

Short story bonus ...

Throwing A Wobbly

The bumblebee wheezed.

At least, that's what it sounded like to Vaughan Cramer. But being only half awake and fully hungover, he wasn't sure.

He blinked into the shaft of watery sunlight cleaving the window and ran his tongue over arid lips. The experience compared to staring at a searchlight point blank while rubbing his mouth with emery cloth.

Can insects wheeze? he wondered sluggishly. Probably not. But the way things had gone recently he was prepared to believe anything.

Cramer shifted slightly. An empty vodka bottle rolled from the bed and met the carpet with a silken thud. He winced. Pain was an inadequate word to describe what was going on inside his head.

The bumblebee resembled a black and orange striped ping-pong ball decorated with pipe cleaners. It looked far too heavy for something as ambitious as flight. The simple act of walking seemed to present it with a major challenge. So how the hell it got into the flat and on to the windowsill was a mystery.

He watched its repeated attempts to climb the side of a flowerpot. Each time it started to crawl up, its weight and exhaustion sent it sliding back down. Its continuous buzzing could have passed for the sound made by an electric shaver. Above, and just beyond reach, the corpulent plant sagged with excess mass, bloated stalks drooping.

Losing interest, he groped for the TV remote control in folds of bedclothes. He punched a channel and muted the sound. At the bottom of the screen the time and date display read *07.53 - E+122*.

A film clip showed a busy street. Obese people were struggling to mount a bus. In the background, stout rush hour travelers waddled to work. This was replaced by footage of a protest meeting. Thousands of grossly proportioned demonstrators were crammed into what he took to be Trafalgar Square. Ample arms held aloft placards and banners. Another scene appeared. A fat man with the unmistakable air of a politician, in a smart if bulging three-piece suit, pontificated silently from behind an imposing mahogany desk.

Then it was back to the studio. Presenters Ricki and Jodie filled the famous couch, wedged together so tightly they gave the impression of being joined at their beefy forearms, like overweight Siamese twins. Rigid grimaces fixed on their plump faces, they were going through the morning papers, indicating garish tabloid headlines with fingers akin to pork sausages. She had all the grace and elegance of a barrage balloon. He was sweating freely.

Cramer almost smiled. There wasn't much to be said in favour of the present situation but at least it was democratic. As with death and taxes, there were no exceptions.

Or none proven, he reminded himself.

He was taking in the ungainly spectacle of a vast TV weather girl obscuring her map when a banshee wailed. It kept going until he strained for the phone on his bedside table.

Before he could croak a greeting, his caller boomed, '*Cramer? Biddlecombe!*'

‘Sir?’ he mumbled, throat parched, head throbbing.

Biddlecombe got straight to the point. *‘You’ve got an assignment. And I want you in situ ASAP.’* His manner was crisp, strident, authoritative. As usual.

‘But, uhm, it’s my day off,’ Cramer protested weakly. ‘I had leave owing, remember, and - ‘

‘We’re in the throes of a national emergency, Cramer, a triple red alert scenario. I shouldn’t have to remind you of that.’

‘No, but - ‘

‘Everyone’s expected to do their bit and you’re no exception.’

‘Of course, and normally I’d - ‘

‘None of the other field operatives would dream of taking time off in the current circumstances.’

‘I’m sure they - ‘

‘All hands to the pump, shoulders to the wheel, your country expects, that kind of thing.’

Cramer sighed and gave in. ‘What exactly do you want me to do, sir?’ he offered meekly.

‘There’s been another tip-off from a member of the public. You’re the only chap we can spare, and as it happens the incident took place not far from you.’

‘If it took place at all,’ Cramer muttered.

‘What? Speak up!’

‘Just commenting on the unreliability of these so-called sightings, sir.’

‘No need to remind me how untrustworthy civilians can be in such matters. We both know our success rate has been less than substantial.’

‘It’s been less than anything at all as I understand it, sir. Zero, nil, naught - ‘

‘Yes, thank you, Cramer; I’m well aware of our lack of headway. As are the cabinet and top brass, not to mention the Press. Which is all the more reason to investigate every case. Now take down the details.’

Cramer fumbled for a notebook and pen.

Once that was over, Biddlecombe signed off with a hearty, *‘Good show! I’ll expect your report no later than fifteen hundred hours, in person.’*

The line went dead.

Cursing, Cramer tossed the notebook aside. Now he couldn’t spend the day with Melanie, as he’d promised, and her big event was this afternoon. But if he really moved he might be able to see her briefly on his way back.

There was coverage of an athletics meeting on the TV. Elephantine “runners” lumbered around the track at a snail’s pace. It cut to a rotund javelin thrower. Abundant flesh barely constrained by tortured lycra, he managed to break into an amble. Feebly, he lobbed his spear. It landed an arm’s length in front of him. He collapsed gasping.

Cramer killed the picture and began easing out of bed. It creaked ominously.

Clutching the adjacent table for support, he slowly manoeuvred his massive, quivering bulk into a standing position. As he did so he caught a glimpse of himself in the wall mirror. Shuddering, he was reminded of why he got so drunk the previous evening. After pausing a few seconds to regain his breath he was ready for the plod to the kitchen.

At the door, perspiration sheened and puffing, he stopped and glanced at the windowsill. The bumblebee was still trying to climb the pot.

It went up, it bumped down. Went up, bumped down. Up. Down.

He could have sworn he heard it pant.

It was going to be a warm day. Damn it.

Cramer stood outside his apartment block, patting his pockets for car keys. Black coffee and analgesics had taken the edge off his hangover but he was far from comfortable. His head was full of shattered crystal and his fresh clothes were already sweaty.

A posh looking woman shambled by. She wore a dress the size of a marquee. But a *designer* marquee. It was still possible to detect a remnant of her sophisticated beauty, now sabotaged by layers of fat. A lead attached her to a small breed of dog, maybe a pug, although the word small was purely academic. As sour-faced as its mistress, the animal was equally obese. Its short legs were immense and bowed, its distended belly scraped the pavement.

Further along the street a huge traffic warden leaned on a parking meter, gulping air.

Once again it occurred to Cramer that a bizarre kind of equality had been imposed.

He found the keys and unlocked his car. In common with most vehicles still on the road it had been customised to meet the new requirements. The chassis and axle were reinforced. All but the driver's seat had been removed, and that was set well back. Even so, he had trouble squeezing into it.

Having mopped his brow with a handkerchief, he checked the address and started out. By necessity, his speed was low.

So were his spirits. The frustration at having to change his plans and disappoint Melanie was sharpened by the feeling that he was about to investigate a false alarm or hoax. Just like all the others.

He passed a trio of joggers. Two women and a man, decked out in voluminous track suits, any of them could have doubled as a primary-coloured blimp. Not that they were likely to be called upon to perform such a task. The women each held one of the man's arms and were gently steering him toward a bench. He was ashen faced, breathless from over-exertion.

Cramer allowed himself to drive a little faster and snapped on the radio.

'... leading health food manufacturer Weightanull brings you Slimofast, the revolutionary new aid to weight reduction. Have the benefits of slimming supplements and strenuous regimes proved too thin for your liking? Are you fed up with faddish diets? Tired of tedious exercise? Then look no further! Because Slimofast is guaranteed to work!'

A chorus of what appeared to be demented chipmunks warbled,

*'Slim-o-fast, Slim-o-fast,
makes those pounds melt off at last.
Slim-o-fast, Slim-o-fast,
now your flab's a thing of the past!'*

'Yes, Slimofast, the miracle weight-loss tonic. Proven effective and entirely safe. Slimofast, enriched with age-old wonder ingredients including Tibetan yak's spleen, ground bark from South America's bungo-bango tree and -'

Cramer hit the off button and expelled a weary breath.

Grimly, he concentrated on the traffic.

The house was a modest semi, tucked away at the end of Blackhorse Avenue and overlooking the woods fringing Dickens Heath.

As Cramer shoe-horned himself out of the car a paper boy staggered past, hefty orange shoulder bag adding to his gigantic girth. He sported the *de rigueur* sullen expression of teenage and a baseball cap that adorned his head like an egg cup balanced on a pumpkin. However much material had been lavished on constructing his trousers didn't stop them riding above ankles of mammoth circumference.

Cramer went through the gate and trudged along the path. He rang the doorbell.

While he waited he cast an eye over the lawn's fleshy blades of grass and the chubby plants choking the borders. Fat ants meandered languidly across the paving stones.

It was getting warmer. He loosened his tie.

The door was eventually opened by an elderly man huffing from the effort of reaching it. He was built like a tank, of course.

'Yes?' he panted.

'Mr Jarvis?'

The man nodded.

'S.I.D.,' Cramer announced.

Jarvis thought about that for a moment. 'That's Sid, isn't it?'

'Er, if you like.'

'What about it?'

Cramer was mystified. 'What about what?'

'Sid.'

'That's why I'm here.'

'There's nobody called Sid here, mate. Try number thirty-six.'

'No, no, *I'm* Sid ... I mean S.I.D.'

'Well what you doing coming here asking for yourself then?' He gave Cramer the sort of look people reserved for maniacs.

'You don't understand,' Cramer insisted. 'I'm here because I'm *S.I.D.*'

'I can spell Sid you know,' Jarvis informed him indignantly, 'I'm not stupid.'

'I'm with S.I.D.!' Cramer persisted.

'Oh, so now you're *with* this Sid, are you?' Jarvis scanned the street. 'Where is he?'

Cramer considered punching him. Instead he said, 'Let's start again, shall we?' He fished out his ID card and shoved it under the man's nose. 'My name is Vaughan Cramer and I'm a representative of the Home Office's Special Investigations Department.' He added slowly and deliberately, 'S.I.D.'

'I don't know why you couldn't have said that in the first place,' Jarvis sniffed.

A woman appeared in the hallway behind him. She was about his age and of corresponding immensity.

'Who is it, Raymond?' she called.

'Bloke from the Home Office,' he told her. 'Says his name's Sid Vaughan-Cramer.'

Cramer decided not to argue.

'Don't keep him standing at the door,' the woman reproved, 'ask him in.'

'The wife,' Jarvis explained ruefully, jabbing a meaty thumb in her direction.

'Nora.'

There followed a moment's awkwardness as Cramer negotiated his way past Jarvis and into the house.

A bird cage hung from a stand in the living room. An incredibly obese budgerigar lay palpitating in it. Nora Jarvis tinged the bars with her finger and cooed, 'Joey? Joey, Joey, Joey. Fancy a nice bit of cuttlefish, Joey?'

Other than the rise and fall of his vast feathery chest, Joey did not react. They solemnly decamped to the three-piece suite. The furniture groaned. Cramer produced his notebook and flipped through the pages. 'As you know,' he began, 'I'm here because you called to report a Pref.'

'Is this to get the reward?' piped-up Mr Jarvis.

'Ah, well, that isn't my -'

'All the advertisements say there's a reward for reporting this kind of thing,' Mrs Jarvis interjected.

'The reward's payable against proof,' Cramer pointed out.

'Oh.' She shared her husband's look of disappointment.

'It's my job to get that proof,' Cramer went on, 'and if I find it, you'll be in line for the reward.'

'So what do we have to do?' Mr Jarvis asked.

'Just answer my questions.'

'We did all that on the phone.'

'Bear with me while I go over some points, okay?'

They nodded, glumly. The action set their glistening jowls juddering.

'I understand you reported the incident as taking place last night.'

'That's right,' Mrs Jarvis confirmed. 'About ten-thirty.'

'And it was here?'

Mr Jarvis pointed to the French windows and the back garden outside. 'Yes, over there.'

At the end of the garden was a low fence. Beyond that, an incline swept up to a wooded area on the edge of the heath.

'What happened?' Cramer prompted.

'We were watching television. Nora went to draw the curtains and called me to come and look at something.'

'What exactly did you see?'

'One of *them*,' Mrs Jarvis said, a look of distaste clouding her features. 'A Pref. Bold as brass, standing by that big tree.' She indicated a swollen oak.

'Male or female?'

'I didn't know trees had sexes.'

'The *Pref*,' Cramer clarified.

They both agreed it was a woman.

'Young,' Mrs Jarvis added.

'What was she doing?'

'Doing? Nothing. Just standing there.' She shuddered. 'To think, one of them, so close ...' Mrs Jarvis shook off the memory. 'Anyway, after a couple of minutes she spotted us and ran off into the woods.'

'I see. Was there anything unusual about her appearance?'

'She was a *Pref*,' Mr Jarvis replied. 'I'd say that was unusual enough, wouldn't you?'

'I mean any particular physical characteristics. Anything out of the ordinary.'

'Don't think so. Mind you, we were pretty shocked at seeing her at the bottom of our garden, so I don't suppose we took it all in. We called the police, naturally.'

'But they drew a blank?'

'They fannied about out there for an hour or so, but didn't find anything.'

'And this is the first time you've seen her or any other Pref around here?'

'Oh, yes,' Mrs Jarvis told him. 'We'd have called earlier if that was the case. You can't be in for the reward if you don't call, can you?'

‘We’ve never had any luck on the lottery,’ Mr Jarvis stated, ‘but maybe we’ll do better with this.’

So much for civic duty, Cramer thought.

He closed the notebook. ‘Well, that’s all I need. Thank you for your help.’ Heaving himself to his feet, he shook their hands.

‘My pleasure, Sid,’ Mr Jarvis beamed.

As Cramer was leaving, the budgie achieved a pathetic tweet.

It hadn’t taken him long to investigate the site, and he wasn’t surprised not to have found anything. Although precisely *what* Biddlecombe and the Department thought constituted evidence had always puzzled him. Nothing short of a real live Pref, presumably.

Yeah, and the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot thrown in for good measure, he reflected cynically.

Traffic in the city centre was busier than when he left, and he was worried about parking. But when he got to the multi-storey car park the green *Spaces* sign was lit up.

There were pigeons sauntering in the slip road leading to the entrance. They were too fat to fly. It was nice to see one thing that hadn’t changed.

Having scattered them with his horn, he had to drive up several floors to find a bay. Which presented the problem of getting down again. In his condition the stairs weren’t an attractive option. The queue waiting to use the tiny lift was hardly more appealing. There were new laws about the number of people who could ride a lift together, but many ignored them, often with disastrous consequences. Reluctantly, Cramer chose the stairs.

Twenty minutes later he emerged at ground level. Bushed. Then came the futility of trying to find a taxi. With walking too difficult for so many people, and the recent one passenger only rule, cabs were gold dust. In the end he gave up and set out for Melanie’s show on foot.

The amount of time he had left before having to report to HQ was trickling away. But he contained his irritation and kept to a moderate pace. It was hot, and he saw more than one small crowd clustered around a porcine pedestrian downed by heat stroke. He didn’t want to be one of them.

Eventually, dishevelled and flustered, he arrived at the Royal Fortescue hotel.

Even as the mountainous doorman directed a lethargic salute at him, sounds of a commotion came from the building’s revolving doors. Several hulking guests, with luggage, had unwisely entered at the same time. More people crowded in behind them and the mechanism jammed.

The interior of the no longer spinning doors was a tableaux of compacted flesh. Faces squashed against the glass in grotesque imitation of gaping goldfish. Podgy hands pressured the panes. A cacophony of muffled woe arose.

Roused from sloth to mere indolence, the flunky clumped to the rescue. He tugged mightily at the brass rail on the door. It wouldn’t budge. The muted whimpers of outrage within cranked up a couple of notches.

Liveried employees appeared, several pushing from inside, others pulling with the doorman. Their task was made no easier by the trapped guests, who were pulling and pushing against their would-be saviours. The entire structure shook precariously. Then suddenly freed itself. The captives squirted out, disgorged like lumpy toothpaste from a stomped tube. They were deposited on the hotel’s forecourt in a tangled heap of blubbery limbs and ruptured suitcases. An unseemly fracas ensued.

In his mind, Cramer chalked up the score. Flubber 1, Dignity 0.
He skirted the melee and entered the hotel by a side door.
A sign in the lobby read -

An Extravaganza of Summer Couture
New Season's Fashions for the Fuller Figure
Exclusive Preview --->

He went the way indicated and produced his invitation for a colossal young woman in a black mini dress. Smiling, she waved him into the hall.

It was packed with an audience of cultured, affluent and universally titanic potential buyers. A very gratifying turn-out for his girlfriend's first major appearance.

Cramer's seat was in the first row on one side of the catwalk extending from the flower-bedecked stage. By the time he elbowed his way to it the lights were dimming and rhythmic music pounded.

The show began. A parade of youthful, grossly overweight models wiggled, tottered and gyrated through a ponderous routine that set the catwalk bouncing. They regaled the spectators with expansive trouser suits, boundless frocks, prolific two-piece outfits and swimwear assembled from measureless quantities of textile. Fortified high-heels, huge wedged clogs and boat-like sandals tramped the boards.

When Melanie eventually appeared she was decked out in a plentiful white ball gown, glittering with pastel sequins. Her lengthy chestnut coloured hair cascaded freely. Drawing level with Cramer she grinned and gave him a coquettish wink.

Notwithstanding multiple chins, stevedore's arms and tree trunk legs, she was beautiful.

At the finale all the models gathered on the catwalk together, bathing in the audience's applause. Then the French designer, Jean-Michel Grandpierre, made a dramatic entrance. An unmistakable figure, resplendent in his trademark kilt, platinum hair cropped, the Gallic *sartor* blew kisses to his admiring public and pecked the models' generous cheeks.

As the clapping died down he waddled to the microphone.

'Ladeez and genteelman,' he intoned, 'I fank you for attendean my liddle show zis aftarnoon.'

Amid the smattering of rekindled applause, Cramer thought he heard something resembling the groan of yielding wood.

'I must alsow fank all zee boyz and gurlz ear on stage wiff me ... '

The sound repeated itself, slightly louder and more prolonged.

'... wiffout ume all zis would 'ave been ... 'ow you zay? ... not pozibale.'

There was another, even more pronounced noise; a cross between a creak and a crack. No one on the catwalk seemed to notice, though several people in the audience were looking anxious.

'I shood alzo zay a beeg fank you to zee people in zee beckgroom for zere ... '

A sharp *snap!* rang out, loud as a pistol shot.

'... 'ard work and - *Sacre bleu!*'

The catwalk lurched violently. Several of the models issued alarmed squeaks. Grandpierre desperately clutched the microphone stand.

For an eternal second, time froze.

Then with a thunderous roar the platform collapsed.

Models went down like poleaxed hippopotami. The Frenchman landed on his

well-padded bottom, revealing the full extent of his monstrous legs. And graphically illustrated that, despite the kilt, he did not embrace Scottish customs in *all* matters sartorial.

Chaos reigned. There were shrieks, shouts and screams; large tracts of flesh were exposed. Dust billowed.

Cramer was one of the first members of the audience to timorously scale the wreckage. Heart thumping, he hurried to Melanie as fast as his cumbersome bulk allowed. She was already sitting up, a bemused expression on her face.

‘Are you ... all ... right?’ he gasped, plonking down beside her.

‘Think so.’ She flicked locks of hair away from her eyes with a ham fist. ‘How are the others?’

He looked around. Several people had hold of Grandpierre’s arms and were straining to hoist him upright. None of the models seemed seriously hurt.

‘I’d say pride was the main casualty.’ He attempted the impossible task of putting an arm around her shoulders. ‘Sure you’re okay?’

She nodded. ‘But I wouldn’t mind getting out of here. Will you help me up so I can go and change?’

He almost strained his back before a posse of bellhops came and lent him a hand.

They didn’t have time for much more than a coffee together. A woman at an adjoining table was tucking into numerous rich cakes, ice cream sundaes and milk shakes. As weight apparently couldn’t be lost by any means, whatever the slimming industry claimed, some people had taken it as a license to scoff.

Before he had to leave, Cramer swore he’d spend the day with Melanie on her birthday, E+127, even if it meant feigning illness to get off work. When he asked her what she’d like for a present she said, ‘Anorexia nervosa.’

They both wished it was that easy.

Having arranged to see each other again the next evening, Cramer headed for S.I.D. headquarters in Whitehall.

He was nearly late for the appointment. His watch, with the specially extended strap, showed just four minutes to spare. Once through Security, the receptionist said he was expected in the basement gymnasium.

Dozens of S.I.D. personnel were down there, weight-lifting, practicing aerobics, jabbing punchbags and engaged in all manner of other clumsy and hopeless bids at fat reduction. Cramer found Biddlecombe stuffed in some torturous exercise machine. He was red-faced and oozing perspiration. It was obvious he was relieved at Cramer’s arrival because it meant he could stop punishing himself. Not that he would ever admit to that.

‘Ah ... Cramer,’ he gasped. ‘You should ... try ... some ... of this ... yourself.’

‘No disrespect, chief, but I don’t see the point. Nothing seems to work, so why waste the time?’

‘Nonsense.’ Biddlecombe was still pooped but getting his breath back. ‘It’s ... wonderful. Very ... character-building.’

‘Doesn’t shift the weight though, does it, sir?’

‘That’s no reason ... not to try,’ his boss huffed, neat grey moustache bristling with irritation. ‘I’m thinking of making it ... compulsory for ... the whole department, in fact.’

Cramer didn’t relish *that* prospect, but held his tongue.

‘I’ll be right with you,’ Biddlecombe said, beckoning a pair of overblown attendants.

Once they levered him out of the contraption he stepped on a set of scales. His face darkened.

‘Any improvement?’ Cramer inquired innocently.

Biddlecombe’s wordless glare was eloquent enough an answer.

When his boss had changed from track suit to the more familiar pinstripes, he lead the way to a lift. Even with just the two of them inside it felt terribly cramped.

As they ascended, Biddlecombe said, ‘What’s your verdict on that sighting?’

‘Probably just another dead end. No proof of any kind beyond witnesses out for the reward. And if it isn’t money-seekers it’s nuts or sensationalists. These reports are turning out to be about as substantial as UFOs.’

‘*They’ve* risen too, you know, according to the Defense Ministry.’

‘Doesn’t surprise me, sir. People are looking for answers.’

‘Yes, not least the PM. I had a meeting with him this morning to deliver a progress report. *Progress* report indeed!’

‘We haven’t exactly had a lot of that, have we, sir?’

‘Precious little. As the Premier never tires of pointing out. Which is why I need results!’

Cramer noticed that they were halfway between the fourth and fifth floors.

‘Where are we going, sir?’ he ventured to ask.

‘Press conference. With the bloody reptiles in a feeding frenzy again, no doubt. You’ll be representing the field operatives.’

‘*Me? A press conference? But ... but ... but ...*’

‘You sound like an outboard motor,’ Biddlecombe barked. ‘What’s the problem, man?’

‘I ... I’ve never answered questions from the Press before, sir. I mean, I wasn’t warned or -’

‘Don’t be a complete prune, Cramer. Apart from me, Norbreck’s going to be there, and we’ll do most of the talking. You’re just to make up the numbers. Should any of the hacks ask you anything, all you have to do is remember you’re subject to the Official Secrets Act, smile like an idiot and tell ‘em everything’s under control. That’s what I always do.’

Oh God, Cramer thought.

The lift tinged, its doors slid open and they spilled out. Walking to the suite set aside for media briefings, Cramer felt like a condemned man.

All the chairs in the press room were occupied. In many cases, several were filled by the same person. They faced a low dais supporting a trestle table covered in a white tablecloth and festooned with microphones. Norbreck was seated there already. Biddlecombe and Cramer joined him. As they settled, three camera crews moved in and jostled for best position.

Staring out at the rows of tubby, unsmiling faces, Cramer quaked.

Biddlecombe nudged him in the vicinity of his well-buried ribs. ‘*Smile*,’ he hissed.

Cramer adopted a deranged smirk.

His boss raised a hand. ‘Let’s begin, shall we?’ The room quietened. ‘Most of you know me, but for those who don’t, I’m George Biddlecombe, General Administrative Secretary, Special Investigations Department. On my left is government Chief Scientist Professor Langley Norbreck.’

The burgeoning boffin favoured them with a laid-back, ‘Afternoon.’

‘And on my right,’ Biddlecombe continued, ‘is Vaughan Cramer, one of the Department’s investigating officers.’

Cramer said, ‘Uhnga. Omfh.’

Biddlecombe cleared his throat. 'We won't bore you with prepared statements today, ladies and gentlemen; we'll just answer any questions you may have.'

A forest of podgy hands went up. Biddlecombe pointed at one.

'Adrian Shelley, Daily Dispatch. Does that mean you haven't anything worth telling us?'

'Not at all. Next!'

'Dominic Moody, The Defender. Can you outline exactly what progress has been made in understanding the nature of the present emergency?'

'I think that one's best answered by Professor Norbreck,' Biddlecombe responded. 'Professor?'

Norbreck leaned back in his protesting chair. 'We have made *some* advances in our knowledge, but it's early days yet. Remember, it's only about four months since the event that has come to be known as the Enlargement took place. However, several facts have been established.' He counted them off on chunky fingers. 'One, we know that the Enlargement occurred in a single twenty-four hour period. Two, it is a global phenomenon. Three, the condition affects all lifeforms; humans, animals, insects, plants, even organisms on a microbiological level. There appear to be no exceptions.'

'What about the Prefs?' an unshaven, shambolic character in the first row shouted. '*They're* exceptions, ain't they?' As an afterthought, he identified himself. 'Eddie Squallor, The Comet.'

Biddlecombe took over. 'Ah, Mr Squallor. Forthright as ever in representing the concerns of the ... *popular* press.' He looked as if he had a bad smell under his nose. 'The issue of Prefs, or Prefatories to give them their full nomenclature, is subject to detailed and thorough investigation.'

'Nom-what?' Squallor muttered.

Another reporter hoisted himself up. 'Osbert Rayner, Globe and Telegraph. Perhaps you could fill us in on the results of this "detailed and thorough investigation".'

For the first time, Biddlecombe seemed ill at ease. 'It's a situation we're keeping constantly under review. To say more than that at the moment could jeopardise national security.'

There was uproar.

'What about the public's right to know?' someone yelled.

'Give us the facts!' demanded another.

'"Fatties Ministry Mandarins in Cover-Up Scandal"!' exclaimed Squallor.

Cramer cringed.

The film crews turned their cameras on the clamouring journos.

'Please! *Please*, ladies and gentlemen!' Biddlecombe pleaded. 'Let's conduct ourselves with some measure of decorum!'

The room eventually calmed down enough for another question.

'Nancy Wakefield, Daily Tribune and Telegraph. The government offers a reward for information about Prefs. How often has the reward been claimed?'

'I don't have the exact figure in front of me,' Biddlecombe stalled, 'but claims run to many hundreds.'

Even in his state of terror, Cramer appreciated the cleverness of his boss' answer. Hundreds of *claims*, yes. Pay-outs was another matter. He reached for a glass of water.

'Grant Edmonds, Evening Bugle News Herald Chronicle Recorder.' He grinned sheepishly. 'Sorry, there's been a lot of mergers lately. It'd be interesting to hear

from someone with first-hand experience of investigating Pref sightings. What's your assessment, Mr Cramer?'

Cramer spluttered a fine shower of water over the camera crews. Hands shaking, he slowly returned his glass to the table. 'Pa-pa-pardon?' he stammered.

'The Prefs,' Edmonds repeated. 'It's obviously important to track down any that might exist, but it seems S.I.D. are having certain difficulties in that respect. What do you have to say about it?'

'Umm.' He felt his face turning fiery red. 'Well, I aah ... Yes. Definitely.'

'Yes what?' Edmonds persisted.

'Yes it's ... important.' He hiccupped. 'Scuse me. It's very important ... to ... look for Preps, er *Prefs*. Yes. *Hic!* 'Scuse.'

'And how many have you found, personally?'

Biddlecombe kicked his shin. '*Ouch!* I mean ... *hic!* ... beg pardon. Well, you have to ... *hic!* ... appreciate that this kind of investi ... *hic!* ... gation is very difficult and ... *hic!* ... '

'Hold your breath!' Squallor suggested.

'... wha - ? Oh, right.' Cramer inhaled, filling his lungs and expanding his cheeks hamster fashion.

Biddlecombe snapped shut his gaping jaw and stepped into the breach. 'I think that, er, my colleague Mr Cramer here admirably demonstrates the ... dedication ... yes, the *dedication* to duty that characterises all Special Investigations Department employees.'

Cramer's eyes began to bulge.

'And let me make it clear,' Biddlecombe went on portentously, 'that even as we speak, the best scientific minds in the country are engaged in intensive research to solve the mystery of the Enlargement. Be assured that everything that *can* be done is being done.'

Cramer was turning blue.

'It remains only to thank you all for coming,' he continued hastily, 'and to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Professor Norbreck ... '

'Afternoon, everybody.'

'... and Mr Cramer. And *Mr Cramer*. Cramer! You can *breathe out* now, man!' '*Paahhwaaaah!*'

'Just a minute!' Squallor protested. 'We haven't finished yet!'

The rest of the press corps echoed him. A general hubbub of complaints erupted.

'Thank you, thank you,' Biddlecombe recited blandly. 'The attendants will see you out.'

At his gesture, security men began clearing the room. The reporters and camera crews were unceremoniously herded into the corridor, their complaints ignored.

When the door finally slammed, Biddlecombe scowled at Cramer. 'A fat lot of good *you* turned out to be.'

'A *fat* lot of ... ! Oh, very droll, sir. Yes, it did go rather well, didn't it? Do you think any of them noticed I was a bit nervous? *Hic!* 'Scuse me.'

Early the following evening Cramer was still smarting from the chewing-out his boss had given him.

Sitting in his flat with Melanie, watching himself on TV, did nothing to make him feel any better. They were running footage of the press conference, for the umpteenth time, and it included glimpses of his gauche screen persona.

'Make it go away,' he begged. 'I look such a twazer.'

'It's not *that* bad, Vaughan,' Melanie lied. 'But maybe you're just not cut out to be a performer.' She switched channels.

'... and I tell you, brothers and sisters, that fat is good!' a televangelist raved. 'It's good because God willed it! And if any of you out there are foolish enough to find a way of shedding those heaven-sent pounds, you should get down on your knees and tell the Lord, "Forgive me, Father, for I have thinned"!''

Melanie switched again.

'... find the lover of your dreams with Heavy Date magazine, the largest circulation contact ...'

She turned off the set.

'Everybody's getting in on the act,' Cramer grumbled.

'You're really tense, Vaughan. Try to calm down.'

'I am calm.'

'You're about as serene as a combine harvester.' She spread her generous arms. 'Come here.'

He joined her on the floor and they snuggled.

'It's your job,' she said.

'Maybe. But if I don't get back in Biddlecombe's good books that'll be academic. I won't *have* a job. On the other hand, I'm thinking of quitting anyway.'

'Why?'

'It's all so pointless, isn't it? Running around looking for Prefs. Chasing moonfluff.'

'Is it? Moonfluff, I mean. Anyway, you have to do what you think is right.'

'What do *you* think is right?'

'This.' She rested her head on his barrel chest. They stayed that way quietly for a few minutes before she spoke again. 'You know, it's strange, and you'll think I'm mad, but the more time passes the more I'm starting to feel that being fat isn't so bad.'

'Hmmm. It's funny how you can get used to just about anything.'

'It's more than getting used to it. It feels ... *right*, somehow. A lot righter than those horrible Prefs.' She pulled a bad medicine face.

Bizarrely, Cramer was surprised to find that struck a chord with him. He was about to tell her so when the phone rang.

It was Biddlecombe. But he hadn't called to deliver a further dressing-down, as Cramer expected.

His boss didn't bother with formalities. '*We have a sighting, and according to our informants it's going on right now.*'

Cramer sat up. 'Where?'

'*The Fairview Housing Estate.*'

'That's -'

'*Yes, next to Dickens Heath. And we've had five or six calls about it. Get yourself over there now, and don't bungle this one!*'

Cramer slammed down the phone.

'I'm coming!' Melanie declared. 'No arguments!'

They arrived in their separate cars, to maximise speed, and found a crowd on the street. Several police land rovers were parked nearby.

Holding out his ID, Cramer approached an Inspector. 'What's happening?'

'Didn't I see you on the telly last -'

'Yes, yes! What's *happening*?'

‘Right. We’ve had a number of eyewitness reports of a Pref on the heath. That lad over there seems to have got the best look.’

Cramer lumbered to the spheroid youth in question. ‘You were the one who saw the Pref, right?’

‘Yeah. ‘Ere, weren’t you on the - ‘

‘Yes, it was me! Now let’s get on with it. Where did you see the Pref?’

‘Up the end of the road there, where it runs by the woods.’

‘Was it a man or a woman?’

‘Woman. Well, girl really.’

‘Are you *sure*?’

A battleship of a female butted in. ‘Oi, mister. I’m his mum. And my Fabian don’t tell no fibs. If he says he saw one of them freaks, he saw it.’

Cramer felt bad about being snappy. ‘Sorry, kid. I didn’t mean to talk to you so brusquely.’

Fabian was baffled. ‘Brusquely? What, that bloke who made all those kung-fu films?’

The Inspector oozed over to join them. He was holding a radio. It seemed miniscule in the enormity of his fist. ‘Some of my men have spotted her,’ he reported. ‘No more than half a mile from here.’

‘Can we get there?’

‘In a land rover, yes. Specially reinforced jobs, powerful engines.’ He glanced at Melanie. ‘But I can only take one passenger, I’m afraid.’

‘Don’t worry, Vaughan, you go ahead,’ she told him. ‘Go *on!*’

Cramer and the Inspector shoe-horned themselves into the vehicle.

As they sped down the road, the radio crackled with a message. ‘Seems we’ve got some of the local citizenry out there looking for her too,’ the policeman related.

‘Well, we could probably do with the help.’

‘Providing they don’t get under our feet.’

They drew in behind a police van at the side of the road, a couple of dozen paces from where the woods loomed darkly.

A sergeant and a gaggle of constables greeted them.

‘We’ve got a fix on the Pref, sir,’ the Sergeant reported. ‘One of our boys saw her a couple of minutes ago, less than a hundred yards north of here. We’re in pursuit.’

‘What about the locals?’

‘A few of them around, which confuses things a bit.’ He nodded at the wood.

‘Another thing: there’s no way we can get the land rovers through that.’

‘So it’s on foot now, Mr Cramer. Want to leave this to us?’

Cramer was determined to get a result this time. ‘No, Inspector. I’m coming with you.’

‘Suit yourself.’ He dug into his pocket and handed over a flashlight. ‘You’ll find that useful.’

The sergeant and a constable opened the back of their van. There were a trio of German shepherds inside; great hairy beachballs with stubby legs.

‘They still have their sense of smell and tracking skills, Mr Cramer,’ the Inspector explained.

The group fanned out into the trees.

It was dark and tangled, and just the occasional muted snatch of chatter from the police radios broke the deathly quiet. They used their torches sparingly, so that only now and again a beam knifed briefly and died.

After trudging sweatily for a few minutes they heard voices, quite close at hand. Several people were shouting. The dogs began to growl, then bark. They strained at their leashes. Cramer saw the glowing disks of flashlights no more than a stone's throw away.

'Come on,' the Inspector urged.

They puffed their way through the twisted undergrowth.

'What chance have we got of catching a Pref on foot?' Cramer said. 'She's got to be able to move faster than we can.' He was fighting for breath.

'More of us. We'll try to surround her.'

They ploughed on.

Minutes later they converged with another group of officers, and a smattering of residents from the estate.

'Which ... way?' the Inspector demanded, rationing his air with staccato speech.

Shafts of light from numerous torches pointed to a nearby copse.

'Encircle it,' he ordered.

They all moved toward the clump of trees, some entering frontally, others carrying on to the sides and back.

Cramer and the Inspector crashed through foliage and found the ground within sloped down to a depression. They half slid to its floor, raking their flashlights in a sweeping arc before them.

Stumbling, almost falling once, Cramer got ahead of his companion.

He heard something, quite close by.

It sounded like someone whimpering. A woman.

Cramer ducked under a hanging branch, made his way around an amplified bush and found the Pref.

She was lying on her back, one leg twisted grotesquely. He could see how she'd stumbled on an almost hidden trunk and taken a fall.

The Inspector caught up with him. Two more men followed. Others, police and civilians, came in from all directions. They turned their torches on her. The glare made her screw up her eyes and raise a hand to shield them.

Somebody whispered, 'We finally got one.'

She was young. And thin. Her arms and legs were slim to the point of skinniness. As she took in draughts of air, ribs showed through the flimsy cloth of her tattered dress. Lank hair trailed over her slender face. She had *cheekbones*. It was a miraculous sight.

Cramer thought she was beautiful.

But he didn't mention that to anybody.

Even after they killed her.