

DAVID KING

GOING BACK

As Mark knelt in the sandpit beneath the transplanted flame trees, he peered at the privet hedge surrounding the garden. Twenty years ago he had climbed among a similar hedge; twenty years ago he had parted branches in order to see the house about which he so often made up stories.

Idly, he began to tap the alphabetical bricks the psychiatrists had left him. Although it was night, he could see the bricks clearly: A, C, E, F, G, I, N, P, R, T, and U. Close was a toy steamroller, half-buried in the sand.

Gingerly, he felt his arm. His “recent, adult” memories were supposed to disappear soon; but he knew they would not. How could a drug alter something as rich as a whole life?

He checked the time. Midnight. Slowly, he drew near the white, stone stairs adjacent to the front door. During every December of his childhood a decal of Father Christmas had decorated the door. When arranging the house’s reconstruction, however, the psychiatrists had decided against including those objects to which he might respond inappropriately. There was, after all, the danger that he might react to an image of Father Christmas as if it were a divine symbol, rather than a past-recapturing one.

He was to visit first the sleepout, which was on the left of the stairs. He opened the door, and paused. Even though the sleepout was only one of the rooms in which he had slept, he recalled it well. He could see mosquito coils, like those whose grey, scented smoke had kept him awake on summer nights; he could see a patchwork quilt, like that under which, on winter mornings, he had woken to regard his collection of gemstones. He ran his fingers over the quilt, wondering whether he did so from free will or conditioning. The psychiatrists had told him that he had been conditioned to visit each of the house’s eleven rooms, but he was sceptical. Still, it was degrading that they even thought they could subject a refined person to an experiment. He peered at the painted asbestos walls, wishing that night had not been pronounced the most “psychologically profitable” time for it. The only light was that of the half moon and the street lamps; and it was hard to see clearly.

Clumsily (there was a dresser in his way) he inserted himself under the bed. Just as years ago, when he directed his toy rocket there, the dust seemed thickest near the skirting-boards. It was disconcerting to realise that this house was only a faithful copy. The reclamation board had

spent a great deal; they must consider him worth reclaiming. But then, he had not been just, as they called him, a “felon”: he had been involved with computers; and when the reclamation was complete, and he had approved adult knowledge and experience, his talent with computers would be useful to the authorities. But did they really believe that by his becoming familiar, in obsessive detail, with childhood objects he would soon become an “innocent, programmable” child again? The idea was absurd — but then, so was the world. That was why fleecing the world had never concerned him.

After ten minutes, the time he was to spend in each room, he left the sleepout. He glanced up. They had even rebuilt the loft. This was really just a recess between the sleepout’s ceiling and the roof; but the word “loft” had always seemed right. As a child, he had not entered it: clearly this was why he was not required to visit it now. He started along the verandah, aware of the grey, tongue-like leaves of the century plant, and of the rows of transplanted fish-fern. Then he opened the door to the lounge.

Darkness. He narrowed his eyes. No, it was not wholly dark: in the grate were the red cubes of a dying fire. He smiled. He had always delighted in eating peanuts before that fireplace. Why had each shell contained only one kernel?

He turned, and examined the other side of the room. In the corner farthest from him was a piano; and next to the piano were a black, cast-iron magazine rack and an aquarium. Goldfish flashed from one end of the tank to the other; apparently, fish never slept. But the magazine rack had no magazines! Did the psychiatrists want to prevent him from reading? He loved reading; *Treasure Island* was the book that had started him. He had even wanted to be a writer, although his first choice had been to be a concert oboist. If this experiment were not so eccentric — not so certain to fail — he felt sure he would have tried, by now, to kill those responsible. True, the idea of revisiting his old home absorbed him; but he had always hated being dominated. But suppose he could be dominated? Was his memory vanishing already? No, he had been to the sandpit, then to the sleepout, and then to here. He was not an innocent child yet.

When he entered the kitchen, he noticed first the wallpaper, which had fruit motifs. Columns of split oranges and lemons were barely discernible in the gloom. He felt taken aback. It was almost unfamiliar, that wallpaper! His recollection of it must have been deeply submerged. He began to wander around. There was the bright triangular egg-cups, empty; there was the wood stove: its once-silver hot-plates were black. Long ago, he had burnt his fingers on it.

Almost absent-mindedly, he moved towards the bedroom next to the kitchen. He tapped a mirror. What he remembered most about this room was the high dresser, in which his father had kept his suits. The dresser had always appeared to loom out of darkness. When had he last visited the room? Twenty years ago? Surely not — yet his insurance policy would mature next year.

He entered the adjoining bedroom: and stopped. He could not recall what he was doing. He sat on the bed. Before him was a lamp whose stand was decorated with halved shells. On his right was a shaving-mirror; its back presented a river scene. He was reminded of the “Rivers of the World” series of cigarette cards his father had given him. Of course, the series that drew him most was the one showing scenes from pirate stories.

But what was he doing?

In the dining-room, he found himself before a large table. He examined it. He had forgotten that yellow, checked motif: but the psychiatrists must have taken the information from his memory. Memory . . . computers. What was a computer?

He sat beside the table. Perhaps one day he could have breakfast here again. Breakfast had always been his favourite meal, because it was closest to dawn, his favourite time of day. But why did only cereals have cards? Was cereal, which was supposed to be wholesome, so unpopular that the masses had to be entranced with cards, golden offers, and plastic inserts? Still, cereal manufacturers put out plastic inserts, such as Crater Critters, with less regularity, now: perhaps breakfast had become more popular. Or perhaps art authorities had intimated that the plastic sculputes were not artistically important.

As he reached under the table, and grasped its steel legs, he began to laugh. His whole life had led to this! His friends or peers, whoever they were, were married, settled: but he'd always been a loner. That was why he spent so much time playing in the hen run. The halved water tanks there reminded him of ships. He laughed again.

Then he stopped laughing, and became aware of the silence.

As soon as he entered the first of the bedrooms adjoining the dining-room, he looked around cagily. The room seemed familiar: had he already visited it? But of course he had. Not long ago his sister had asked him to come in bed with her. She had shown him the face of her watch, and stated that it was “iridescent”. Really, however, it had been merely luminous.

To reach the second bedroom, he had to cross the dining-room once more. When he was inside, he hesitated. He had been wandering around for a long while, now: what was he after? Contentment? Security? His

super-ball? The darkness frightened him. He opened the curtains. They had drawings of Noah's Ark. He craned towards the sandpit. When he was in it, Mrs Cummings sometimes leaned over the fence and talked to him. His dresser was more fun than the sandpit, though. It was a spaceship; it could soar to Mars or Pluto. He liked hiding in . . . confounded right-wing government! What were they doing to his mind? Always questions. He grasped his head and closed his eyes.

The bathroom, toilet, and laundry could be reached only from outside the house. He reeled through the back door and towards the bathroom. Perhaps it was bath-night tonight. If it was, where was his toy fish? He couldn't be a pirate without it. Perhaps he could go and get it and escape from the bloody Captain Kidd.

In the toilet, he clutched the chain; the floor was wet. Behind was the copper. A box of Cold Power loomed out of the darkness.

He began to stagger along the footpath.

He fell into his sandpit.

A while later, he reached for a brick. Then he collected them all before himself. Soon, he had made the word "GUN". He glanced around. Why was he away from his cabin? Someone might tell the captain. He'd kill them!

He ran into the sleepout, drew off his clothes, cast them on to the floor.

Suddenly, he listened. He could hear footsteps. They were heavy.

He edged towards the bed, and lay still.

Presently, the door closed.