

Puma

To Liana
– till Catday

Here on the final pyre
See that page with its curled ends
Rolling into the fire.
Here's what the poet sang:
'This is the way the world ends:
Not with a whimper. BANG.'

One

All this happened a long time ago, children, so forgive me if I am vague on detail. But the date and place are sure. The date was December 18 and the last day, evening rather, of the Christmas term. The heat was seasonably intense, and the school nativity play was being held in the open air. Three hundred-odd parents and children sat on plastic chairs in the playground of St Bede's Primary, Nowra, New South Wales, and watched Jack Tamworth, Joey Warwick and Bertie Domville as shepherds watching their flocks by night. Their stage was a set of planks on trestles, the sky they sat under a real one. The Southern Cross spoiled things rather: you were not supposed to be able to see the Southern Cross in Palestine. But the three boys sounded like real shepherds. Mr Lithgow, the English master who had written the script, had given them real sheepmen's language.

'Who's that joker there then?' asked Joey Warwick.

'A bloody poddy-dodger,' Bertie Domville said.

Ronald Birchip, one of the older boys, winged and nightshirted as the Archangel Gabriel, was coming towards them, bare feet making the boards creak. 'Hail, O ye fortunate shepherds,' he said, giving the Australian Labour Party salute.

'Sounds like a pommy bastard,' Jack Tamworth said.

'Have ye not seen that star rising in the east?' said Ronald Birchip, pointing firmly at the horizon. 'It is as a sign. A great travail in the heavens has brought to birth a fiery wonder, and this night it shines over a lowly stable, where the Prince of Peace, himself a fiery wonder, shall be brought to birth by a virgin.'

‘What’s a virgin?’ asked Joey Warwick.

The headmaster, Mr Maitland, frowned round at Mr Lithgow. Mr Lithgow had, in the interests of realism, gone too far. This was supposed to be a reverent occasion. But Gerald Bathurst, a reporter on the *Wagga Wagga Sentinel*, a small yachtsman and former air navigator, winner of an astronomical quiz on Channel 37, was saying to Lithgow: ‘Christ, there’s a bloody coincidence.’

‘What is?’

‘There *is* a new star in the east. Look.’

‘I can’t see anything.’

‘God has a great sense of showbiz, I’ll say that for the bugger. Look, man. A bloody star in the bloody east. Can’t you see it?’ Some of the audience was going shhhhh.

‘No. Are you sure *you* can?’

‘Me tight? On three schooners and a rusty nail? I know the sky. I look at it, remember? I’d be doing an onomy column not an ology one for the rag if anyone was bloody interested.’

Shhhhh. Shhhhhhhh.

‘Look,’ said Mr Maitland, ‘this is supposed to be a holy occasion.’

‘A scoop,’ said Bathurst. ‘A sky scoop. I’d better go and get some background dope from Canberra.’ He started to get out and trod on the little toe of the right foot of the stout lady next to him. Ow. Shhhhh.

‘I can’t see anything,’ said Lithgow.

Whether he could or not, boys and girls, it was at last available to his naked eye and to all naked eyes in the southern hemisphere. Puma. Puma. It had once been thought to be an asteroid, or minor planet. The gap between Mars and Jupiter had long been known to be full of minor planets, scraps of celestial nonsense spinning round the sun. Round, many of them, many of them small. But some not all that small and some not round at all. There was one in the shape of a canister of toilet cleanser, more than a hundred kilometers long. Hector. A lot of them had good old classical names, just like toilet cleansers – Ajax, Hercules, Vesta, Juno. But there were also names of unclassical origin – Victoria, named after an ancient empress; Brucia, because the man who discovered it did so with a telescope

donated by a lady called Miss Bruce; Marilyn, named after somebody's daughter. After the first Great War of the twentieth century, the American Relief Administration had helped Soviet Russia get over a devastating famine, and Soviet astronomers had responded by discovering a new minor planet and calling it ARA. It was because certain astronomers had their instruments trained on that gap in the sky between Mars and Jupiter that Puma was at last (I intend no pun) spotted. Asteroids were despised by some starmen: the vermin of the sky they called them. But others dedicated their lives to those spinning bits of rubbish.

There were two men, one in Florida, USAMC, the other in Lillenthal, Europe (Teutphone Province), who laid equal claim to the first sighting of Puma. The American, whose name was Pulham, wanted the asteroid to be called Pulhamia. After all, there was a Pickeringia, a Blenkinsopia, a Piazzia, a Gaussia. The Teutphone invoked the same precedent when he demanded it should be called Mannheimia. The Global Astronomic Sodality, GAS, bade them compromise and call it PUMA. Why not MAUP, the unimaginative Teutphone wanted to know. Puma seemed, soon, to be rather a fitting name. The radio signals that the heavenly body pulsed out had a curious snuffling intonation, like some great cat on the scent of fodder. Puma was not, as we know, an asteroid. (A megasteroid? cried Pulham. Pulham's Unattached Mega Asteroid?) It was a major planet, though not of our solar system. It seemed to have been the satellite of a star unnamed and unlocalised. By some gravitational vagary or other it had become a maverick, a heavenly rogue. That night in Southern Australia brought its first whisper of tidings of great horror. It was of earth's size but its density was at least ten times greater. It had wandered into the stream of earth's history and, at leisure, proposed bringing that history to a close. Astronomers knew about Puma. They knew the worst, though not all were prepared to admit it, even to themselves.

There had been a number of blepophone calls to Professor Bateman of the Canberra Observatory. Eyes other than those of Gerald Bathurst had been sharp. Bateman's secretary gave unsensational information. A name and a vague destiny. Puma, a heavenly

body in Sector G476, now at the beginning of a period of clear visibility in the southern heavens. In a few months the northern hemisphere would see it too. It would get into the gravitational pull of the sun, then go haring off again into the unknown. A flash in the heavenly pan, so to speak. Bateman and his guest, Professor Hubert Frame of the University of Westchester, USAMC, knew more and better, or worse.

They had finished dinner, which for Frame had been mostly Australian burgundy and cigarettes. Frame was sixty, of a dangerous thinness, a man worn down to intellectual brilliance and a pathological appetite for tobacco. He was an ouranologist, and his official title at the University was Coordinator of Space Travel Studies. He had come to Canberra to give the Israel Goodman Memorial Lecture on Early Ideas Concerning Magnetospheric Storms and Electron Activity Relations. During the talk he had not coughed at all, an act of will supposed Bateman, but he was coughing enough now. The talk, which had seemed to some to be delivered in cartoon balloons of cigarette smoke, had been well received. He was free now to relax, cough, and talk with his old friend Joe Bateman. Bateman said, as so often before:

‘You ought really to give them up, you know. How many a day is it now?’

‘Eighty. Ninety. A bit late to talk about giving up, wouldn’t you say?’

They were in Bateman’s study, a pleasant room full of russet leather, mediaeval astrolabes, small highly coloured fish of the South Pacific in dim-lighted square glass tanks, group photographs, swimming trophies. ‘That cough must be a nuisance.’

‘I take these,’ Frame said, showing Bateman a packet of Rasps Extra Strong. It bore a picture of an old man coughing his heart up. Frame fed himself a pastille and lighted a fresh Cataract from the stub of the old. ‘The two go well together,’ he suck-puffed, breathing out eucalyptus like a koala-bear. And then: ‘The Responsibility of the Scientist. We’ve all been asked to give talks with some such title at one time or another. I’ve always refused. The question is: what do we tell them?’

'We tell them, if by *them* you mean the so-called Fourth Estate, that Puma, when it gets close enough, will exert a palpable gravitational pull on the earth. They'll want to know what that means, so we tell them. Tidal waves, earthquakes, seaquakes. Then Puma snuffles off.'

'But,' said Frame, after coughing, 'comes roaring back.'

'I like to believe that none of us is really sure about that, Hubie.'

'We're sure. We're damned sure. We're sure all right.'

'One thing at a time,' Bateman said. 'Sufficient unto the day, and so forth. The first job is to convince the heads of our respective executives that they'll have to declare a state of emergency.' He looked out at the heavens beyond the open french windows as he went over to the little bar to get cognac. The term *emergency* had led him to cognac.

'A national matter, then.' Frame coughed it out. 'In the long run it will have to be a national matter. What they nowadays call a provincial matter.' Bateman nodded as he poured cognac for them both. It was Australian cognac. *Beware of French imitations*, the commercials said. They both knew in what way it was a national, or provincial, matter. Bateman said, handing a brandy balloon over:

'Politicians are a nuisance. They won't be able to blame this on anybody. They can't make party issues out of it. Coalition governments. They don't like those.'

'You'll speak to your P.M. tomorrow?'

'Who am I to speak to the P.M.? That thing up there will get bigger, then somebody will want to know what it is, and then a question will be asked in the House, then they'll get on to the Minister of Science and finally they'll get on to me. That question, of course, may never be asked. No time for frivolities with so much important party legislation to go through. Politicians make me sick. *Bloody sick.*'

'My poor dead wife's first cousin,' Frame coughed, 'married our President's sister. It's an involuted mode of getting to the White House. God works in a mysterious way. It so happens that our President's son Jimmy is to marry shortly – the assistant woman counsellor at West Point. There will be junketings in the nation's

capital. I shall be there, as a marginal relative. Jack Skilling will hear all about Puma amid flowers and California champagne. Ten days' time.'

'Of course,' Bateman said, 'we reckon without Legrand. For all we know Legrand may be telling them about the End of the World already. Headlines in *L'Univers* and *Figaro* and so on.'

'The French are an excitable lot,' Frame said in a new gust of smoke and eucalyptus. 'Nobody will believe him. But I shouldn't be surprised if Burgos is preaching doom in Valparaiso. After all, they'll have seen Puma there by now. Look, like a damned idiot I find myself out of cigarettes. I could have sworn I had another pack. You don't by any chance —'

Bateman smiled. It was a good smile on a sixty-five-year-old retired army kind of face, seawindsuntanned. A fit man, strong and paunchless, a non-smoker all his life, he took from his jacket pocket a twenty-pack of tipped Robotti and handed it to his friend. His friend, in manic eagerness to tear the pack open with his nails, nearly shredded the contents. 'Bless you, Joe,' he said, a Robotti wagging from his lips.

'How will you get on?' Bateman smiled. 'There'll be no tobacco up there.'

Frame frowned a second, as though he thought Bateman meant heaven. Then he smiled and said, coughing: 'I shan't be going. I'll be lucky if I see the thing completed. If it ever is completed. If it's ever even damned started. Politics again,' he smoke-sighed. 'Big words. The survival of the race through its most useful representatives. The trouble is we've inflated language to the limit. We need to get an epic poem written just to show the bastards the awesomeness of what they're up against, the responsibility of those who rule our race in the face of it. Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour.'

'Has your doctor been saying something?' Bateman frowned.

'I don't need a doctor to tell me. I *know*. I'm thin, I'm tired, I coughed something up the other day. Tired, yes. Very tired. Ready for sleep.'

'You can sleep on the plane.'

'I meant in a bigger sense.'

'I know damn well what you meant. Is your bag packed?'

‘Yes, except for those films. The evidence, the ineluctable, the incontrovertible.’ Bateman handed over the envelope that had been lying on a small fretwork Indian table. Frame weighed it in his hand. ‘We were always talking about working for the future. And this is what the future is.’

‘Man will survive.’

‘Why the hell *should* he survive? For the sake of who or what?’

‘For the sake of the future.’

‘The future.’ Frame gave out the word in two brief bitter coughs. Then he drank off his cognac and went to the bedroom with the envelope. He packed it between his shirts and his other suit. The ineluctable, incontrovertible. He was glad he had smoked himself to death. When he came out coughing to the central living-space into which all the rooms of the bungalow disembogued, he found Bateman waiting to take him to the airport. He was looking glumly at the huge wall telescreen, on which a giant newsreader rainbowed out the end of the news. The new star in the east was a godsend bit of froth to end on, after all the weighty items about terrorists and politicians. Nativity play at a school in Nowra, Christmas star, the real thing, no tinselled stage prop. Then a crack about no virgin births having been reported in New South Wales and the unlikelihood of three wise men coming from the east, namely New Zealand, the New Zealanders being traditionally known as poms without brains, or brynes. The newsreader smirked himself out, shuffling his papers together, and Bateman switched off a commercial for Manegloss. He led his coughing friend to the car. It was a gorgeous antipodeal night. Their trained eyes saw Puma well above the horizon.

They travelled silently for a time towards the southern tip of the metropolitan Commonwealth Territory. ‘A future,’ Bateman then said, ‘for Vanessa. You want that, surely?’

‘Vanessa wandering through space, generating generators and genetrices of generations. It sounds pretty dull, doesn’t it?’

‘There’ll be generations who’ve never known anything else. Born in a spaceship of someone born in a spaceship of someone born in a. Give Vanessa my fondest regards. God, what a pity, what a bloody damnable –’

‘Yes yes yes.’ Brian, Bateman’s police technical supervisor son, was to have married Vanessa Frame, but Brian had been killed by rioters in Ballarat, Victoria. Vanessa had been doing research at the Ouranological Institute in Melbourne at the time. All of five years ago. ‘And when I consider the son-in-law who’s been wished on me instead – Half-assed dilettante, not even good in bed so far as I can put two and two together. There’ll have to be an end to that marriage. Candidates chosen singly, not in tandem. He may, of course, die in a bar brawl. He may have a sudden accession of self-denying nobility. Val as Sidney Carton. Most damned unlikely.’ He went into a fit of coughing. They saw the lights of the airport. They slid into Traflane F. ‘Whatever she says, I stand on that single nomination – her. Not because she’s my daughter but because she is what she is. She doesn’t have to be fed into VOZ or PIT or UNY or whatever damned computer it’s going to be. She’s the only one who can take over from me. And if she starts insisting on damned Val going with her –’

‘Women are strange.’

‘Strange? Daisy and I were married for thirty-five years and I never knew the first thing about her. And here’s Vanessa saying she loves that half-assed no-good. Strange is not the –’ He broke into coughing.

‘When you say *take over*,’ Bateman said, now steering towards the ANSWER terminal (Air New South Wales East Runs), ‘you don’t mean totally in charge?’

‘No. Just my aspect of the venture. As for overman or overwoman, that’ll be up to VOZ or PIT or UNY.’ He got out of the car. ‘No need to see me off. Parking’s too much of a problem. Will you be at GAS in February?’

‘Yes. Bring Vanessa if you can. Thanks for coming. You gave them all something to think about. Watch that cough.’

Frame dozed in his first-class couchette speeding east towards the United States of America, Mexico and Canada. His cough shook him into waking, so he injected a miniampoule of S9 into his wrist. That would quieten the cough for an hour or so, but he didn’t like the after-effects – nausea, shivering, constipation. He fell into a dream. Someone was calling him from downstairs. ‘Get up, you lazy little

runt. Out of that bed, boy.' It was his father, back home in Lafayette, Indiana. Hubie Frame, a child again, called down: 'But I *am* up, *am* up, *am* up.' Even in the dream he wondered why he was calling that, never having been much of a liar even as a boy, patently still in bed. He awoke, and his brain was ready to remind him that a lot of his dreams were verbal, and that here was a palinlogue. Amup was Puma. Now why was his father, who, if anyone was, was with God, or in the dream perhaps *was* God, calling him down? But, of course, *get up* meant *come down*. And vice versa. The time was coming when notions of upness and downness, backness and frontness would cease to have meaning. Earth Puma thrae amup thraaemup rhumptaea.

A whirring noise below told him that the capsule containing passengers for San Francisco was being released. He drew back the curtain that had hidden his gaze from the stars to find daylight outside, and below the city. Then down hurtled the capsule. He rang for the stewardess to bring him orange juice, coffee, and a packet of Lombard cigarettes. While waiting to be served, he began to cough and felt something slimy and sickening come up into his mouth. He spat it into his handkerchief and then ceased to cough. Dissolution. Pmrhuaet.

Soon Manhattan lay below and, children, Professor Frame had a terrible vision. The city was washed in huge swirling seas of ochre and greenish egg-yolk, mounting in regular rhythms ever higher and higher, till they broke in spray from the pinnacles of the Newman Tower, the Patmore Center, the Scotus Complex, the Outride Building, the Paternoster Convention City, the two hundred storey Tractarian Folly. And then the island split down the middle and from the wound thus made fire leapt and smoke billowed. The fire was lashed out by the waves but came back again, snarling. The towers crumbled and went down into momentarily gaping holes in the ocean, and then all was covered in dun hell smoke, puffing and bellying. Then, boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, the city was as it was, proud, the skyscrapers thrusting like swords sprung from dragons' teeth, lovely in sunlight, and Frame and his fellow-passengers were told to prepare for landing.