

Mr Hebbly Goes to Town

Metaphrog

The spray of drizzle was soothing to the temples, it almost balanced the scream of traffic and flurry of people staggering all around him. A woman in a purple waterproof anorak approached aggressively holding her ground, an absurdly angular figure leaning forward, refusing to move, teeth clenched against the wind, body braced against any inevitability, glasses glinting in a parody of evil. Moving sideways a little didn't bother him; he caught himself grinning and then felt guilty, saddened by the woman's pathos. So much stress, so many spoilt minutes, disappointed loved ones. He tried not to imagine any more. Was it worse or was this some hideous distortion caused by a new malignant shift in his own fragile state of mind. For some people this time of year must be nightmarish, dreadful. For some it was a struggle to stay alive: he should think himself lucky.

Anyway, it wasn't worth analysing really, could lead to depression; better to try and sort out more pressing problems. The bank would be busy, everywhere was ridiculously busy, and it would all take a little longer than usual. A moustachioed man with lascivious eyes danced into view: apparently he was occupied shaking something in each hand, and shouting prices and endorsements. A deliberate commotion outside a shop that had taken the place of the local newsagent and looked like it had been especially designed for the purpose of selling flashing lights and small explosives. As he passed, and attempted to ignore the shaking somethings, the man muttered something that sounded like: 'wombat'.

On the corner there hovered a stinky meat mias-

ma, the butcher was filling a second large plastic bin with oozing gobbets, bags of bits. Generally it was unwise to attempt crossing the road until the little green men appeared. Vans and cars forced their ways through congestion then hurtled a short distance over the wet surface. He wondered if anyone else found this strange, if anyone else noticed the pointless speeding and stopping. Angry cars everywhere, screeching and vrooming. Occasionally drivers would honk, or even wave an aggressive fist at each other or at a pedestrian. Old hunched figures smelling damply of lonely flats milled backwards and forwards peering at the traffic lights and the reflections in the blackened smoked glass. The light changed and they began milling carefully across, waiting patiently for the impatient drivers barging through the shuffling crowd.

The opposite pavement, normally populated by the odd local care-in-the-community characters or disgruntled hairdressers, was today a sea of writhing bodies. Shopping: the modern leisure activity and necessity.

An aching nostalgia sapped his mood as he made his way to the pelican crossing in heavier rain. A hooded figure lurched by, moving fast, mumbling a greeting, the pressure of addiction, anxious face already beginning to look a little jaundiced.

Tommy had said he heard a fox. A funny thing to hear in a city over the near constant noise, but then the animals fed off all the garbage. Rats ran riot in the quiet.

He got really tired of them trying to sell him a



loan. Buy a car. "You know I've never actually learned to drive, too much of a space cadet. Daydreaming. Resigned myself to being a passenger in life." There had been a silence then. "I can't drive." No? "Well why not borrow some money to take some lessons?" Last time he'd been to the bank he'd politely declined a new account, a giant furry animal had kept on waving at him. He'd thought it was a rabbit. "A fucking giant rabbit waving at me." But Gerry had assured him it was a squirrel. Later in the park he'd thought about that: nuts, something about saving up for the winter.

Fire engines had begun to arrive along the road in both directions, settling outside the Co-op, sirens blaring orange against the darkening clouds. It was only late afternoon but it felt like night. Bovine faces stopped and peered at the firemen, lopsided grins appearing on white round moons. Smoke billowed from the high windows into the bruised sky.

The bank windows were duller than they should have been, the blinds had been closed, but the yellowy light was visible inside. The wooden door stood shut.

"What time is it?"

"Only half past three. But the blinds are closed!"

"Maybe there's a robbery."

The old woman wrinkled her nicotine-stained face and laughed, "Santa probably needed money."