He'd welcome even that, for the company.

He scans the horizon, using his one sunglassed eye: nothing. The sea is hot metal, the sky a bleached blue, except for the hole burnt in it by the sun. Everything is so empty. Water, sand, sky, trees, fragments of past time. Nobody to hear him.

"Crake!" he yells. "Asshole! Shit-for-brains!"

He listens. The salt water is running down his face again. He never knows when that will happen and he can never stop it. His

breath is coming in gasps, as if a giant hand is clenching around his chest – clench, release, clench. Senseless panic.

“You did this!” he screams at the ocean.

No answer, which isn’t surprising. Only the waves, wish-wash, wish-wash. He wipes his fist across his face, across the grime and tears and snot and the derelict’s whiskers and sticky mango juice.

“Snowman, Snowman,” he says. “Get a life.”

## Bonfire

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Once upon a time, Snowman wasn't Snowman. Instead he was Jimmy. He'd been a good boy then.

Jimmy's earliest complete memory was of a huge bonfire. He must have been five, maybe six. He was wearing red rubber boots with a smiling duck's face on each toe; he remembers that, because after seeing the bonfire he had to walk through a pan of disinfectant in those boots. They'd said the disinfectant was poisonous and he shouldn't splash, and then he was worried that the poison would get into the eyes of the ducks and hurt them. He'd been told the ducks were only like pictures, they weren't real and had no feelings, but he didn't quite believe it.

So let's say five and a half, thinks Snowman. That's about right.

The month could have been October, or else November; the leaves still turned colour then, and they were orange and red. It was muddy underfoot – he must have been standing in a field – and it was drizzling. The bonfire was an enormous pile of cows and sheep

and pigs. Their legs stuck out stiff and straight; gasoline had been poured onto them; the flames shot up and out, yellow and white and red and orange, and a smell of charred flesh filled the air. It was like the barbecue in the backyard when his father cooked things but a lot stronger, and mixed in with it was a gas-station smell, and the odour of burning hair.

Jimmy knew what burning hair smelled like because he'd cut off some of his own hair with the manicure scissors and set fire to it with his mother's cigarette lighter. The hair had frizzled up, squiggling like a clutch of tiny black worms, so he'd cut off some more and done it again. By the time he was caught, his hair was ragged all along the front. When accused he'd said it was an experiment.

His father had laughed then, but his mother hadn't. At least (his father said) Jimmy'd had the good sense to cut the hair off before torching it. His mother said it was lucky he hadn't burnt the house down. Then they'd had an argument about the cigarette lighter, which wouldn't have been there (said his father) if his mother didn't smoke. His mother said that all children were arsonists at heart, and if not for the lighter he'd have used matches.

Once the fight got going Jimmy felt relieved, because he'd known then that he wouldn't be punished. All he had to do was say nothing and pretty soon they'd forget why they'd started arguing in the first place. But he also felt guilty, because look what he'd made them do. He knew it would end with a door being slammed. He scrunched down lower and lower in his chair with the words whizzing back and forth over his head, and finally there was the bang of the door – his mother this time – and the wind that came with it. There was always a wind when the door got slammed, a small puff – whuff! – right in his ears.

"Never mind, old buddy," said his father. "Women always get hot under the collar. She'll cool down. Let's have some ice cream." So that's what they did, they had Raspberry Ripple in the cereal bowls with the blue and red birds on them that were handmade

in Mexico so you shouldn't put them in the dishwasher, and Jimmy ate his all up to show his father that everything was okay.

Women, and what went on under their collars. Hotness and coldness, coming and going in the strange musky flowery variable-weather country inside their clothes – mysterious, important, uncontrollable. That was his father's take on things. But men's body temperatures were never dealt with; they were never even mentioned, not when he was little, except when his dad said, "Chill out." Why weren't they? Why nothing about the hot collars of men? Those smooth, sharp-edged collars with their dark, sulphurous, bristling undersides. He could have used a few theories on that.

The next day his father took him to a haircut place where there was a picture of a pretty girl in the window with pouty lips and a black T-shirt pulled down off one shoulder, glaring out through smudgy charcoal eyes with a mean stare and her hair standing up stiff like quills. Inside, there was hair all over the tiled floor, in clumps and wisps; they were sweeping it up with a push broom. First Jimmy had a black cape put on him, only it was more like a bib, and Jimmy didn't want that, because it was babyish. The haircut man laughed and said it wasn't a bib, because who ever heard of a baby with a black bib on? So it was okay; and then Jimmy got a short all-over cut to even out the ragged places, which maybe was what he'd wanted in the first place – shorter hair. Then he had stuff out of a jar put on to make it spiky. It smelled like orange peels. He smiled at himself in the mirror, then scowled, thrusting down his eyebrows.

"Tough guy," said the haircut man, nodding at Jimmy's father. "What a tiger." He whisked Jimmy's cut-off hair onto the floor with all the other hair, then removed the black cape with a flourish and lifted Jimmy down.

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At the bonfire Jimmy was anxious about the animals, because they were being burned and surely that would hurt them. No, his father told him. The animals were dead. They were like steaks and sausages, only they still had their skins on.

And their heads, thought Jimmy. Steaks didn't have heads. The heads made a difference: he thought he could see the animals looking at him reproachfully out of their burning eyes. In some way all of this – the bonfire, the charred smell, but most of all the lit-up, suffering animals – was his fault, because he'd done nothing to rescue them. At the same time he found the bonfire a beautiful sight – luminous, like a Christmas tree, but a Christmas tree on fire. He hoped there might be an explosion, as on television.

Jimmy's father was beside him, holding on to his hand. "Lift me up," said Jimmy. His father assumed he wanted to be comforted, which he did, and picked him up and hugged him. But also Jimmy wanted to see better.

"This is where it ends up," said Jimmy's father, not to Jimmy but to a man standing with them. "Once things get going." Jimmy's father sounded angry; so did the man when he answered.

"They say it was brought in on purpose."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Jimmy's father.

"Can I have one of the cow horns?" said Jimmy. He didn't see why they should be wasted. He wanted to ask for two but that might be pushing it.

"No," said his father. "Not this time, old buddy." He patted Jimmy's leg.

"Drive up the prices," said the man. "Make a killing on their own stuff, that way."

"It's a killing all right," said Jimmy's father in a disgusted tone. "But it could've been just a nutbar. Some cult thing, you never know."

"Why not?" said Jimmy. Nobody else wanted the horns. But this time his father ignored him.

"The question is, how did they do it?" he said. "I thought our people had us sealed up tight as a drum."

"I thought they did too. We fork out enough. What were the guys doing? They're not paid to sleep."

"It could've been bribery," said Jimmy's father. "They'll check out the bank transfers, though you'd have to be pretty dumb to stick that kind of money into a bank. Anyway, heads will roll."

"Fine-tooth comb, and I wouldn't want to be them," said the man. "Who comes in from outside?"

"Guys who repair things. Delivery vans."

"They should bring all that in-house."

"I hear that's the plan," said his father. "This bug is something new though. We've got the bioprint."

"Two can play at that game," said the man.

"Any number can play," said Jimmy's father.

"Why were the cows and sheep on fire?" Jimmy asked his father the next day. They were having breakfast, all three of them together, so it must have been a Sunday. That was the day when his mother and his father were both there at breakfast.

Jimmy's father was on his second cup of coffee. While he drank it, he was making notes on a page covered with numbers. "They had to be burned," he said, "to keep it from spreading." He didn't look up; he was fooling with his pocket calculator, jotting with his pencil.

"What from spreading?"

"The disease."

"What's a disease?"

"A disease is like when you have a cough," said his mother.

"If I have a cough, will I be burned up?"

"Most likely," said his father, turning over the page.

Jimmy was frightened by this because he'd had a cough the week before. He might get another one at any moment: already there was something sticking in his throat. He could see his hair on fire, not just a strand or two on a saucer, but all of it, still attached to his head. He didn't want to be put in a heap with the cows and pigs. He began to cry.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" said his mother. "He's too young."

"Daddy's a monster once again," said Jimmy's father. "It was a joke, pal. You know – joke. Ha ha."

"He doesn't understand those kinds of jokes."

"Sure he does. Don't you, Jimmy?"

"Yes," said Jimmy, sniffing.

"Leave Daddy alone," said his mother. "Daddy is thinking. That's what they pay him for. He doesn't have time for you right now."

His father threw down the pencil. "Cripes, can't you give it a rest?"

His mother stuck her cigarette into her half-empty coffee cup. "Come on, Jimmy, let's go for a walk." She hauled Jimmy up by one wrist, closed the back door with exaggerated care behind them. She didn't even put their coats on. No coats, no hats. She was in her dressing gown and slippers.

The sky was grey, the wind chilly; she walked head down, her hair blowing. Around the house they went, over the soggy lawn at a double-quick pace, hand in hand. Jimmy felt he was being dragged through deep water by something with an iron claw. He felt buffeted, as if everything was about to be wrenched apart and whirled away. At the same time he felt exhilarated. He watched his mother's slippers: already they were stained with damp earth. He'd get in big trouble if he did that to his own slippers.

They slowed down, then stopped. Then his mother was talking to him in the quiet, nice-lady TV-teacher voice that meant she was furious. A disease, she said, was invisible, because it was so small. It could fly through the air or hide in the water, or on little boys' dirty fingers, which was why you shouldn't stick your fingers up your nose and then put them into your mouth, and why you should always wash your hands after you went to the bathroom, and why you shouldn't wipe . . .

"I know," said Jimmy. "Can I go inside? I'm cold."

His mother acted as if she hadn't heard him. A disease, she continued in that calm, stretched voice, a disease got into you

and changed things inside you. It rearranged you, cell by cell, and that made the cells sick. And since you were all made up of tiny cells, working together to make sure you stayed alive, and if enough of the cells got sick, then you . . .

"I could get a cough," said Jimmy. "I could get a cough, right now!" He made a coughing sound.

"Oh, never mind," said his mother. She often tried to explain things to him; then she got discouraged. These were the worst moments, for both of them. He resisted her, he pretended he didn't understand even when he did, he acted stupid, but he didn't want her to give up on him. He wanted her to be brave, to try her best with him, to hammer away at the wall he'd put up against her, to keep on going.

"I want to hear about the tiny cells," he said, whining as much as he dared. "I want to!"

"Not today," she said. "Let's just go in."

## OrganInc Farms

Jimmy's father worked for OrganInc Farms. He was a genographer, one of the best in the field. He'd done some of the key studies on mapping the proteome when he was still a post-grad, and then he'd helped engineer the Methuselah Mouse as part of Operation Immortality. After that, at OrganInc Farms, he'd been one of the foremost architects of the pigoon project, along with a team of transplant experts and the microbiologists who were splicing against infections. *Pigoon* was only a nickname: the official name was *sus multiorganifer*. But pigoon was what everyone said. Sometimes they said Organ-Oink Farms, but not as often. It wasn't really a farm anyway, not like the farms in pictures.

The goal of the pigoon project was to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host – organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses, of which there were more strains every year. A rapid-maturity gene was spliced in so the pigoon kidneys and livers and hearts would be ready sooner, and now they were perfecting a pigoon that could grow five or six kidneys at a time. Such a host animal could be reaped of its extra kidneys; then, rather than

being destroyed, it could keep on living and grow more organs, much as a lobster could grow another claw to replace a missing one. That would be less wasteful, as it took a lot of food and care to grow a pigoon. A great deal of investment money had gone into OrganInc Farms.

All of this was explained to Jimmy when he was old enough.

Old enough, Snowman thinks as he scratches himself, around but not on top of the insect bites. Such a dumb concept. Old enough for what? To drink, to fuck, to know better? What fathead was in charge of making those decisions? For example, Snowman himself isn't old enough for this, this – what can it be called? This situation. He'll never be old enough, no sane human being could ever . . .

*Each one of us must tread the path laid out before him, or her,* says the voice in his head, a man's this time, the style bogus guru, *and each path is unique. It is not the nature of the path itself that should concern the seeker, but the grace and strength and patience with which each and every one of us follows the sometimes challenging . . .*

"Stuff it," says Snowman. Some cheap do-it-yourself enlightenment handbook, Nirvana for halfwits. Though he has the nagging feeling that he may well have written this gem himself.

In happier days, naturally. Oh, so much happier.

The pigoon organs could be customized, using cells from individual human donors, and the organs were frozen until needed. It was much cheaper than getting yourself cloned for spare parts – a few wrinkles left to be ironed out there, as Jimmy's dad used to say – or keeping a for-harvest child or two stashed away in some illegal baby orchard. In the OrganInc brochures and promotional materials, glossy and discreetly worded, stress was laid on the efficacy and comparative health benefits of the pigoon procedure. Also, to set the queasy at ease, it was claimed that none of the defunct pigoons ended up as bacon and sausages: no one would

want to eat an animal whose cells might be identical with at least some of their own.

Still, as time went on and the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became harder to come by, some people had their doubts. Within OrganInc Farms itself it was noticeable how often back bacon and ham sandwiches and pork pies turned up on the staff café menu. André's Bistro was the official name of the café but the regulars called it Grunts. When Jimmy had lunch there with his father, as he did when his mother was feeling harried, the men and women at nearby tables would make jokes in bad taste.

"Pigeon pie again," they would say. "Pigeon pancakes, pigeon popcorn. Come on, Jimmy, eat up!" This would upset Jimmy; he was confused about who should be allowed to eat what. He didn't want to eat a pigeon, because he thought of the pigeons as creatures much like himself. Neither he nor they had a lot of say in what was going on.

"Don't pay any attention to them, sweetheart," said Ramona. "They're only teasing, you know?" Ramona was one of his dad's lab technicians. She often ate lunch with the two of them, him and his dad. She was young, younger than his father and even his mother; she looked something like the picture of the girl in the haircut man's window, she had the same sort of puffed-out mouth, and big eyes like that, big and smudgy. But she smiled a lot, and she didn't have her hair in quills. Her hair was soft and dark. Jimmy's mother's hair was what she herself called *dirty blonde*. ("Not dirty enough," said his father. "Hey! Joke. Joke. Don't kill me!")

Ramona would always have a salad. "How's Sharon doing?" she would say to Jimmy's father, looking at him with her eyes wide and solemn. Sharon was Jimmy's mother.

"Not so hot," Jimmy's father would say.

"Oh, that's too bad."

"It's a problem. I'm getting worried."

Jimmy watched Ramona eat. She took very small bites, and managed to chew up the lettuce without crunching. The raw carrots too. That was amazing, as if she could liquefy those hard, crisp foods and suck them into herself, like an alien mosquito creature on DVD.

"Maybe she should, I don't know, see someone?" Ramona's eyebrows lifted in concern. She had mauve powder on her eyelids, a little too much; it made them crinkly. "They can do all sorts of things, there's so many new pills . . ." Ramona was supposed to be a tech genius but she talked like a shower-gel babe in an ad. She wasn't stupid, said Jimmy's dad, she just didn't want to put her neuron power into long sentences. There were a lot of people like that at OrganInc, and not all of them were women. It was because they were numbers people, not word people, said Jimmy's father. Jimmy already knew that he himself was not a numbers person.

"Don't think I haven't suggested it, I asked around, found the top guy, made the appointment, but she wouldn't go," said Jimmy's father, looking down at the table. "She's got her own ideas."

"It's such a shame, a waste. I mean, she was so smart!"

"Oh, she's still smart enough," said Jimmy's father. "She's got *smart* coming out of her ears."

"But she used to be so, you know . . ."

Ramona's fork would slide out of her fingers, and the two of them would stare at each other as if searching for the perfect adjective to describe what Jimmy's mother used to be. Then they'd notice Jimmy listening, and beam their attention down on him like extraterrestrial rays. Way too bright.

"So, Jimmy sweetheart, how's it going at school?"

"Eat up, old buddy, eat the crusts, put some hair on your chest!"

"Can I go look at the pigeons?" Jimmy would say.

The pigeons were much bigger and fatter than ordinary pigs, to leave room for all of the extra organs. They were kept in special buildings, heavily secured: the kidnapping of a pigeon and its

finely honed genetic material by a rival outfit would have been a disaster. When Jimmy went in to visit the pigeons he had to put on a biosuit that was too big for him, and wear a face mask, and wash his hands first with disinfectant soap. He especially liked the small pigeons, twelve to a sow and lined up in a row, guzzling milk. Pigeonlets. They were cute. But the adults were slightly frightening, with their runny noses and tiny, white-lashed pink eyes. They glanced up at him as if they saw him, really saw him, and might have plans for him later.

"Pigeon, balloon, pigeon, balloon," he would chant to pacify them, hanging over the edge of the pen. Right after the pens had been washed out they didn't smell too bad. He was glad he didn't live in a pen, where he'd have to lie around in poop and pee. The pigeons had no toilets and did it anywhere; this caused him a vague sensation of shame. But he hadn't wet his bed for a long time, or he didn't think he had.

"Don't fall in," said his father. "They'll eat you up in a minute."

"No they won't," said Jimmy. Because I'm their friend, he thought. Because I sing to them. He wished he had a long stick, so he could poke them – not to hurt them, just to make them run around. They spent far too much time doing nothing.

When Jimmy was really little they'd lived in a Cape Cod-style frame house in one of the Modules – there were pictures of him, in a carry-cot on the porch, with dates and everything, stuck into a photo album at some time when his mother was still bothering – but now they lived in a large Georgian centre-plan with an indoor swimming pool and a small gym. The furniture in it was called *reproduction*. Jimmy was quite old before he realized what this word meant – that for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or something.

The house, the pool, the furniture – all belonged to the OrganInc Compound, where the top people lived. Increasingly,

the middle-range execs and the junior scientists lived there too. Jimmy's father said it was better that way, because nobody had to commute to work from the Modules. Despite the sterile transport corridors and the high-speed bullet trains, there was always a risk when you went through the city.

Jimmy had never been to the city. He'd only seen it on TV – endless billboards and neon signs and stretches of buildings, tall and short; endless dingy-looking streets, countless vehicles of all kinds, some of them with clouds of smoke coming out the back; thousands of people, hurrying, cheering, rioting. There were other cities too, near and far; some had better neighbourhoods in them, said his father, almost like the Compounds, with high walls around the houses, but those didn't get on TV much.

Compound people didn't go to the cities unless they had to, and then never alone. They called the cities *the pleeblands*. Despite the fingerprint identity cards now carried by everyone, public security in the pleeblands was leaky: there were people cruising around in those places who could forge anything and who might be anybody, not to mention the loose change – the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies. So it was best for everyone at OrganInc Farms to live all in one place, with foolproof procedures.

Outside the OrganInc walls and gates and searchlights, things were unpredictable. Inside, they were the way it used to be when Jimmy's father was a kid, before things got so serious, or that's what Jimmy's father said. Jimmy's mother said it was all artificial, it was just a theme park and you could never bring the old ways back, but Jimmy's father said why knock it? You could walk around without fear, couldn't you? Go for a bike ride, sit at a sidewalk café, buy an ice-cream cone? Jimmy knew his father was right, because he himself had done all of these things.

Still, the CorpSeCorps men – the ones Jimmy's father called *our people* – these men had to be on constant alert. When there was so much at stake, there was no telling what the other side might resort to. The other side, or the other sides: it wasn't just one other side you had to watch out for. Other companies, other countries, various factions and plotters. There was too much hardware

around, said Jimmy's father. Too much hardware, too much software, too many hostile bioforms, too many weapons of every kind. And too much envy and fanaticism and bad faith.

Long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the ramparts so you could pour hot pitch on your enemies, said Jimmy's father, and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside.

"So are we the kings and dukes?" asked Jimmy.

"Oh, absolutely," said his father, laughing.