

ESCAPE

by Danielle M. Ashley

UNWELCOME BLAST FROM A GLADLY FORGOTTEN PAST

'Who's afraid of the PAIRCY?'

Duke's eyes defocused, the figures on the sheet of paper started to spin, float back and forward and overlap in a series of bizarre visual effects, as his head went light and terror gripped his guts. The startle made him drop his favourite pen and almost made him fall backwards in his chair. He did not know how long it took to regain use of his intellect. About twenty seconds. He then realised he did not know just HOW that name came into his head. The *name* that had manifested itself and had thrown him into an instant seizure state. Where had he seen it? Where had he read it? Had he just dreamed it? Had it just sneaked into his mind of its own will?

He looked around. The paper on his desk only showed rows of numbers, accompanied by company names none of which was worthy of note. The pile of hard-bound legal books on his right had been there, untouched, for weeks. The desk lamp, switched on despite the daylight – albeit overcast – was one of his work habits. The curtains were partly drawn. Behind them, a wet lawn framed between two brick walls, and some children playing a ball game. One of said children, ever so full of energy, let out another shout to his mates. And that was how he'd heard it. One of the kids had shouted it. The one that was his stepson.

Stanley Duke looked, to his average town fellow, like a half failure, someone who hadn't quite made it and/or had had some problems of the kind that people leave unsaid. They were so right on the second count, but not quite on the first. It is true that he hadn't had an easy streak. The last few years had been hard years of recovery, but they had brought about things that looked like seeds from which a life could grow again. A life so different to what he'd been accustomed to, but something that taught him to be a new man.

His new life across the ocean had begun a few years earlier. Newfoundland. *Why there? Why anywhere?* Now 2009 was dripping to an end in a kind of melancholy way. How things had changed.

Newton, nine this year, was his main reason to feel like a worthwhile human being again. He was a healthy, handsome boy with infinite paths still open to him. He was the reason to fight the horror and get on with his life each day. And Duke's relationship with Stella Jones was the singular, bright event that he had not hoped for, a miracle that gave him a new lease of life and made his days

comfortable and warm. But it was Newton who made him want to live.

Stella was 36, and had had it rough as well. She worked a humble role at the 24-hour Shoppers, but she'd had big problems with drink in her past, and once she'd gone five years without a job. Newton, the product of a horrific rape that belonged to some of her darkest bygone days, had shown more resilience than her mother, and although damaged, Duke found him repairable, and he worked with all his patience at it.

It had been easier than he thought to get a way to pay the bills. The hard part was with himself. Four years before, in his old life in England, he'd suffered a serious psychiatric EPISODE from the sequelae of which he never fully healed, and professionally he was finished. He had been a somebody – but now he did not miss it.

His new home felt like home, in some strange ways. The region could get atrocious weather, for example. But it helped him to adjust. The town was not an idyll – in fact it was full of sadness and gloom which could be seen in all residents' eyes as you crossed their gaze while filling your trolley with blandness at the store – but he felt like he'd landed on a cushion. But now... his face was full of fear and worry as he extracted his mug from the microwave, the coffee inside having reached a scalding temperature. The sky outside was white and grey. For the thousandth time, the slam of the football against the outside wall resonated like an explosion.

Duke returned to his office/spare room, but did not enter. He merely stared through the door, while taking miniscule sips of coffee and trying to understand. The room was darkened, the curtains almost fully drawn. The walls were white and unadorned. A guest bed was loaded with two plastic storage boxes full of paper and other loose folders, while a heavy wooden desk looked much the same. A yellowing 14-inch computer screen showed headache-inducing images. Two chairs on the right side of the room were covered with a basic rotation of shirts and cheap business suits. The office was not presentable.

The rest of the house was not inspiring, either. But it was a home. Certainly, here he could not expect any of the privileges he had enjoyed in his native land. But the place was quiet. The worries were all simple. Stella had never looked so healthy since Duke met her in Dr. Copeland's waiting room on one of his first visits, nearly three years ago. He had no ambition left for himself but things were so sweetly tolerable that he wish he would never tire of it.

The coffee was bad, and Duke, refusing to think of anything of which he was afraid, went to his bed and swept his mind black.

He came round at 8 pm, it was now dark. Noises of people returning home. The new smell of the incipient winter coming through the door.

THE SECOND ACT

'Son...'

He would never use the word 'Son' to address anyone, least of all his own son, but with Newton it was a kind of joke, and he would call him 'Father' in return, in a mutually-agreed, tongue-in-cheek way to acknowledge and emphasise that they were not really father and son.

'Son, I heard you say something today from my window.'

'Uh?'

Stan hesitated a bit before *pronouncing* that word. 'Paircy'.

'Uh?'

Stan waited for a new sentence, a new way to say this, to assemble itself in his head. 'Do you... is there someone who... Have you *seen* anybody... suspicious... or strange?'

Newton's facial muscles now relaxed in an expression of sudden realisation. 'Oh! The PAIRCY!'

The word reverberated across Duke's mind like a hundred dogs barking inside an empty cathedral. Shadows and fires rushed before his eyes, coarse fabric, smoke, and a deafening rush of crashing seas.

Four seconds at most, then he used his will to regain control of himself – without showing, or so he thought, any sign of disturbance. The flash was still fading out when he opened his mouth to speak again. He managed a steady voice, although he had to hide his hands for fear they'd shake.

'Yes... what is it?' His voice might have been steady, but it had gone up a few tones. 'Is he... a man bothering you or something?'

Newton laughed. 'Noooo, it's just our secret *story*, he's a character in our next *play*.' Newton loved a bit of reading, he and his best friend who often came around for dinner, could write the most imaginative stories. But *this*?! 'Don't worry Father, if a stranger comes to me – I tell you right away.'

Newton turned round and leapt onto the worn settee in search of a cat to tease. Then he turned round to look at his 'Father', double-checking that the conversation had actually finished. Duke forced a grimace that meant that was it.

The rows of numbers were sliding under his expert gaze as per usual, under the unnecessary glow of the vintage desk lamp. The morning was much the same as the last one, white cloud and occasional raindrops. It was all a coincidence, he repeated in his head, not for the first time, as he finished one sheet and promised himself a hot drink after he'd done the next page. Percy is a common enough family name. Even a first name. He remembered Shelley... then he remembered his wife, and decided to abandon this thought. In fact, he didn't wait until the end of the page, and he got up from the chair to stretch his legs. Then he had an idea.

He looked round the spare room, concluding it had to be in the basement. It was on the floor, the phone directory, still in the shrink wrap it arrived with. Nobody used these things, these days. He flipped through the pages; there weren't many to go through in this town. No Percys here, but in the next two towns there were five. See? ... Then his eye fell upon an entry that shared an uncommon surname with one of the dear brothers that he had lost on *that* night four years ago. He wrestled the memory out of his mind and hurried upstairs to have his coffee.

He passed the door of Newton's room: it was a perfect example of the kind of room that would make the average Canadian dad proud. But it all left him indifferent. He was pleased, however, with his stepson's love of reading, and with the joy he had shown when Stella had brought him a small electric piano from the rummage sale. It showed signs of it being used...

How irritating was the buzzing of his phone: hadn't he been a bit concerned over the last couple of days, he would have kept it off altogether. But he'd got through enough work for the day. Just then, Stella's red estate clunked to a stop outside, way earlier than usual.

They gave each other a tiny peck as she came in – these were the moments when he was glad he had survived. Then the news.

'They've asked me to do a night shift.'

Stan nodded.

'And Newt is going to Harmer's for a sleepover.' He remembered this. He'd known about it for a

week.

'Uh uh.'

'But you'll have to pick him up in the morning.'

'Okay.'

'If you don't mind.'

'No big deal.'

He liked Harmer. He'd had to deal with school friends whose parents he could not stand, but Mathieu's father was marvellous. He didn't know his mother so much, but Ethan Harmer was now family, and he'd taught him a lot about how to be a father. The two could talk openly. He couldn't have been more relaxed about Newton spending the night there. In fact, better there than in this sodding street. Just the month before there had been a burglary. Plus the reports about strange men talking to kids. But maybe that was just paranoia.

By now, Duke was pretty sure that all was fine. His shaken memories had played him a trick he should ignore. Having the house to himself appealed, too. He could get the bottle out and enjoy his guilty indulgence of classical music until the early hours.

SHOW

Twenty miles to the north, an unnamed dense patch of fir lay sheltered from the coastal wind and a gateless track led into it, shallowly penetrating it up to a clearing, inside which the Harmers' two-floor house stood. How envious Stan and Stella were of it. It was the most peaceful and delightful of settings, and the architect who had designed it for them – a fellow who'd gone to university with Ethan before the latter dropped out – was clearly big on glass, and had done a fantastic job providing a black-themed exterior that complemented naturally the surrounding trees.

Duke pictured this in his mind, as he sipped his first glass of sherry at home in his slippers, while hearing a soft and distant thunder in the comfort of the gas heater.

Time flew; the kitchen clock showed half twelve, but then he remembered the clock had stopped weeks ago. It couldn't have been all that late. It would be a waste to throw away a single second of such a rare moment of intimate solitude.

So he got up from his chair and realised his head was fuzzy; he walked to the liquor cabinet to hide the evidence, and he staggered a bit. The room around him was warm and rounded, a blushed contentness was in him. He was proud of his stepson. Yeah, Newton, at that very moment probably defying the orders to sleep, laughing and joking and enjoying the company of his good friend, having a childhood – not mercilessly schooled like himself had been. He wanted to look at his son's room again, to imagine the life of leisure his stepson enjoyed and deserved.

He guiltily opened the door, turned on the light, and was dazzled by the amount of detail and loose itemry along all four walls. He smiled and nodded proudly. He felt unsteady yet again, so he went towards the only chair in there. He let his behind fall on the chair – and when he raised his gaze, found himself facing the keyboard of the electric piano. The red square button had to be the power switch. What the hell.

A red light and a soft hiss indicated that the instrument was now powered. He'd played a little, a long time ago, and he might even have remembered some piece if he'd tried. Instead, he elected to spread seven of his fingers on to seven random keys, and push.

The sound that came out was like the scream of seven sacrificial victims with a blade through their hearts; visions of ruin and despair, tongues of fire out of control, and the sickening feeling that the floor was opening beneath his feet.

It was loud; it was the sound of an organ.

He gasped, jumped up, turned round to look behind him, and then again, like a frightened dog; he opened the boy's closet to ensure no perils were hiding there; he opened his drawers, opened his sports bag, looked at the patterns in the carpet in horror. *Everything* could mean something. Half of the items he found he didn't even know what they were. How could he know they were simple toys? How could he know if any of them meant anything? After all, *he* hadn't.

His heavy head sharpened, even as his judgement got even dimmer. He threw on a set of clothes grabbed at random from the laundry chest and jumped into his car.

The drive through the town's intersections seemed to last forever; finally he wriggled free of the last one and merged into the highway heading north, passing exit after exit inviting him to leave the main road and head inland, to sad and lonely villages he'd never been to.

It was practically morning, though one could not tell if the sun had yet risen or not for the clouds. As Duke reached the vicinity of Harmer's stylish pad, he had sobered up. He kept on driving, under the white blanket of the sky, his windscreen wipers periodically sweeping off thin and sparse raindrops. He was the only vehicle for miles.

A sense of shame, of inappropriateness, began taking form. He'd over-reacted, surely, and now he was out here, way too early in the morning, unwashed and unkempt.

He didn't take the exit leading to the Harmers. Instead, he kept on driving for a few minutes longer, collecting his thoughts, and finally feeling like taking a breath of fresh air, he left the highway by taking a right, up a sloping lane, and he ended in an unpaved car park at the top of a hill. The car park was empty at this hour.

He was in fact at the top of a minor cliff overlooking the ocean, and this must have been a viewing spot. Upon opening the door some wind blew in, and he realised that his brow had sweat on it; however, he felt calm and relaxed as the expansive view gave him a sense of peace. He took some steps around the area, and let the wind dry his face. He locked the car out of habit, although there was not another soul in sight.

The water was a grey-teal colour, matt, lacking any depth as did the flat cloud cover above. Duke took the short path through the grass that led from the car park to the viewing parapet, placed at the extremity of a hard-surfaced area which was loosely paved with concrete slabs.

The path rose gently and more of the sober grandeur of the view appeared as its end neared, until Duke finally set foot on the concrete and walked toward the parapet.

He did not remember tripping, or sliding, or putting a foot the wrong way, or any of the railings giving way. All he knew is that he was suddenly transported to a strange rush of spinning scenery, his arms and legs thrown about by unfamiliar forces. He found himself in mid-air, falling down towards the water, quite unable to understand how, but with enough time to realise the probable consequences of the impact. For the first moments of the plunge, he was too startled to scream. Finally, towards the end, his mouth emitted an incoherent blare that lasted only a fraction of a second before the smash cut it short.

BEND

The two feet of water saved his life. He felt his head hit the gravel, followed by a crushing sensation

to the whole of the right side of his body. He took a few instants to register all the pain, but then the drowning feeling overrode it and he found himself kicking and pushing up to emerge. In full survival instinct mode, ignoring which limbs were healthy and which ones weren't, he speed-crawled until he found a corner where he could keep himself out of the water by sitting and leaning his back on the rock. There he rested to catch his breath, waited for his heart to return to normal, and spent several minutes trying to get a sense of the absurdity of what had just happened.

His right shoulder hurt in a fierce burning way, but he could move about. Once the legs had steadied, he could walk. He barely noticed the icy chill of the water and the wind, but he knew he would soon freeze if he didn't get out of there asap. He was not far from the road and civilisation, he thought, but down there, he could have been far away and anywhere – nature's force felt wild and awfully real. He had to find a way to get back to the top of the precipice. There was enough space to walk going north, and there was hoping he could find a path to climb back up not far. He started inching along the foot of the cliff, and luckily, soon the fine gravel ribbon widened and walking became more comfortable in the clearway between the wall and the water. He went for a couple of minutes, then turned round a blind corner.

The path, if one could call it that, started to climb gently and Duke began to hope that it would be the beginning of a man-made cut that would eventually take him up. But not a hundred feet had gone since the beginning of the climb, when on his left a hole bore into the cliff face, in what seemed a natural cavity. Looking ahead along the coastline, things didn't look so promising. There was no way going up for as long as he could see, and although there might have been one behind the next bend, he would have had to walk a good while just to poke his head around it. The cliffs were nothing like the white ones he knew as a child; these were dark and crumbly, like a stone titan ready to disintegrate and bury you. The shoulder kept on throbbing.

Looking at the opening in the rock, Duke noticed a metal pipe going in. He couldn't see if the cave was a blind alley or... was it a passage? Could it lead to the other side, to the road? Duke had never been out here, but he'd seen stranger things before. Perhaps the locals walked through all the time. He walked in as far as he could go while still being able to see ahead in the near darkness. The bore went on for much longer after that. He turned round to observe the metal pipe again as it came in towards him. At one joint, a thick industrial cable came out of it, and a plastic box was crudely nailed to the damp rock wall. It was an unsecured electrical panel on the inside of which there were two switches inside waterproof housings. He pressed one and to his surprise, some distance further into the burrow, some light did come on. Then he pressed the other, to no visible effect. As he stood up again, he braced for the pain, clenched his teeth and let it pass. Then he ventured deeper in.

The light was coming from small building-site spotlights on wooden crates and fluorescent tubes nailed to the vault, some of which flickering visibly. A very makeshift system, which cast a cool and clinical colour. The tunnel had a gentle upward inclination, and after a shallow left-hand curve, it opened into a large, roughly circular chamber. The chamber featured at its centre a circular pit filled with water, like a huge, unenclosed well, some 15ft in diameter. The walls of the chamber and passages, and indeed those of the well, were bare, ragged-edged rock. All around the sides of the room, unidentifiable debris was strewn, some of which black and burnt. The walls showed signs of smoke blackening too. Duke looked into the pool. How deep was it? Through the surface of the standing water, he thought he saw the bottom, but he wasn't sure. One solitary fish was swimming peacefully at a depth out of arm's reach. It was a normal-looking, everyday-shaped fish for which he did not have a name. For the fish, this silent place must have felt like a solitary and meditative retreat. He wondered if this water connected with the sea outside.

Periodically, drops would filter from the dome and fall, and those that landed in water produced a musical warbling plop. He was quite unable to make sense of much of this place. On the opposite side of the round room, the cave narrowed down again into a corridor and continued. He walked round the pool of still water and followed it.

Only a few steps beyond, there was another room, and this seemed to be the end of the cave. This one was much smaller. It was dark as the lights there did not work, but enough light came through the passage from the previous room, that with a bit of eye adjustment, enough could be seen. In here, the walls exuded an acrid smell of burnt materials that were probably not supposed to burn. Much more clutter on the floor. Two metal chairs, one of them on its side. A row of four lockers was lined along one edge, all of them half open and seemingly empty. A battered office desk, with a few soaked sheets of paper atop. If he'd tried to pick them up, they would have probably disintegrated into pulp. Other salvaged furniture was cramped together, some of it upside down, abandoned and encrusted with rust. A broom, mop and bucket. A stack of cardboard boxes, all similarly damp and heavily stained, of unknown contents. And, on the floor, several small, dark, lumpy heaps of hard to identify nature.

He stood and stared up and down among much puzzlement. Then, not without severe pain, Duke picked up a long stick that lay at his feet, probably the detached handle of another broken broom, and poked the mounds of unknown material with the end of it. They were soft. He then used a little more pressure to drag some of the matter towards him. From the way it felt and moved, it seemed to be fabric. He tried to further manipulate it by using the stick, but got frustrated, and so overcame his revulsion and grabbed an extremity of it with his bare hands. It was heavy, coarse, soaking wet. He passed one corner of it from one hand to the other, pulling more of it up from the scrunched heap. He looked at it one more time from a different side, ready to conclude that it was a blanket. Then, in searing horror, he SAW, and threw the garment back to the floor in a sudden reflex of panic. *It was a hooded robe.*

It was imperative to get out of there. He retraced his steps hastily, eager to be back to the freedom of the open air. But on his way there – he had completely forgotten – he encountered again the chamber with *the pool*. And there he stopped.

On the other side of the pool, diametrically opposed to where he stood, was the passage which would lead him to the escape. He just had to walk around the hole and scam. But instead, he hesitated, fixating the round surface, doubting, fearful to take the first step.

The water was still just like before, and the silence likewise; in fact nothing had changed from a moment previously. Duke bit his lip. He was not sure whether to force himself to walk calmly, or to make a hurried scramble. He was not sure if he wanted to *look* into it, or force himself to look ahead. Every moment he waited was a moment longer in the cavern he so longed to leave, and yet the seconds passed, and he kept still; and the stiller he got, the more afraid he was to move again.

Finally he moved. Self-consciously, with soft but tense steps, he took the right side path, going counter-clockwise round the hole, in a contrivedly calm gait facing ahead, although he could not keep the corner of his eye from tracking the blackness. Then, once arrived on the other side, after his short hike during which time had seemed to stretch, he traversed the low arch and continued down the exit tunnel without stopping. The light filtering from outside was visible ahead.

A few steps into the final passage, he encountered a puddle, as he felt a sense of wetness coming from his right foot. This did not bother him, for he would just carry on without stopping. He was about to lift his other foot to take the next step, as he had planned, but the other foot, too, was now feeling wet even before he'd had a chance to move it.

At this point he was forced to look down, and he saw water streaming down the slope down which he was walking, whirling at his ankles. He turned round to look behind him, and he saw to unspeakable terror that the waters of the pool were overflowing.

Duke felt his legs go the consistency of warm butter. The reality around him started to look like slow motion, and he almost started seeing himself from an outside point of view as his brain got flooded with a chemical intensity reserved only for the most extreme situations of danger. He turned to face the exit again and initiated a long stride in a reflex reaction to get away from what he had just seen. But as his foot landed, things did not go as he expected. He could not think straight any more, and even functions such as taking a step and keeping balance seemed compromised. Breathing and phonation too, as he tried unsuccessfully to emit a scream when he felt himself bend over forwards without any control over it. He fell over onto his arms, finding himself on all fours with water flowing even faster over the whole of his fallen knees and calves. He managed a few forward pushes with his trembling limbs that only gained him a few feet of progress towards the exit, but then the feeling of the water reaching his face and splashing on it, sent through a new wave of fear that deprived him of the command of the little strength he had left. He was fully on the ground now, the water flow rushing faster by the second, gurgling all around his body and wetting every part of it; some of it went into his nose and mouth, but he could do nothing about it, for he felt like a limp ragdoll incapable of motion. Through his submerged ear, he could feel a vibration carried by the water, a buzzing: when he recognised it, his mouth opened voiceless – perhaps in a second futile attempt at screaming, or maybe in an instinctive expression of the terrified awe that pervaded him. His arms and legs flailed a bit, not even sure what would be the pattern of movement that would propel him: towards the light, towards the exit, but how far was it? He would never make it. The water splashed. His mind had never been so utterly defeated and trembling before its own demise. He prayed to the Lord that he had so cruelly abandoned four years before, he prayed to Him to kill him there and then, while there was time; to spare him the boundless horror of seeing what he did not wish to ever see again, and perishing by it. He could not see, he could not focus: only a glow that he thought was the unreachable exit, a salvation forever out of reach. A whisper sounded in his mind, its origin unknown, as if it wasn't carried by the air but by the very substrate of reality itself.*paircy*.....*paircy*..... He was further crippled by more cramps, while in his mind's eye a new chasm of fear opened up like a demonic mouth. He had given up now, aware of his own powerlessness, aware that his body would not carry him. He'd given up on the body, he was now bargaining about his spirit. He wished to simply disappear, to simply be carried away, killed, dismembered, but carried at the four corners of the world, anywhere but here, in this cave, with the dread and the blackness without bounds.

SIGNAL

It was difficult to tell what was perceived by the five senses and what originated inside the head; in such a hallucinatory limbo where each terrifying vision reinforced the next, the certainty of the gruesomeness of one's destiny could well resemble the most extreme monstrosity conceived by the imagination, and vice versa. But so it was that a new sound, distant, weak at first, started to become perceptible, and it startled Duke like nothing else. A faint, high pitched *voice* that no human throat could produce: something that Duke had heard before. It startled him, it *hollowed* him, it put him in touch with an intensity of *emptiness* and pain that defies memory. But for once, it did so in a way that gave him wind instead of weakness, because it was so frightening that his whole being refused to lay there and wait for it to come and take him.

His arms regained some muscle, he used them to drag himself towards the cold glow of the morning, and the glow kept growing bigger. The painful crawl seemed to last forever, and every heroic pull was carried out as it might be the last before its *arrival* – and the end of him. Yet the patch of daylight was close now, and freedom started to seem possible. How cruel would it be to

succumb now.

He had the feeling – he did not turn to watch, but he just *felt* – that the horror he was running from was not far behind him, when he finally pulled himself clear of the underground cavity and into the open; then he kept going forward, without really seeing any detail, in his blurry field of view, of his heading. A couple of pushes later, and he was tumbling and rolling down a little hill of sand and broken stones, accumulating further injuries and losing the little sense of orientation he had, until he came to a stop where the mounds of crumbled stone met the sea. It was at this point that he realised that he might have just gone from the frying pan into the fire: the waves came crashing towards him, and the rising and falling swooshing of the surf was so loud that his strength began to vacillate again.

But determined not to die just like he knew he would if he did not remove himself from there, he resolved to go and drown himself far out into the sea, far from the lair, far from the sounds that might attract *him*. The absolute driving force was to get away, put as much distance as possible; the escape by way of the open sea was the only direction that had presented itself to his confused mind and the only one he had considered; besides, it was truly all he hoped for right now; to at least die in a way that did not involve the awful end he had now twice faced in his life.

The further out he went, the weaker the rush of the waves battering the cliff. The sea was dark and huge around him, but calmer, and it did not scare him. His vision was starting to go black at the edges, the swimming motion was causing more and more damage to his already injured body, but he did not feel it; he pressed on, and he would press on until he passed out and found his peaceful demise.

But not too long before that moment came, a newer, but different, washing sound arrived close by, and then two gloved hands suddenly took him by the arms.

PAUSED

It was February. Newton, that day, would be absent from the usual kickabout. He would be going to see his stepfather in what might be one of the last times he'd see him before he would be forced to leave the country, according to his mom, until he felt better. Duke hadn't informed anybody of what he had seen. He did not care if the authorities knew of the cave or not, or what was in it, or whether it existed any more or whether it ever existed at all. He didn't care if he was believed or not, he would keep his mouth shut, wrap himself in his blanket and pretend not to hear. He just wanted to close his eyes and dissolve. He wanted nothing.

With Newton away for the afternoon, his friends had taken the match to another tolerant neighbour's lawn. The ball, as it often did, got kicked too hard and ended up on the opposite side of the street, and rolled towards the storm drain, where it wedged itself at the mouth of the opening. Donovan volunteered to go and get it.

He bent and reached with his arm into the drain opening to scoop out the ball, and as he did so, he noticed a very unusual sound coming from down below. A strange, filtered noise, tonal but discordant, and slowly rising and falling in pitch. It was spooky. Was it the wind blowing through the pipes? He'd better hurry and get back to his mates. But his arm, as it stretched towards the ball, brushed away a thin layer of dirt and dead leaves that had accumulated there. Underneath, some lines, a sign. A series of small scratches, an inscription that had been scrawled onto concrete with a twig before it hardened. He tried to uncover the rest of it. He swept his forearm in an arc, to reveal a strange nine-letter word.
