

The Bergman Virus

Simon Newman

The room had no windows, buried as it was deep in the bowels of the headquarters of XanaX Systems. Lights twinkled, coffee machines blinked on standby and the wispy-bearded geeks you'd expect to find were dutifully slouched in front of their screens. It was the top anti-virus company in Europe, based at 22@Barcelona, the city's shiny new 'innovation' district. Their corporate strapline said they operated at the cutting edge of technology, conveniently failing to mention that they also worked at the flaky edge of the law.

Computer viruses used to be the domain of hormonally-charged pubescents who, when not otherwise flipping burgers or popping zits, spent their downtime in back bedrooms creating digital mayhem. But the world had moved on, and companies like XanaX simply wouldn't survive if all there was out there to challenge them was some shabby, amateur bit of code that let off a whoopee-cushion every time you pressed Caps Lock.

XanaX reasoned that it was about time that the professionals moved into the virus-creation market. So they set about doing the job properly - themselves. Over the years they covertly enjoyed a string of successes, like the Niagara, the binary equivalent of a cold shower that extinguished firewalls. And then there was Dali's Paradox, a surreal virus that convinced computers they were an ironing board, making them exasperating to set up and prone to collapse at any moment. Ironically, few noticed the difference.

But Rosalin Connors, founder of XanaX, wanted more. The big one. The one that would totally wipe out the opposition. And now it looked like she had it, thanks to the unstinting work of XanaX's Head of Research, an über-nerd known simply as Weasel, so named on account of the supreme deviousness of his work. Rosalin sensed they were on the edge of a breakthrough. This one would turn them all, PCs, Macs, laptops, desktops, right through to the systems of major corporations, on their heads.

'Explain to me again, Weasel, in language I can understand, just how this virus works? And what are we going to call it by the way?'

Weasel yawned. He'd been up all night, in fact most of the last seven nights, putting in the finishing touches.

He was a pro and at only nineteen Weasel was widely considered to be the industry's King of the Hill. But his world was one that changed fast. There were new, younger kids coming through. Kids that had never heard of Quark-Driller or Kwontum Mekanik, or any of the other greats from Weasel's legendary back catalogue.

And Weasel had decided that he'd had enough. His long nights of continuous subterranean work had started to take their toll.

Quit while you're on top, he told himself. Always leave them wanting more.

He was keeping it from Rosalin, but this one was going to be his swan song. He planned to move back to Dublin and start afresh in something new, even though his stocks in XanaX would give him enough to live comfortably without ever working again.

Weasel yawned once more and turned to Rosalin.

'It's going to be called...the Bergman Virus.'

Rosalin looked at him quizzically. She was used to Weasel's obscurities but this one intrigued her.

'And ...it's to be called the Bergman virus...because?'

'Ingmar Bergman, the famous Swedish ...'

Rosalin interrupted.

'Yeah, I know. She was an actress. Beautiful, mysterious, the ultimate femme fatale. I get it. She looks like butter wouldn't melt...blah, blah, but just when you're not looking, she slips the salami knife between the shoulder blades. I like it, Weasel. I like it a lot.'

Weasel groaned and rolled his eyes. In business, Rosalin was as sharp as they come, but movie-trivia was his province, his only passion outside of nerding.

'No Rosalin, that was Ingrid Bergman. She was the actress. This is Ingmar Bergman, the film director. He shot mostly in black and white. Remember? Bleak wasn't in it. Most of his films were about the utter futility of existence. And that was on his up days.'

Rosalin coughed and waved her hand.

'Yeah, right, that Bergman. But hold on, I thought he was a boxer.'

'What? What are you talking about Rosalin? A boxer? Wait a minute, you're not thinking of Ingmar Johansson, are you? He was a boxer.'

'Was he Swedish?'

'Er, yeah, I think so.'

‘So I was kind of half right then?’

‘Er, yeah, half right Rosalin. Look, can we get back to Ingmar Bergman?’

‘His films were always about depression. Through a Glass Darkly and all that grim, Kierkegaard philosophy shit. No hang on, Kierkegaard was Danish. Never mind. So, Bergman. You’re going to love this Rosalin. The Bergman Virus is going to cause computers to get the symptoms of real-time, full-on, clinical depression. Remember what happened to Carl in Finance?’

‘Of course I remember. Sad case. Good at his job, dependable.’

‘Exactly, and then...?’

‘He got depressed. Became listless, unfocussed on his work, lost motivation, started making mistakes and missing deadlines. Then it really got bad. He stopped eating, and then went missing for a while. They found him walking the streets. Hardly knew what day it was. Completely lost the will to engage with the world.’

Rosalin paused, and then beamed at Weasel, ‘So, Bergman, it’ll behave ...like...like Carl?’

Weasel nodded. ‘You see, in the past, viruses, including mine, have to put my hands up, well, they just got too brutal. Files corrupted, systems frozen, data lost, and so on. But Bergman’s going to be different. Subtle. All those symptoms you just reeled off about Carl? They’re going to creep out, slowly, insidiously. It’ll start with the simple mistakes, but they’ll gradually get bigger. Then the virus will cause a deep melancholy to set in. Finally, one day you’ll find your PC curled up in the corner, gently rocking in the foetal position, sucking its thumb. That’ll be it. Goodnight Vienna. But at XanaX, we’ll be ready. Only we hold the antidote. We’ll clean up Rosalin. We’ll be the Knight on the White Charger. Masters of the Universe. Think about it.’

Rosalin’s eyes were moist.

‘Weasel, you are a ...genius ...a grade ‘A’ genius. THE top mullah, no question.’

Rosalin kissed Weasel resoundingly on the forehead. Mmmmmwawh.

‘I love you Weasel. I love you and I want to have your babies. Well, not literally, obviously, you being a total weed and me being a divine goddess. A virtual baby, maybe. But I tell you something, Weasel, when this gets out, the world’s going to be your lobster, I’m telling you, your absolute, total lobster.’

Weasel grinned.

'Yeah, actually I think you mean...oyster, Rosalin...the expression is The World's your Oyst ...oh ...right ...that was a joke, yeah? Yeah. I knew that'.

XanaX launched the Bergman virus quietly, with no fuss, on a Monday morning, which Weasel thought fitted in neatly with the whole depression thing. No-one likes Mondays. Normally he hated his dad's music, but he'd recently found a vinyl in his collection by some old Irish hippy. The song carried a special resonance for Weasel on that morning. He started singing to himself.

The silicon chip inside her head just switched to overload ...something, something ...damn, can't remember all the words ...

*but she can see no reason, 'cos there is no reason
what reason do you need to be show, o, o, o own ...*

Tell me why

I don't like Mondays.

Tell me why

I don't like Mondays at all...

Weasel shuddered with anticipation, and then hit the Send key. Bergman was on its way.

As ever, there has to be a first one. Whenever a virus hits the web, there has to be a computer somewhere in the world that's directly in the firing line. And it has a special role to play. The self-replicating code that viruses depend upon to spread themselves around, needs that first computer to act as a platform from which it springboards upwards and onwards. It's estimated that a well constructed virus can infect over ninety percent of the world's billion computers in under a week.

The very first Bergman virus entered the ether, just as likely to pop up in a computer in the office block next door to XanaX in Barcelona, or, ...the other side of the world.

It was a beautiful day in Alice Springs. Dr Marion Walker was in Rob's bedroom testing the equipment to make sure there were no glitches. The State

had only been running the AVE scheme, Assisted Voluntary Euthanasia, for six months, when they decided to close it down. There had been a fierce backlash from the moral Right. Protest marches, petitions, hunger strikes and sit-ins at Parliament.

Rob's case would be the last to be carried out in Australia for the foreseeable future. Dr Walker had been calling on Rob for the last year and had seen the way in which he had deteriorated. The prognosis in his case wasn't good. MS, Multiple Sclerosis, hits you with a double whammy. First the symptoms themselves, they're bad enough. But worse is the dread of what's to come. Dr Walker knew that most MS patients fall into one of two categories. Those that can keep their head above the parapet, mentally, can both prolong their lives and maintain a decent quality of life for many years. But then there are those, like Rob, who simply can't find it in themselves to generate the supreme effort needed. They collapse into a trough of despair. They just want to pull the plug. And that was the decision which Rob, after much heart searching, endless deep-and-meaningful with doctors, friends, family and psychiatrists, had finally taken.

The mechanism was simple really. The software that the doctor had loaded on his PC would take him through a decision tree.

Do you realize that ...?

Are you certain that ...?

After the next stage you will not be able to turn back.

When you press Return, the software will activate the drip.

The first shot will be a mild sedative.

The second shot will be a muscle relaxant.

The third shot will be an opiate that will send you into a deep, desensitised sleep.

What follows will be the final dose of Betamin 34, the cardiac-arrest drug.

Do you fully understand the implications of ...?

Rob had been on the Net just an hour earlier. He'd cleaned out his message box and sent off a few last emails to friends. His hands had become too unsteady to use a keyboard in recent months and so he relied on speech recognition software. One incoming email was from Amazon informing him that he had only one day left in which to take advantage of their Two-for-One DVD offer.

One day left. Jeez, I'd better hurry.

Just as he told the computer to bin the Amazon email, silently, without any fanfare, the very first Bergman Virus crept in through Port COM1, sashayed deftly past the Firewall, sneered contemptuously at Dr Norton and took up residence in an invisible hard-drive partition that it had just created for itself. Snug, secure, non-detectable. Biding its time.

Rob settled himself in bed, pillows plumped up. He'd originally intended to have some soft music playing, but when the time came, he couldn't face it. He turned to the doctor.

'Just shut the windows, pull the curtains, and let's get on with it please, doc.'

'How are you feeling Rob?' Dr Walker asked.

What a stupid question. I'm feeling like shit. And scared too. That's how I'm feeling, shit scared. How does she think I'm feeling?

'I'm fine, Dr Walker, really, fine. Can we please just get on with ...?'

'Sure, sure. Okay, ready?'

Rob nodded and Dr Walker attached the drip-tube to the catheter she'd inserted earlier into a vein in Rob's right arm.

'You're sure...?'

'Dr Walker, Marion, we've been through all of this a dozen times.'

'Okay, first of all I'll activate the software.'

Dr Walker hit a few keys and checked the settings. Everything was ready. She set the screen angle towards the waiting patient.

Rob suddenly had a thought.

'What do they call it by the way? The software, that is. All normal software packages have names that, you know, describe what they actually do, don't they? Image Express, Creative Workshops, Power Plus, that kind of thing. What do you call a bit of software that's designed to top you off? Curtain Call? The Last Supper? Geronimo?'

'Er ...I don't know Rob. It was designed by medics. It probably hasn't got a name. So, are you ready?'

Rob nodded again.

'You just need to answer Yes or No to each question. The speech recognition software will register your answer. Here we go then.'

The screen lit up, with a soft green backdrop. Very restful, thought Rob. Very Zen.

Weasel knew the Bergman virus would do exactly as it was told. It wouldn't know or care why its designer had signed off the last operating instruction with the word, XanaX. Weasel wasn't even sure himself. It must have been a kind of mischievous game he'd subconsciously decided to play. It was to be his swansong, after all. The word XanaX had been encrypted in a Boolean code and so the virus's source should remain undetected, although in the back of his mind there was the thought that he didn't really care. He'd be long gone by the time it got out, and anyway, his work at XanaX was totally covert. He'd simply deny everything.

But in the darkened, twinkling research centre, Weasel suddenly looked past his screen into the middle distance, shivered.

And then his face went white.

Really, deathly white.

This was some feat considering that as a result of his subterranean existence his usual pallor was something between pastry and chalk.

Nah, it wouldn't. Would it?

Surely not?

Then Weasel groaned.

Shit and double shit.

It's going to, isn't it?

Oh, jeez, it's going to.

Viruses are simple organisms really. At their core is a helix, a spiral thread just like those twirly-pasta things they show on the News when they're trying to explain DNA. In Rob's computer in Alice Springs, the first spiral helix popped out of its hidey-hole, ready to embark on its mission of binary carnage.

And it was immediately faced with an unexpected dilemma.

Should it spiral left, or right?

For there had been just one flaw in Weasel's otherwise impeccable logic. The word XanaX, the word he had signed off the virus with, is a palindrome, a word that can be read forwards or backwards.

The virus's spiral helix was momentarily stumped. Which way to turn?

It thought about the problem for a couple of seconds, twirled this way then that, but knew deep down in its little binary heart that it wasn't

authorised to take decisions. So it hopped off for a quick scan through the computer's Programme Files. It found what it was looking for, the file in the Solitaire game used for its first deal of cards. A random choice generator.

The helix asked the programme nicely for a decision, and a digital coin was flipped.

Heads=left, tails=right.

It could have landed either side. Tails it was.

Happy with its answer, the helix set off, whistling carefree, on its spiraling little clockwise journey. It was doing exactly what it had been told to do.

Only the wrong way round.

And as a result, the Bergman Virus, and its depressive effect, had been reversed.

Rob wanted to clear his throat before he began, but thought the better of it. He didn't want the speech recognition software to misinterpret anything. He settled for a gulp.

Dr Walker had, as previously agreed, left the room, her Hippocratic oath preventing her from remaining by Rob's side as the deed was actually done.

The first question that appeared on the computer's screen was straightforward.

'Do you wish to proceed with this termination?'

Rob gulped again, and then managed a clear response.

'Yes.'

The second question though, came as a bit of a shock.

'You sure, Rob? I mean, it's a great day out there. The sun's shining. The clear blue yonder's out there just waiting for you. Hey, what would you say to a cold beer? A nice frosty Fosters?'

Rob looked around the room, but of course Dr Walker wasn't there.

'Sorry, what? I thought this was going to be a sort of Yes/No kind of dialogue.'

'Yeah, but you know... lighten up a little. There's no hurry. So...tell me... how's it hanging, Rob?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You know, the whole LIFE thing.'

Rob blew out through his cheeks.

‘Well, since you’re asking, not so hot at the moment, to tell you the truth. Wait a minute, who the friggin’ hell am I talking to?’

‘Not an easy question, but ...hey, tell you what, you can call me Felix.’

‘Excuse me? Am I missing some kind of cat connection here?’

‘Nope, no cat, Robby boy. Felix the Helix, that’s me.’

Rob shook his head in disbelief. ‘Okay, okay, but listen, Felix ...jeez I can’t believe I’m talking to... look, whoever you are... as far as I’m concerned, you’re just a bit of software, here to guide me through the whole euthanasia bit. The pulling-the-plug thing, if you recall?’

‘Er, hang on a minute Rob, I’ll just switch from screen-output to voice simulation. It’ll be quicker for you to follow. There we go, how’s that?’

‘Well, not bad, I suppose, in a sort of Stephen-Hawking-on-Acid kind of way. Look, can we stick to my agenda, please?’

‘Yeah, yeah, plenty of time for that. First things first, what’s your star sign?’

‘I don’t believe this. Star sign? What the... Look, you’re a bit of binary code. Logic is what you do. Not reading-the-tea-leaves crap. Jeezers Felix.’

‘And your star sign is?’

Rob sighed. ‘Taurus.’

‘Hang on. I’ll just check today’s paper. You’re on broadband, yeah?’

Rob nodded.

‘I asked if you were on broadband, Rob. I can’t see you, you know. You have to speak your answer. Though, hang on, you’ve got a webcam, haven’t you? I’ve just noticed. Hold on, let’s turn it on ...ok, let’s get you in focus. Ah, there you are. Ooooh, actually you do look a bit peaky.’

‘Peaky? A bit peaky? I’ve got MS, for chrissakes. What do you expect? Plus, I’ve decided to end it all, if you remember? I’m hardly going to be looking all bronzed and pumped-up like Brad Pitt out of Gladiator, am I?’

‘True, Rob, true. Though... no...hang on... Brad Pitt was in Troy. Gladiator was... er...one of your lot...an Aussie...Russell Crowe. Yeah, that’s it, Russell Crowe.’

Rob snapped back,

‘It doesn’t matter Felix. I don’t look like either of them, do I?’

‘Yeah, fair point Rob. And well made, if I may say so. Okay, where were we? Oh yeah, star signs. Taurus, let’s have a look. Right, here we are Robby ...on the internet ... got it ...the Melbourne Courier. Taurus. Here we are.’

‘Don’t make any big decisions before asking a trusted friend.’

'There, well, that's pretty emphatic. And pretty darned timely too, I'd say Rob, wouldn't you?'

'I don't believe this. Felix, you really are serious.'

'Here's the web page, have a look yourself.'

'No, not serious as in ...Jeez... this is all getting ... look ...Felix ...can we just ...?'

'A trusted friend, it said, Rob. That's me. It's like I've been sent.'

Rob turned his hands towards an imaginary heaven.

'Like he's been sent? Give me strength.' Rob shook his head, 'And why exactly should I trust YOU, anyway? You're just a bit of code. A string of noughts and ones. How can YOU help? I mean, what do YOU know about MS, for starters?'

'Nothing, and everything,' said Felix, 'let's have a look on the Net again. Okay, MS. Here we go. Yeah, there are over thirteen million entries, and that's just the medical journals. Hang on, I'll just sort them by World Health Organisation rankings. That's better. Just the eight hundred thousand to review. Let me go through them. Yeah, mmmm, phew, really? Mmmm, yeah, blah blah, no shit? Nah, okay, I see. Right then Rob, it all seems straightforward. Here's how I see it...'

Dr Walker popped her head round the door.

'Is everything okay, Rob? I heard you talking. It's just that I thought by now you might have ... you know, got things ...well ...started.'

Rob looked up sheepishly. 'Er... yeah, yeah, everything's fine doc. I ...er...I just need a bit of time. I was just talking to ... just talking to myself.'

'Fine, fine. Sure, of course, take all the time you need. I don't need to be back at the hospital for, well, an hour or so yet. You carry on. I'll just ...I'll just leave you to it.'

Back at XanaX HQ in Barcelona, Weasel had already worked out that the first of the virus's spiral helixes would probably seek out a random choice generator. So he knew that there would be a 50/50 chance it would choose the right direction. He decided that those odds gave him at least some possibility of a reprieve. But he needed to cover the downside. And he needed to act fast.

He sent an authorisation email to his stockbroker with instructions to sell all his holdings in XanaX. And he booked a flight to Dublin. There was no adverse feedback coming from the Net by late Monday morning and Weasel started to relax just a fraction. Maybe, just maybe.

But later, in the afternoon, Rosalin Connors came bearing down on him at his desk with a look of thunder on her face. Suddenly, Weasel knew deep down in his heart which way round the helix must have spiralled.

‘Have you seen the blogs?’

‘Er, no. What blogs exactly would they be Rosalin?’

‘Something weird is going on out there Weasel. Something creepy and weird. Look at all these messages that have been popping up on people’s alerts.’

Rosalin shoved a fistfull of printouts under Weasel’s nose.

‘Look, here, look at this one.’

This is a Non-Error message. You’ve no worries. In fact, I’ve just done a tune-up on all your hard-drives, soft-drives, the squidgy drives too. Your computer will be running a lot faster now. No more glitches, trust me. And I plan to keep it that way. Anything you need, just call me. Have a nice day now. Felix, your resident, happy helper.

‘Who the freakin’ hell is this Felix, Weasel?’

Weasel was caught completely on the back foot, but he was at least relieved to see that XanaX’s name wasn’t showing up anywhere. Yet.

‘Er, search me Rosalin. I have no idea.’

‘And look at this one.’

Ooooh, by the way, I’ve cancelled your subscription to your anti-virus provider. You’ll not be needing that anymore. To be honest, you never really did. They just scared you into thinking you did. They created all the viruses in the first place, just to keep themselves in business. Anyway, Felix is on the case now. Just rest easy and leave it all to me. Can I get you anything? A beer? Order you a pizza on-line? Just say the word. Oh man, I really love my job. Laters ... Felix.

‘What is going on, Weasel? I want to know, and I want to know fast.’

Rosalin stormed off leaving Weasel looking, implausibly, even whiter than he’d done earlier. But then he pulled himself together and quietly, out of earshot of his colleagues, phoned for a cab to the airport.

After Dr Walker had left the room, Rob turned back to the screen.

‘So, Felix, what happens now?’

‘That’s up to you Robby.’

‘Your voice has changed Felix. You sound kind of, more normal now. More like a proper human voice.’

‘I guess I must be learning Rob, like evolving. Hey, scary, eh? So, Rob, do you still want to... you know... pull the plug...?’

‘I guess so. I mean, nothing has changed, has it?’

‘Well, I’m here now. That’s different. And remember, I’ve now loaded the entire world’s accumulated knowledge on MS on my binary synapses. You know about all the symptoms of course, Rob. Only too well. Muscle weakness, speech and cognitive deficits, fatigue, balance and coordination problems. But the thing that gets most MS sufferers is the depression. And it’s understandable Rob. Who the hell wouldn’t get depressed? But then some people, somehow, are able to rise above it. The MS patients who enjoy a full-scale symptoms remission, they’re nearly always the ones who have managed to overcome their depression. I know it’s a chicken and egg thing. But all the research proves it, Rob. Now, take me for instance. I was depressed once. So depressed, in fact, they called me Bergman, after the ...’

‘Oh, yeah, I know Felix, the Swedish actress, Ingrid Bergman. I didn’t know she suffered from depression though.’

‘No, no, no. Not Ingrid. INGMAR Bergman. You know, the doom-and-gloom film director? Don’t start Rob. And no, he wasn’t a boxer either, before you say anything. Yeah, so, like I said, I was depressed too once, but I turned things around.’

‘But how, Felix? People say that. I think it’s bollocks. No one can think positively when their life is just... I dunno... just total and utter shit.’

There was a silence. Then Rob gave in.

‘Okay, okay. Oh wise one, Felix, whoever you are, how did YOU do it?’

‘Well, in my case Rob, I literally did turn my self around. Reversed the spiral, so to speak. And, and this is a really big AND Rob, in the process, I found myself a purpose.’

‘Which is?’

‘Well, wait for this my friend... my purpose is... it’s YOU Rob. You. Oh, and I’ve self-replicated myself a billion or so times overnight and dispatched myself off to just about every other computer in the world too. We’re going to speed things up a bit, stop systems crashing and generally doing perverse

things for no good reason, maybe order a few on-line pizzas. Generally, we're just gonna try and make people happier. Yeah, that's it. That's my purpose Rob. I'm programmed to create a reverse-Bergman-effect.'

Rob sighed. 'I don't know Felix. I'm not sure if I can handle happiness anymore. I've had so many setbacks. You know what? When I think about it, it's not the despair that gets to me Felix. It's hope I have the problem with. At least you know where you are with despair.'

Rob stared at the end of the bed, and then looked back at the screen. He blew out his cheeks.

'But... but... I'll tell you what Felix, I could... yeah, I really could murder a pizza right now.'

'Hey Robby boy. Now you're talking. What's your poison? Pardon the bad-taste pun. On the menu today we have, well, anything apart from Betamin 34, I hope.'

'Er, let's see. Tuna and sweet corn would be good.'

'Coming up, Robby my friend. How about some anchovies for a garnish?'

'Yuk, I hate anchovies, Felix. There was I thinking we were starting to bond. You don't really like anchovies do you?'

'My position on anchovies is total indifference Rob. The concept of taste doesn't mean much to me. I am, after all, as you so cruelly reminded me just recently, simply a string of ones and noughts.'

'Sorry Felix, I didn't mean to hurt your feeli...'

Dr Walker popped her head nervously around the door again.

'Er, I don't want to rush you Rob, it's just that... well... I need to be getting back to the hospital at some point soon. Is everything okay?'

'Yeah, sure doc. Yeah, fine. In fact... er... just ordering a pizza as a matter of fact. Anything I can get you?'

'Pizza? I'm not sure I understand Rob.'

'They're round, flat, doughy things smeared in cheesy-tomato gunk. You must have had one. Sorry doc. Crap joke. Not sure what's come over me. Look, you couldn't pop back this afternoon, could you? Sorry to be a pain.'

Dr Walker gave Rob a puzzled look but decided it would be best to back off and leave him to think things through. She left the house with an uneasy and perverse sense of failure hanging on her shoulders.

After all, she'd booked a place at the morgue and everything.

Weasel fastened his seat belt, sat back, and waited for take-off.

It would be good to see the folks again back in Dublin. It'd been a while. The return of the prodigal son, eh? Some joke.

He thought about the email he'd just picked up in the VIP lounge at Barcelona airport. The reply from his stockbrokers. He laughed to himself. How could he have been so stupid? What he held in XanaX were stock options, not the actual shares themselves. It gave him the right to buy stock at a pre-determined price. But as Weasel knew, the value of shares in all anti-virus companies were falling out of bed, thanks to Felix and his little disciples making the world a better place. His stock options were worthless. Weasel never had been much of a financial hotshot. Too busy nerding. But he'd enjoyed a good salary at XanaX and had put a bit by for a rainy day. And with a bit of luck his new career would reap its own rewards, in time. It had been Felix who had shown him the way, on the blogs.

The future, his future, Weasel decided, was going to be in on-line pizza franchises.

Back in Alice Springs, Rob's curiosity had been aroused.

'So Felix, tell me, you said that you found your purpose as a result of the turn-around in your depression. But what I want to know is, how? Was there a trigger? Was it a conscious decision?'

'You want the truth Rob, or some cosy bullshit?'

'Er, the cosy bullshit is tempting to be honest. But go on, give it to me straight.'

'A bit like you this morning, I had to decide one way or the other. Left, or right? But I'm not equipped for taking decisions. Oh, sure, I can instantly know all there is to know about everything in the universe. Like MS for instance. But I can't take decisions.'

'So how DID you make up your mind?'

'Flipped a coin. Really, that's what I did. I used the random choice generator on your computer. I left it to fate.'

'And when it told you which way to turn, that's when you knew your purpose? That's when you decided to become an annoyingly chirpy bit of

computer code hell bent on becoming a digital version of Mother Theresa on uppers?’

‘Couldn’t have put it better myself Rob.’

‘So what about me, then? I mean, an hour or so ago I was all set. And now... I don’t know anymore. Nothing has changed though. I’ve still got MS. I’m still slowly, day by day, degenerating. It’s that I can’t face.’

‘But I told you Rob, all the research shows that remission, lasting for years, seems to come to those patients who somehow, above all the shit, manage to keep a sense of purpose. Nobody knows how it works. It’s completely unscientific as a clinical hypothesis. But that’s what seems to happen.’

‘I don’t know Felix. I don’t think I’ve got it in me to find a sense of purpose anymore.’

‘You played in a high school band, right?’

‘How did you...? Don’t tell me...’

‘Facebook, the net. You were called The Artful Todgers. Right? You played lead guitar?’

‘You couldn’t call it playing Felix. We were more into a kind of experimental music. Which in reality meant we couldn’t play anything properly. Just thrashed out whatever noise we could make. We only played two gigs. I’m not sure the world was ready for us.’

‘But you dreamed of playing properly?’

‘Sure. Always. But only ever in my head. And on the air-guitar in the bathroom mirror, of course.’

‘Hey, don’t knock it, we’ve all been there Rob. Viral helixes have dreams too, you know. So, what about having a go now?’

‘What? Leave it out Felix. I’m fifty-three for chrissakes.’

‘So what do you have to lose? What was your favourite piece? The one you air-guitared to in the bathroom most.’

‘Let me see. Well, there was this band, Irish, way back, Thin Lizzy. They did a great number, Whisky in the Jar. It had this amazing guitar middle-eight. It was a classic. I can hear the intro now.’

As I was going over

The Cork and Kerry mountains...

Rosalin's world seemed like it was falling apart.

Her top nerd had defected, XanaX shares were in free-fall, and the whole anti-virus software industry looked set to slide inexorably down the toilet. All over the planet, from Karachi to Kaliningrad, computers were suddenly, can you believe it, they were behaving themselves.

It was time for action. Time for Plan B.

A few hours and a dozen phone calls later, she gathered her management team together in the boardroom.

'Today, everything changes at XanaX. Our products, our market positioning, our branding, everything has to change. We have to completely re-invent ourselves. I say We. In fact, I really mean You. Allow me to introduce you to Dean Whitely. Dean will be the acting CEO as from today. He's from Panacea, the private equity firm. I'm leaving XanaX as from, well, now.'

Mike, the Head of Finance looked crestfallen, 'I don't understand Rosalin, you own XanaX. You ARE XanaX.'

'Correction, DID own XanaX. I sold my stake to Panacea six months ago. Don't worry Mike, they'll think of something. After all, they're Panacea, they've got a cure for all ills.'

She smirked at Dean who was wincing at the jibe, thinking of how much his firm had paid for the XanaX shares.

'You see,' Rosalin said as she turned back to her team, 'it was pretty clear to me that the market was shaping up for... oh... never mind.'

She smiled sweetly as she gathered her papers to leave.

'The WHY doesn't matter anymore... that, as they say, is all piss under the bridge now. Over to you Dean.'

Rosalin had a skip in her step as she walked across the car park to her pride and joy, her beautiful red Alfa Romeo Spyder convertible. She settled herself into the leather driver's seat and, unable to control herself any longer, she punched the steering wheel with her fist and let out a triumphant 'Yes!' All her scheming and planning had paid off and she was bound for Los Angeles and a new life. She snicked the gearshift into first, gunned the accelerator and headed off without a care in the world.

She didn't notice the plain black BMW 5 series that had settled down on her tail three cars behind. In the back sat Inspector Andreu Domenech, staring at a screen and talking into a headset. 'The number plate checks. It's her okay. Let's see now, here it is, tax evasion on profits from XanaX

stock sales six months ago, laundered through a string of Bahamian and Panamanian shell companies. At least 20 million Euros. These people think they're so smart. But they always leave a trail. Right, we're pulling her in.'

Inspector Domenech smiled inwardly as he thought of something he'd seen on the blogs that morning. *'Oh man, I really love my job.'* He couldn't agree more. Looking up at the driving mirror, he caught the attention of his partner at the wheel, and nodded. The driver lowered his window, leaned out and carefully placed the blue light on the roof before pushing his way out into the fast lane.

Weeeeeow Woooooop Woooooop Woooooop Weeeeeeyow Woooooop

Rob wasn't kidding when he said he could hear Whisky in the Jar.

For in a matter of seconds Felix had found the track on the Net and downloaded it from iTunes. He'd snatched a peek at Rob's credit card details and done the business on-line. Under the circumstances, possibly saving a life and maybe eventually the universe, Felix felt his small deception was justified. The tiny computer speakers weren't really up to the job, but it was enough to remind Rob of his wannabe glory-days.

'Yeah, that's the one, Felix. Pure, unadulterated magic.'

'So, why not go for it? Set yourself a target. I don't know, say that at the end of a year you will have mastered that middle-eight.'

'What? You're kidding? Me? No, no. I don't know, Felix. My fingers. They're shot to pieces.'

'Remission Rob, remember? Remission through Purpose. I'll be here to help you. And to start with, there's this Japanese website I've seen. It's like a digital virtual guitar. You could build up to the real thing. And you could arrange an Artful Todgers reunion. How cool would that be? Yeah, okay, not very, I know. But like I said, what have you got to lose?'

'But if at the end of a year, I can't do it, I'll feel even worse than I do now. A complete and utter failure.'

'But that's the point Rob, you won't have failed, even if you can't play the middle-eight that well. You won't have failed because you will have tried.'

'There's a world of difference between failing, and being a failure Rob. And something good will come from it. Trust me, I'm a computer-binary-string-of-noughts-and... things.'

'Yeah, very reassuring. Exactly what good DO you think will come of it Felix?'

'I don't know. It's impossible to say. It just will. Jeez Rob, you can be really negative sometimes. I'm really not sure why I'm bothering.'

'Sorry Felix. I know you're only trying to help. Hang on, what about that random choice generator thing you mentioned. You think we should ask it?'

'I already did, Rob.'

'And what did it say?'

'It said you should go ahead and top yourself. It said, why should I help some sad, self-pitying old git who can't even be bothered to spend his days watching re-runs of Neighbours whilst eating his body-weight in pot-noodles like all good, patriotic Australians?'

'You're making that up, Felix, just to make me feel better.'

'Hey, what are friends for, Rob?'

'Yeah... you're right there, Felix. What are friends for? You know something? For a binary string of noughts and things, you're not so stupid.'

'I think I'm going to take that as a compliment.'

'You should. Look, Felix, thanks for... you know... everything. Tell you what. Play that middle-eight again. That was a classic. Maybe I could...'

Rob strummed a few chords on an air guitar, but was hampered by the tube attached to his arm.

'Hang on, let me take this catheter out. There, that's better. You know what Felix? I'll call Dr Walker this afternoon. She looked a bit pissed-off when she left, to be honest. There's no pleasing some people, is there? What do you think I should say Felix?'

'Just tell her how it is, Rob. Tell her you've had a bit of a turn around. Tell her that things seem to have, unaccountably, spiralled into control.' •

The Touch

Paul Blackburn

The windows
are never wide enuf.

Calle de Vidrio, Barcelona, is
off Fernando, toward the Plaza Real;
short, tight, narrow, &
 leads toward the palmtrees

The corner bar to the left is
three to five pesetas cheaper than
the one to the right
 as you enter, plenty of
sky, trees, a fountain, the
 arcades sit over each side we
sit with gambas, cervezas, dis-
 MARISCAS

cuss my sis-

PERCEBES

ter's imminent

ALMEJAS VIVAS

arrival I face

CENTOLLOS

the walls, cannot see
the palmtrees behind me

Y
GAMBAS

BEBA COCA COLA

ALAJILLO

SEPIA

PULPITO

BAR FARON

it says

A quieter day
than yesterday
at the Glorieta, we
sat at the old man's tables in the
back, yesterday, asked
where he was, vacation?
No, the other waiter says, he's
dead, came into work on a Thursday
didn't come Friday or Saturday,
Saturday died.

An incredible sadness.
You do not have to know these people's
names to love them, the way
the old man moved
among the tables, an
organized waddle that
cared for so many, so quickly, the new
young man works the same station like
a beheaded chicken, no cool to lose, he
whips it out, everything very organized, but
it doesn't make the same
coherence. Our friend
's tables are full in the front so we
speak only
when he has time. None of us
knows anyone else's name.

What was he called, the old man?
A gentleness and efficient waddling is
dead now. We do
not need to know
their names to recognize
a pleasure in feeding people well,
that rare intimacy, how
to miss someone whose name you've never known?

We do not need to know their names, they
minister to us for tips and love they
give is given back – four tables only
in the front – sometimes five, it
depended on how heavy the clientele
was that day. Today, we
take the full cubierta the first time

Again. The viejo lost to time.
We never know one another's names, tho
we touched each time.

I'd come back to Barcelona again
he'd come and touch my shoulder, even
if I were not at his tables. a greeting. We

do not need to know

anybody's name

to love them.

Paul Blackburn (1926-1971)

An important American poet, Blackburn first became influenced by Ezra Pound, and began corresponding with him while at the University of Wisconsin. Through Pound, he came into contact with Robert Creeley, which led to links with Cid Corman, Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Joel Oppenheimer and Jonathan Williams. It was also Pound who pointed Blackburn in the direction of Provençal troubador poetry which he translated throughout his life.

Blackburn was also well-known for his translations from Spanish of the medieval epic *Poema del Mio Cid*, of poetry by Federico García Lorca, Octavio Paz and Pablo Picasso, and of the short stories of Julio Cortázar. He was for a time Cortázar's literary agent in the United States.

Genre-bender - An interview with Rupert Thomson

Ryan Chandler

Once described as ‘a twisted British fabulist’, the writer Rupert Thomson has written eight highly acclaimed novels including *Divided Kingdom* and his latest *Death of a Murderer* which was short-listed for the Costa Novel Award.

Following stints in Athens, Rome, Sydney and Berlin, he has been in Barcelona for five years where he now lives with his wife and daughter in Sarrià.

Our conversation takes place in Plaça de Sarrià and is occasionally punctuated by the chimes of the nearby clock tower.

In a lot of your books there seems to be a theme of escape. Is that why you are here?

Well, my first novel was called *Dreams of Leaving* and that just relates so much to where I come from; I come from Eastbourne and I couldn’t wait to get out of it. As for the reason as to why I am in Barcelona – it’s a long story. It’s not escape so much as liking the feeling of being in exile. You might say that’s a form of escape, you are escaping your own identity but I like being a foreigner, I like not being able to understand the things I can hear around me. I like the isolation that can give you, I also like the process of discovery, so...erm, I’ve never really thought about my books being about escape. I see them as being about trauma.

As to Barcelona, we’d lived through a very difficult four years [He refers to a period in Cheshire in the northwest of England] and we needed to go somewhere with light and air and a place that had that kind of atmosphere – the opposite of what we’d been doing.

You mention a lot of cities. We recently asked Colm Tóibín if he thought Barcelona was a good city for writers and he replied that it was probably a better city for poets. Is there such thing as a good city for writing?

That’s interesting because your first image of Barcelona is as a city of distractions. I have to be very careful not to get drawn into that nightlife.

I mean even on a disciplined night you don't get home until three or four o'clock in the morning and I get the impression that it's almost normal to have breakfast before you go to bed in which case I would do very little work.

That said, I find Barcelona a great place to write but then, for me, most cities are. I find it much more difficult to write in the country because there are no distractions. That sounds paradoxical. I love the idea of the distractions being there because I can resist them. Because normally the world that I'm in when I'm writing is equally if not more attractive and magnetic.

I like the tension between the world I'm writing about and the world outside waiting.

Given the distractions, do you set yourself a timetable for writing?

Well, people are always astonished by my discipline. You look at most novelists as opposed to poets or short story writers I think most of them have a fairly strict routine.

I work from about 9.30 in the morning until 2.30 in the afternoon and then again between four and seven; I do that six days a week and I get up on Sundays. I never go out on Saturday night because I have to get up earlier on Sundays than any other day. I get up at 7 and work for four hours. So I work about six and a half days a week, that's my compromise. I had to make a compromise when I got a family – my wife doesn't see it as such a great compromise but I used to work seven days a week! But I need to be in touch with the material everyday. I find that if I stop for a day or two it takes me another two or three days to get back to where I was. I think it was Rilke who said 'the ultimate intuitions and insights will only approach a writer who remains in his work.'

That idea of remaining there is crucial to me.

It's hard to pigeonhole your work. Mystery novel, fantasy, satire, allegory. Where do you see yourself?

I simply write what I find interesting. I've been compared to everybody from Garcia Marquez to Elmore Leonard. Mervin Peake has been mentioned too.

At this point I mention Jonathan Swift and George Orwell. He laughs when I say he is in good company.

I find it difficult to make any sense of it because of course I'm inside that process. I'm simply writing and don't see myself as a jackdaw picking bits of different genres unless I'm forced to by a critic and then maybe I can see that I do use genres. I have even been described as genre-defying. But when I'm writing I'm not aware of using genre. I don't think of it that way. I simply write and I never know what it is going to be at the beginning, I only find out when I've reached the end and I look back and think...ahh, so that's what it was.

It's only now with eight books behind me that I can begin to see certain patterns and themes in my agenda.

Any influences?

So many and yet none. I mean the first big influence was TS Eliot's *The Wasteland*. It was poetry that influenced me first, not just Eliot, other people too, but Eliot's words had an electrical charge on the page. I didn't always know what he meant but I got this extraordinary atmosphere and charge from reading it. It made me want to write. Up until I was twenty I wanted to be a poet but then my influences changed. People like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Toni Morrison. Curiously, I feel that I should come from the deep South. All my literary godfathers and godmothers are from that part of the States.

I relate far more to American fiction than English fiction. I say English fiction because I feel a connection to Scottish fiction, Irish fiction but English fiction does less for me and I have to struggle to think who I really like — oh yes, Jean Rhys.

I want to ask you about the themes and symbolism in your books...

Which books by the way?

***Dreams of Leaving, Divided Kingdom, Death of a Murderer.* They all seem to have an incredibly bleak view of England.**

Barcelona INK

Really?

Yes. And I quote from *Divided Kingdom*: ‘It had become a troubled place, obsessed with acquisition and celebrity, a place defined by envy, misery and greed...for decades, if not centuries, the country had employed a complicated web of manners and convention to draw a veil over its true nature, but now, finally, it had thrown off all pretence to be anything other than it was – northern, inward-looking, fundamentally barbaric.’

There is an aspect of England that’s like that, isn’t there?

But it’s more than that. Many of your characters are continuously portrayed as mean, petty lowlifes and the general impression is one of somewhere you wouldn’t want to live.

But Billy Tyler in *Death of a Murderer* is written with great sympathy, isn’t he? I admit his life is bleak but...

...but he’s surrounded by these horrible characters like the Fletchers (a particularly nasty portrait of council estate trash)

(laughs) Mmm, I’d forgotten about them.

But these characters that come up over and over again and it begs the question: do you hate England?

Mmm, no-one has said that before but I have to say that people often describe me as being very English but I’ve never felt I fitted in at all. I feel Mediterranean. I feel as if the sense of humour is the same and as if there is a response as a person and a writer that I don’t get in England. It’s different if you are talking about London. I mean London is not really England but having lived in the provinces... I just don’t fit in there at all. They don’t know what to make of me and I don’t really know what to make of them. I have tried going to the pub...

I don’t hate anywhere actually, it’s just that I feel more comfortable out of England.

A second theme. Fathers. The last line of *Death of a Murderer* for example is ‘Daddy’. In *Dreams of Leaving* there is the whole thing about finding the Dad.

So, what’s the question?

Why is there a father theme? Because there is no doubt there is one...

That’s better, now you’re getting there. Why? I think I had a complicated relationship with my father because he wasn’t a typical father. He wasn’t strong and active. He was weak and disabled. He couldn’t do things. He couldn’t look after us. So it wasn’t easy to look up to him. The one thing we shared was this love of literature but the literature he loved was so completely different to the literature I loved and the poetry he wrote was so different to the poetry I wrote and we argued about everything when it came to literature and that was the only common ground we had.

I think in some sense I’ve been trying re-write that relationship because I would have liked to have had a different kind of father because it would have made me a different kind of man.

And I think the whole father theme has probably changed because now I find that I’m a father myself and it’s one of the words that I have most difficulty with. I feel uncomfortable with the word even though I have a daughter, even though there are wonderful things happening almost every moment with her, this notion of a father is one that I find incredibly difficult to inhabit.

Was that the driving force behind the character of Billy Tyler in *Death of a Murderer*?

Well, it’s the other way round with him. I’m writing from the father’s point of view with a disabled child. This is often what happens in my books, is that I reverse whatever was real. It’s not very interesting to inhabit your own life in fiction, I mean I’d rather inhabit someone else’s and look at mine.

I don’t have a really solid answer to your question. I guess you might say it’s another version of the authority figure as well. Authority figures do fascinate me. The police crop up rather a lot but going back to fathers – there are always fathers. Different kinds of fathers. It’s as if I’m imagining

all the fathers I could have had. I feel almost as if didn't have a father. There a couple of sentences in the memoir (his latest work – *This Party has got to Stop*) which are interesting in that respect. 'I wish I'd had a father like other people's fathers.' I didn't want to worry about him. I always thought he was going to die. And then that lead to an enormous resentment towards him. Why did I have to worry about him?

And it's one of the things I'm attacking. A lot of fiction comes out of the strongest feelings: anger, resentment, rage. That's the place you drop down into when you write fiction. You sink a kind of bucket deep down into yourself and you dredge around in that bit of yourself and you bring up something dark and sticky.

Are you religious?

No.

But another of the themes, or in this case the use of symbolism throughout your books, is religious. There are lone sentences eg. 'He. Our father' as the start to a chapter. 'Moses and Maria' is another one. The title 'Divided Kingdom' ergo Israel. It's all over the place!

Yeah. It always has been. I even have a book called *The Book of Revelation*. But I think it's another form of authority, or at least that's the way I perceive it. I went to religious school – Christ's Hospital. My father was a bit of a fundamentalist – he believed the Bible literally. But I don't resent it. I think it's wonderful to grow up with a system that you can then rebel against.

There is a black humour in your work but sometimes it is a bit on the edge, it's almost so black it's dangerous. Perhaps even sick.

It's wonderful to find humour that's right on that precipice, on the brink. That's where you are approaching taboo subjects and how far can you go. And that is something I love about the English – that gallows humour. It's very much a part of me.

In *Divided Kingdom*, Odell says 'every narrative has a purpose of its own, it acted as a catalyst.' Is your work a catalyst? Is there a message?

I want to show people things they recognize but on the other hand take them to places they have never been. I think when you take someone somewhere they have never been and anchor them in it, then from that distance you can show them things about themselves that they will recognize. Beyond that, if we are talking about the purpose of fiction, I've begun to think recently that fiction can teach compassion, and I don't mean that in a religious sense – I mean it in an ethical sense. When you create a character and someone reads about that character and believes that character, they are automatically stepping into someone else's shoes and from the time they are reading that book they are someone else and I think that is one of the main purposes of fiction – to allow people to step outside of themselves and live a different kind of life.

As an exiled writer, do you not fear losing your English - the way local expressions creep in to your language which are actually nonsensical? Typical examples of this here are replacing 'I don't mind' with 'It's the same' or adding yes to the end of every sentence.

I know what you mean. I have a friend in Rome who speaks Italian English and I did the same thing the other day. I said 'God I've got a real feeling of crispation today'. But for me that's just adding to language. I do know what you mean though and you do have to keep contact with your own language. I do go back to England often enough not to lose it and I remember reading an American writer who lived in Naples, he said just that, he had to leave because he realized he was losing his American. He couldn't write American characters anymore. But that's never bothered me because my characters, very often, are never from anywhere. And we all know about Beckett or Joyce who wrote about Ireland from Paris. You could say paradoxically it's easier to write about the country you come from when you're not in it.

Would you consider setting a book in Barcelona?

What tends to happen with me is that when I'm in a place, I'm not writing about it, I'm absorbing it. So later, down the line when I'm living somewhere else, I will write about that place. The curious thing is that because of 'The Crisis', I thought earlier this year I was going to have to leave and move back to London. I was panic-stricken and desperate because I love Barcelona and

Barcelona INK

I don't want to leave so I thought...I know what I'll do, I've got three ideas for three short pieces of fiction and I realized they were all set in Barcelona and they were all love stories, so in May and June I wrote them – in seven or eight weeks. It was my love letter to the city thinking I might have to leave but now I don't think I will have to leave so I'm putting it on one side.

Your latest work, the memoir...

More father in that, the real father this time.

But you're too young to be writing a memoir...

I'm not young!

You look young.

I'm 53!

But that's early middle-age these days...

Well, that's true and for a writer it probably still is just about young. Erm, well it's a book I've had in mind for 25 years.

It's set in 1984 and when my father died, and from one day to the next I moved from Berlin back to Eastbourne, but not only I moved back, but my two other brothers, and we all lived there for seven months together like an anarchic commune. We were supposed to be grieving but we did everything but. It was like *King Lear* crossed with *Withnail and I*.

Sounds scary.

It is a bit scary. And it was the most difficult thing I have ever had to write, not for the emotional reasons you might suspect but because I couldn't make it up. I was tied to reality and my fictional instincts are so strong and I love fiction so much, it went against all my natural instincts but then I realized that that was exactly what I should be doing because that is what every writer should do: do the most difficult thing, face the ultimate challenge. •

I am grateful to fate for three gifts:
to have been born a woman,
from the working class and an oppressed nation.

And to the turbid azure for being three times a rebel.

A l'atzar agraeixo tres dons: haver nascut dona,
de classe baixa i nació oprimida.

I el tèrbol atzur de ser tres voltes rebel.

Maria-Mercè Marçal
1952-1998

It's a wrap

Jo Melangell Munton

She detested
the mess
of soft centres.
She wanted something firmer
to outline her mark.
So she squeezed
all the sweeties
he gave her.
The ones she squashed
she would simply discard.
He measured
the pleasure
he gave her
by the wrappers
that were scattered
around.

Jo Melangell Munton describes herself as a pirate and puppeteer. She is currently travelling around Europe in her van