

A FEW INTRODUCTORY WORDS

Dear Reader,

As we have known each other now for at least five seconds, and I'm warming to you already, I feel a few words of reassurance are in order. If you are not as yet well versed in the gentle art of the cryptic crossword, do not panic. The possession of the cruciverbalist's particularly warped way of thinking (that's a crossworder, in case I've lost you already) is by no means a necessary requirement for the reader of this book – indeed, in the greater scheme of things, it may not even be desirable.

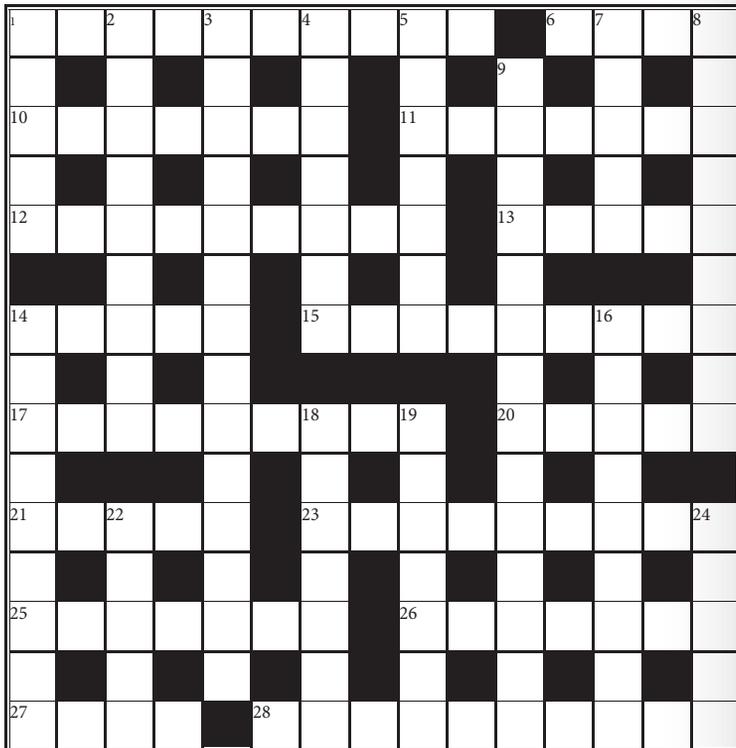
You will be taken gently by the hand at the solution of each clue, and may cheerfully ignore the explanation altogether, study it and memorise the technique it reveals, or nod impatiently at it as it confirms what you had already deduced several pages previously.

I have included the empty grid at the beginning, and did toy with the idea of providing all the clues as well, revealing the whole thing as it would have appeared in the newspaper, but decided that being able to solve at least some of the clues beforehand would diminish the hopeful enjoyment of the

book. Instead, I have added an updated grid at the end of every chapter in which solutions have been found.

While writing this book, I found that a particular song invoked the mood I needed to be in. To amuse myself, I ended up hiding some of the lyrics in the text, and finally even the title itself. There is no prize for identifying the song, but if you think you know what it is, by all means get in touch and I'll let you know if you are right.

THE GRID



CHAPTER ONE

They appeared at the last stroke of midnight. That's the way it happens. Whether they took the time to get acquainted with their new existence, or hit the ground already running, is unknown. Setting off from one of the most inhospitable, and therefore uninhabited, parts of the earth, there were no witnesses. What is certain is that, like every other lethal force that had occasionally arrived unseen at the start of a new day, a basic instinct for self-preservation told them exactly which direction to take.

Considering the number of them, some eleven in all, their size, variable but ranging to a full forty-feet high, and their astonishing turn of speed, the noise of their progress should have alerted every earthquake-monitoring station around the world. As it was, two hours and many miles had passed before their presence was even noticed.

A six-year-old boy in northern China had woken from a nightmare, and rather than wake his parents at the other end of the room, he had been distracted by the brightness of the light coming through the window. He had opened the window and was leaning out, staring at the moon shining

down from a cloudless sky on to the other houses in his village, trying to impose on it a face he was sure should be smiling and benign but kept realigning itself into an expressionless mask, when a sound made him turn his head to the barren landscape to the south.

In the fraction of time it took them to reach him, the sound split into two increasingly distinct components – a random beating of many low, muffled drums, and the quiet hiss of the wind through their thick white fur. They swept through and around the village on either side of the boy's house, and within seconds the noise, which had never risen much above a murmur, was all but inaudible. The village betrayed no sign of their brief visit, save the barking of a dog.

The boy watched the receding figures reach the hills to the north and disappear. Despite their speed, he had had time to see clearly in the night's glow that each of them wore, in a dark oval that covered barely half the front of their heads, the same expressionless face he had been staring at just moments before. The events of the rest of the day would determine whether this vision would live with him for the rest of his life, or be erased from his memory within twenty-two hours.

A solution would have to be found.

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Colin Holly was, and always had been, a creature of habit. On this particular morning, without having made a single conscious decision, he found himself at the usual newsagent's, buying his usual newspaper, and suffering the usual awkwardness when trying to pay for it. The newsagent would always be reading a paper on the counter and would

never look up. Holly would hold the money out and then be ignored, during which he could never bring himself to clear his throat, let alone place the money on the counter and walk out.

Eventually, eyes and presumably mind still fixed on the previous day's events, the newsagent would absently take the money and, if necessary, return the appropriate change, all without so much as a sideways glance at the till. Holly wondered whether, despite having repeated this ritual every morning for the best part of two decades, he would even recognise the newsagent if he walked past him in the street, never actually having seen his face full on.

The shop lay on the corner of a square in north-west London, technically a triangle, which would have felt considerably more like a rural village had it not been in the shadow of a huge seventies hospital building. Most of the shops along two sides of the triangle had been taken over by the usual chains, but a few independents still held out, a baker's, an Italian deli, a Polish restaurant. Holly had most of his modest needs catered for here, and seldom had cause to use any of the many buses that were always lined up along the third side, the hypotenuse of this triangle, and it had been a good many years since he had used the train station at the far corner.

For the moment, his routine was still dictating his actions. He folded the newspaper and clamped it under his arm so he could hide both his hands in the pockets of his sheepskin jacket, away from the bitter winter wind. He set off for home, his house already visible a couple of hundred yards away, indistinguishable in the featureless terrace but for the fact that it nestled exactly at the point where the road made a forty-five degree turn to the right, giving an

otherwise dreary street an unexpectedly enigmatic ending. Cryptic, Holly would have said.

Halfway back, he made his customary involuntary glance at the first-floor bay window at number 29 and flinched, as he did every morning, at the vertical blinds that repelled him as much as they would have repelled the previous occupant.

Eric had been the only person in the area that Holly visited, and he had done so frequently until Eric's sudden death of a heart attack in the summer. At sixty-four, Eric had been a full two decades older than Holly, but they'd shared an almost identical lack of interests other than an aversion to rhetoric and a love of crosswords. Why waste time saying anything five times, they both agreed, when you could say it just the once and even then encrypt the meaning? They had spent many happy mornings together pondering the daily crossword in Holly's paper, with much silent appreciative nodding at the way an everyday word could generate such a convoluted, seemingly unrelated sentence, the clinically logical distilled from the apparently illogical.

Silent, that is, until the last couple of months of Eric's life, when he had suddenly become rather too talkative for Holly's liking, and the talk increasingly surreal. Crosswords seemed to have turned from an enjoyable pastime into a religion, and Eric had taken Holly to task on numerous occasions for not taking them seriously enough. Holly had put this down to the onset of dementia, and had found himself dropping by not quite so frequently, when one day the door had been opened by a young lady with bright pink hair, wearing a sullen expression and precious little else, who informed Holly that her uncle, well great-uncle, not that there was

anything great about him, had pegged it without any warning and left the place in, well look at it.

Holly had almost finished expressing his condolences when the door was slammed in his face. The girl's use of words may not have been very artistic, but he couldn't help but admire her lack of rhetoric. He felt, on the whole, that Eric would have approved.

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The endless corridors, empty but for the occasional trolley or wheelchair, shivered at the wind that moaned its ever-changing counterpoint through the broken windows and the cracks in the double doors, some fully open, some half-open, most closed, which punctuated the maze. The snow was swirling in too through the tattered curtains, settling in small drifts in the corners, blurring the distinction between outside and inside. This unification was completed by the fog that occupied the centre of every available space but not the edges, seemingly repelled by the walls, floor and ceiling.

The symphony of wind was occasionally joined by another voice, a wordless utterance that started at male speaking pitch and rose steadily until it became a shriek, coming to a sudden end, as though by a cleaver.

Barely noticeable against the fog, a darker shape moved slowly, smoothly and silently along. At a particularly loud and drawn-out shriek, it stopped by a window and seemed to look up. Its breathy voice was as hard to distinguish against the wind as its form against the fog.

'Patience.' The consonants formed an almost empty framework, the tenor vowels being barely audible. 'He will be here soon. He will have to come here. And then he'll be ours.'

Another, more doleful shriek came from outside and concluded the conversation between the two.

Two solutions that should have been found, but weren't.

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With a mere dozen or so houses to go, an obstacle suddenly presented itself, an obstacle in the form of Holly's immediate neighbour, Gus. Holly hadn't noticed Gus on the other side of the street until he had emerged from behind the parked cars and started to cross.

Holly's first impulse was to hide behind a wall, a dustbin, a car, anything, even cross the road the other way. Typically, though, he just froze and hoped he hadn't been spotted. Not that there was the slightest antipathy between the two. It was just that Gus made Holly very uncomfortable, and Gus knew it, and revelled in it.

For all that he must have been well into his eighties, Gus was the closest approximation to the classic naughty schoolboy that Holly had read about when he was a boy. Gus now wallowed in his antiquity, as it allowed him to play his ideal role of wide-eyed, senile innocent, a role that Holly, from the safety of an empty shopping aisle, had seen him play many times in the small local supermarket, on one occasion reducing the poor owner to tears. Indeed, Gus had repeatedly been barred from the premises, but in perfect keeping with the lack of grip on reality that was the cornerstone of his assumed character, he wandered freely back in whenever he felt in need of some entertainment.

Apparently, he had just been barred again. He was being rather forcibly escorted home by his long-suffering niece who was scolding him bitterly, to his obvious delight,

particularly as she was in her WPC uniform, giving him the impression of being frogmarched home by the law.

'I only asked him,' Holly overheard, 'if a packet of peanuts says "may contain nuts", what else it might contain.'

More remonstrations, by which time they had reached his gate. Holly had by now resumed walking, albeit at a snail's pace, and as they had now stopped he was faced with the decision of whether to stop as well, maybe attending to a wayward shoelace, or bite the bullet and try to sneak into his own gate, the one before, without them noticing. He decided on the latter.

'Now don't forget,' the young policewoman was saying, 'seven o'clock this evening. Tom will be there, and there's something I want to ask you about.'

Holly had reached his gate.

'Intriguing, my dear. I shall make every effort to reach the rendezvous at the appointed hour, but who knows what kind neighbour may invite me in for a cup of cocoa?'

Holly winced, threw a faint fleeting smile in the direction of the voice without taking his eyes off his own front door and hoped fervently that his key would behave itself. It took pity on him and acted with commendable efficiency. The door was open just long enough to admit a reproachful 'Uncle Gus!' before rattling shut.

Once inside, Holly took off his jacket to reveal an old maroon and white sleeveless jumper over a conspicuously unironed white shirt, brown trousers and shoes, both nondescript, both with their heyday long behind them. He hung up his jacket and went straight through to the kitchen at the back of the house, filled the electric kettle and switched it on – back to routine, although in the event routine only had five minutes left to live.

Waiting for the water to boil, coffee granules already in cup, he would have time to scan the front page headlines. Today was Friday December 8 2006, according to the paper's format, a full eleven years after the death of Princess Di, and yet there she was on the front cover, main story yet again, together with a rather smug story about the previous day's storms across Britain that apparently only this paper had seen coming.

Truth be told, he was no big fan of the *Daily Voice* ('It's your Voice!', as the television advertisement generously proclaimed), but it had been his wife's paper of choice. He had loyally continued buying it after her death and now couldn't bring himself to stop. Fortunately he had the cryptic crossword to justify this habit, the very puzzle he and Eric used to gloat over. To an aficionado like Holly, compilers of cryptic crosswords were surprisingly individual, and this particular compiler had a liking for the slightly surreal that Holly found appealing.

Today's puzzle was now the next order of business and would normally have taken up the next few hours of his time. Holly took his coffee and the paper upstairs to the room at the front of the house which, in the absence of any need for more sleeping arrangements, he called his office, actually more of a junk room with a table in the bay window. He sat at this table and opened the newspaper to the puzzles page, muttering 'Get in there', mimicking the silhouetted head next to the paper's name on the front page in the cockney accent he fondly imagined the character to have.

He had started reading the first clue, 1 Across as always, the first word of which he saw ruefully was 'Eric', when he became aware of three things.

The first was that it had suddenly got slightly but noticeably darker, although the pale winter sunshine had not diminished outside.

The second was a low rumble, very quiet at first but getting steadily louder to the point that the windows rattled and he could feel the table shake.

The third was that he was not alone in the room.