MR. FOX WAS, he realized afterward, with a shudder of sudden recognition like that of the man who gives a cup of water to a stranger and finds out hours, or even years later, that it was Napoleon, perhaps the first to notice. Perhaps. At least no one else in Brighton seemed to be looking at the sea that day. He was taking his constitutional on the Boardwalk, thinking of Lizzie Eustace and her diamonds, the people in novels becoming increasingly more real to him as the people in the everyday (or "real") world grew more remote, when he noticed that the waves seemed funny.

"Look," he said to Anthony, who accompanied him everywhere, which was not far, his customary world being circumscribed by the Boardwalk to the south, Mrs. Oldenshield's to the east, the cricket grounds to the north, and the Pig & Thistle, where he kept a room—or more precisely, a room kept him, and had since 1956—to the west.

"Woof?" said Anthony, in what might have been a quizzical tone.

"The waves," said Mr. Fox. "They seem—well, odd, don't they? Closer together?"

"Woof."

"Well, perhaps not. Could be just my imagination."

Fact is, waves had always looked odd to Mr. Fox. Odd and tiresome and sinister. He enjoyed the Boardwalk but he never walked on the beach proper, not only because he disliked the shifty quality of the sand but because of the waves with their ceaseless back-and-forth. He didn't understand why the sea had to toss about so. Rivers didn't make all that fuss, and they were actually going somewhere. The movement of the waves seemed to suggest that something was stirring things up, just beyond the horizon. Which was what Mr. Fox had always suspected in his heart; which was why he had never visited his sister in America.

"Perhaps the waves have always looked funny and I have just never noticed," said Mr. Fox. If indeed "funny" was the word for something so odd.

At any rate, it was almost half past four. Mr. Fox went to Mrs. Oldenshield's, and with a pot of tea and a plate of shortbread biscuits placed in front of him, read his daily Trollope—he had long ago decided to read all forty-seven novels in exactly the order, and at about the rate, in which they had been written—then fell asleep for twenty

minutes. When he awoke (and no one but he knew he was sleeping) and closed the book, Mrs. Oldenshield put it away for him, on the high shelf where the complete set, bound in morocco, resided in state. Then Mr. Fox walked to the cricket ground, so that Anthony might run with the boys and their kites until dinner was served at the Pig & Thistle. A whiskey at nine with Harrison ended what seemed at the time to be an ordinary day.

The next day it all began in earnest.

Mr. Fox awoke to a hubbub of traffic, footsteps, and unintelligible shouts. There was, as usual, no one but himself and Anthony (and of course, the Finn, who cooked) at breakfast; but outside, he found the streets remarkably lively for the time of year. He saw more and more people as he headed downtown, until he was immersed in a virtual sea of humanity. People of all sorts, even Pakistanis and foreigners, not ordinarily much in evidence in Brighton off season.

“What in the world can it be?” Mr. Fox wondered aloud. “I simply can’t imagine.”

“Woof,” said Anthony, who couldn’t imagine either, but who was never called upon to do so.

With Anthony in his arms, Mr. Fox picked his way through the crowd along the King’s Esplanade until he came to the entrance to the Boardwalk. He mounted the twelve steps briskly. It was irritating to have one’s customary way blocked by strangers. The Boardwalk was half filled with strollers who, instead of strolling, were holding onto the rail and looking out to sea. It was mysterious; but then the habits of everyday people had always been mysterious to Mr. Fox; they were so much less likely to stay in character than the people in novels.

The waves were even closer together than they had been the day before; they were piling up as if pulled toward the shore by a magnet. The surf where it broke had the odd appearance of a single continuous wave about one and a half feet high. Though it no longer seemed to be rising, the water had risen during the night: it covered half the beach, coming almost up to the seawall just below the Boardwalk.

The wind was quite stout for the season. Off to the left (the east) a dark line was seen on the horizon. It might have been clouds but it looked more solid, like land. Mr. Fox could not remember ever having seen it before, even though he had walked here daily for the past forty-two years.

“Dog?”

Mr. Fox looked to his left. Standing beside him at the rail of the Boardwalk was a large, one might even say portly, African man with an alarming hairdo. He was

wearing a tweed coat. An English girl clinging to his arm had asked the question. She was pale with dark, stringy hair, and she wore an oilskin cape that looked wet even though it wasn't raining.

"Beg your pardon?" said Mr. Fox.

"That's a dog?" The girl was pointing toward Anthony.

"Woof."

"Well, of course it's a dog."

"Can't he walk?"

"Of course he can walk. He just doesn't always choose to."

"You bloody wish," said the girl, snorting unattractively and looking away. She wasn't exactly a girl. She could have been twenty.

"Don't mind her," said the African. "Look at that chop, would you."

"Indeed," Mr. Fox said. He didn't know what to make of the girl but he was grateful to the African for starting a conversation. It was often difficult these days; it had become increasingly difficult over the years. "A storm offshore, perhaps?" he ventured.

"A storm?" the African said. "I guess you haven't heard. It was on the telly hours ago. We're making close to two knots now, south and east. Heading around Ireland and out to sea."

"Out to sea?" Mr. Fox looked over his shoulder at the King's Esplanade and the buildings beyond, which seemed as stationary as ever. "Brighton is heading out to sea?"

"You bloody wish," the girl said.

"Not just Brighton, man," the African said. For the first time, Mr. Fox could hear a faint Caribbean lilt in his voice. "England herself is underway."

England underway? How extraordinary. Mr. Fox could see what he supposed was excitement in the faces of the other strollers on the Boardwalk all that day. The wind smelled somehow saltier as he went to take his tea. He almost told Mrs. Oldenshield the news when she brought him his pot and platter; but the affairs of the day, which had never intruded far into her tearoom, receded entirely when he took down his book and began to read. This was (as it turned out) the very day that Lizzie finally read the

letter from Mr. Camperdown, the Eustace family lawyer, which she had carried unopened for three days. As Mr. Fox had expected, it demanded that the diamonds be returned to her late husband's family. In response, Lizzie bought a strongbox. That evening, England's peregrinations were all the news on the BBC. The kingdom was heading south into the Atlantic at 1.8 knots, according to the newsmen on the telly over the bar at the Pig & Thistle, where Mr. Fox was accustomed to taking a glass of whiskey with Harrison, the barkeep, before retiring. In the sixteen hours since the phenomenon had first been detected, England had gone some thirty-five miles, beginning a long turn around Ireland that would carry it into the open sea.

"Ireland is not going?" asked Mr. Fox.

"Ireland has been independent since 19 and 21," said Harrison, who often hinted darkly at having relatives with the IRA. "Ireland is hardly about to be chasing England around the seven seas."

"Well, what about, you know . . . ?"

"The Six Counties? The Six Counties have always been a part of Ireland and always will be," said Harrison. Mr. Fox nodded politely and finished his whiskey. It was not his custom to argue politics, particularly not with barkeeps, and certainly not with the Irish.

"So I suppose you'll be going home?"

"And lose me job?"

* * *

For the next several days, the wave got no higher but it seemed steadier. It was not a chop but a continual smooth wake, streaming across the shore to the east as England began its turn to the west. The cricket ground grew deserted as the boys laid aside their kites and joined the rest of the town at the shore, watching the waves. There was such a crowd on the Boardwalk that several of the shops, which had closed for the season, reopened. Mrs. Oldenshield's was no busier than usual, however, and Mr. Fox was able to forge ahead as steadily in his reading as Mr. Trollope had in his writing. It was not long before Lord Fawn, with something almost of dignity in his gesture and demeanor, declared himself to the young widow Eustace and asked for her hand. Mr. Fox knew Lizzie's diamonds would be trouble, though. He knew something of heirlooms himself. His tiny attic room in the Pig & Thistle had been left to him in perpetuity by the innkeeper, whose life had been saved by Mr. Fox's father during an air raid. A life saved (said the innkeeper, an East Indian, but a Christian, not a Hindu) was a debt never fully paid. Mr. Fox had often wondered where he would have lived if he'd been forced to go out and find a place, like so many in novels did. Indeed, in real

life as well. That evening on the telly there was panic in Belfast as the headlands of Scotland slid by, south. Were the Loyalists to be left behind? Everyone was waiting to hear from the King, who was closeted with his advisors.

The next morning, there was a letter on the little table in the downstairs hallway at the Pig & Thistle. Mr. Fox knew as soon as he saw the letter that it was the fifth of the month. His niece, Emily, always mailed her letters from America on the first, and they always arrived on the morning of the fifth.

Mr. Fox opened it, as always, just after tea at Mrs. Oldenshield's. He read the ending first, as always, to make sure there were no surprises. "Wish you could see your great-niece before she's grown," Emily wrote; she wrote the same thing every month. When her mother, Mr. Fox's sister, Clare, had visited after moving to America, it had been his niece she had wanted him to meet. Emily had taken up the same refrain since her mother's death. "Your great-niece will be a young lady soon," she wrote, as if this were somehow Mr. Fox's doing. His only regret was that Emily, in asking him to come to America when her mother died, had asked him to do the one thing he couldn't even contemplate; and so he had been unable to grant her even the courtesy of a refusal. He read all the way back to the opening ("Dear Uncle Anthony") then folded the letter very small; and put it into the box with the others when he got back to his room that evening.

The bar seemed crowded when he came downstairs at nine. The King, in a brown suit with a green and gold tie, was on the telly, sitting in front of a clock in a BBC studio. Even Harrison, never one for royalty, set aside the glasses he was polishing and listened while Charles confirmed that England was, indeed, underway. His words made it official, and there was a polite "hip, hip, hooray" from the three men (two of them strangers) at the end of the bar. The King and his advisors weren't exactly sure when England would arrive, nor, for that matter, where it was going. Scotland and Wales were, of course, coming right along. Parliament would announce time-zone adjustments as necessary. While His Majesty was aware that there was cause for concern about Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man, there was as yet no cause for alarm.

His Majesty, King Charles, spoke for almost half an hour, but Mr. Fox missed much of what he said. His eye had been caught by the date under the clock on the wall behind the King's head. It was the fourth of the month, not the fifth; his niece's letter had arrived a day early! This, even more than the funny waves or the King's speech, seemed to announce that the world was changing. Mr. Fox had a sudden, but not unpleasant, feeling almost of dizziness. After it had passed, and the bar had cleared out, he suggested to Harrison, as he always did at closing time: "Perhaps you'll join me in a whiskey"; and as always, Harrison replied, "Don't mind if I do."

He poured two Bells'. Mr. Fox had noticed that when other patrons "bought" Harrison

a drink, and the barkeep passed his hand across the bottle and pocketed the tab, the whiskey was Bushmills. It was only with Mr. Fox, at closing, that he actually took a drink, and then it was always scotch.

“To your King,” said Harrison. “And to plate tectonics.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Plate tectonics, Fox. Weren’t you listening when your precious Charles explained why all this was happening? All having to do with movement of the Earth’s crust, and such.”

“To plate tectonics,” said Mr. Fox. He raised his glass to hide his embarrassment. He had in fact heard the words, but had assumed they had to do with plans to protect the household treasures at Buckingham Palace.

* * *

Mr. Fox never bought the papers, but the next morning he slowed down to read the headlines as he passed the news stalls. King Charles’s picture was on all the front pages, looking confidently into the future.

ENGLAND UNDERWAY AT 2.9 KNOTS;

SCOTLAND, WALES COMING ALONG PEACEFULLY;

CHARLES FIRM AT ‘HELM’ OF UNITED KINGDOM

read the Daily Alarm. The Economist took a less sanguine view:

CHUNNEL COMPLETION DELAYED;

EEC CALLS EMERGENCY MEETNG

Although Northern Ireland was legally and without question part of the United Kingdom, the BBC explained that night, it was for some inexplicable reason apparently remaining with Ireland. The King urged his subjects in Belfast and Londonderry not to panic; arrangements were being made for the evacuation of all who wished it.

The King’s address seemed to have a calming effect over the next few days. The streets of Brighton grew quiet once again. The Esplanade and the Boardwalk still saw a few video crews, which kept the fish and chips stalls busy; but they bought no souvenirs, and the gift shops all closed again one by one.

“Woof,” said Anthony, delighted to find the boys back on the cricket ground with their kites. “Things are getting back to normal,” said Mr. Fox. But were they really? The smudge on the eastern horizon was Brittany, according to the newsmen on the telly; next would be the open sea. One shuddered to think of it. Fortunately, there was familiarity and warmth at Mrs. Oldenshield’s, where Lizzie was avoiding the Eustace family lawyer, Mr. Camperdown, by retreating to her castle in Ayr. Lord Fawn (urged on by his family) was insisting he couldn’t marry her unless she gave up the diamonds. Lizzie’s answer was to carry the diamonds with her to Scotland in a strongbox.

Later that week, Mr. Fox saw the African again. There was a crowd on the old West Pier, and even though it was beginning to rain, Mr. Fox walked out to the end, where a boat was unloading. It was a sleek hydrofoil, with the Royal Family’s crest upon its bow. Two video crews were filming, as sailors in slickers passed an old lady in a wheelchair from the boat to the pier. She was handed an umbrella and a tiny white dog. The handsome young captain of the hydrofoil waved his braided hat as he gunned the motors and pulled away from the pier; the crowd cried “hurrah” as the boat rose on its spidery legs and blasted off into the rain.

“Woof,” said Anthony. No one else paid any attention to the old lady, sitting in the wheelchair with a wet, shivering dog on her lap. She had fallen asleep (or perhaps even died!) and dropped her umbrella. Fortunately it wasn’t raining.

“That would be the young Prince of Wales,” said a familiar voice to Mr. Fox’s left. It was the African. According to him (and he seemed to know such things), the Channel Islands, and most of the islanders, had been left behind. The hydrofoil had been sent to Guernsey at the Royal Family’s private expense to rescue the old lady, who’d had a last-minute change of heart; perhaps she’d wanted to die in England. “He’ll be in Portsmouth by five,” said the African, pointing to an already far-off plume of spray.

“Is it past four already?” Mr. Fox asked. He realized he had lost track of the time.

“Don’t have a watch?” asked the girl, sticking her head around the African’s bulk.

Mr. Fox hadn’t seen her lurking there. “Haven’t really needed one,” he said.

“You bloody wish,” she said.

“Twenty past, precisely,” said the African. “Don’t mind her, mate.” Mr. Fox had never been called “mate” before. He was pleased that even with all the excitement he hadn’t missed his tea. He hurried to Mrs. Oldenshield’s, where he found a fox hunt just getting underway at Portray, Lizzie’s castle in Scotland. He settled down eagerly to read about it. A fox hunt! Mr. Fox was a believer in the power of names.

* * *

The weather began to change; to get, at the same time, warmer and rougher. In the satellite pictures on the telly over the bar at the Pig & Thistle, England was a cloud-dimmed outline that could just as easily have been a drawing as a photo. After squeezing between Ireland and Brittany, like a restless child slipping from the arms of its ancient Celtic parents, it was headed south and west, into the open Atlantic. The waves came no longer at a slant but straight in at the seawall. Somewhat to his surprise, Mr. Fox enjoyed his constitutional more than ever, knowing that he was looking at a different stretch of sea every day, even though it always looked the same. The wind was strong and steady in his face, and the Boardwalk was empty. Even the newsmen were gone—to Scotland, where it had only just been noticed that the Hebrides were being left behind with the Orkneys and the Shetlands. “Arctic islands with their own traditions, languages, and monuments, all mysteriously made of stone,” explained the reporter, live from Uig, by remote. The video showed a postman shouting incomprehensibly into the wind and rain.

“What’s he saying?” Mr. Fox asked. “Would that be Gaelic?”

“How would I be expected to know?” said Harrison.

A few evenings later, a BBC crew in the Highlands provided the last view of the continent: the receding headlands of Brittany seen from the 3,504-foot summit of Ben Hope, on a bright, clear day. “It’s a good thing,” Mr. Fox joked to Anthony the next day, “that Mrs. Oldenshield has laid in plenty of Hyson.” This was the green tea Mr. Fox preferred. She had laid in dog biscuits for Anthony as well. Lizzie herself was leaving Scotland, following the last of her guests back to London, when her hotel room was robbed and her strongbox was stolen, just as Mr. Fox had always feared it would be. For a week it rained. Great swells pounded at the seawall. Brighton was almost deserted. The faint-hearted had left for Portsmouth, where they were protected by the Isle of Wight from the winds and waves that struck what might now be properly called the bow of Britain.

On the Boardwalk, Mr. Fox strolled as deliberate and proud as a captain on his bridge. The wind was almost a gale, but a steady gale, and he soon grew used to it; it simply meant walking and standing at a tilt. The rail seemed to thrum with energy under his hand. Even though he knew that they were hundreds of miles at sea, Mr. Fox felt secure with all of England at his back. He began to almost enjoy the fulminations of the water as it threw itself against the Brighton seawall.

Which plowed on west, into the Atlantic.

* * *

With the south coast from Penzance to Dover in the lead (or perhaps it should be said,

the bow) and the Highlands of Scotland at the stern, the United Kingdom was making almost four knots. Or 3.8 to be precise.

“A modest and appropriate speed,” the King told his subjects, speaking from his chambers in Buckingham Palace, which had been decked out with nautical maps and charts, a lighted globe, and a silver sextant. “Approximately equal to that of the great ships-of-the-line of Nelson’s day.”

In actual fact, the BBC commentator corrected (for they will correct even a king), 3.8 knots was considerably slower than an eighteenth-century warship. But it was good that this was so, Britain being, at best, blunt; indeed, it was estimated that with even a half knot more speed, the seas piling up the Plymouth and Exeter channels would have devastated the docks. Oddly enough, it was London, far from the headwinds and bow wave, that was hardest hit. The wake past Margate, along what used to be the English Channel, had sucked the Thames down almost two feet, leaving broad mud flats along the Victoria Embankment and under the Waterloo Bridge. The news showed treasure seekers with gum boots tracking mud all over the city, “a mud as foul-smelling as the ancient crimes they unearth daily,” said BBC. Not a very patriotic report, thought Mr. Fox, who turned from the telly to Harrison to remark, “I believe you have family there.”

“In London? Not hardly,” said Harrison. “They’ve all gone to America.”

* * *

By the time the Scottish mountaintops should have been enduring (or perhaps “enjoying” is the word, being mountains, and Scottish at that) the first snow flurries of the winter, they were enjoying (or perhaps “enduring”) sub-tropical rains as the United Kingdom passed just to the north of the Azores. The weather in the south (now west) of England was springlike and fine. The boys at the cricket ground, who had usually put away their kites by this time of year, were out every day, affording endless delight to Anthony, who accepted with the simple, unquestioning joy of a dog, the fact of a world well supplied with running boys. Our Day’s Log, the popular new BBC evening show, which began and ended with shots of the bow wave breaking on the rocks of Cornwall, showed hobbyists with telescopes and camcorders on the cliffs at Dover, cheering “Land Ho!” on sighting the distant peaks of the Azores. Things were getting back to normal. The public (according to the news) was finding that even the mid-Atlantic held no terrors. The wave of urban seasickness that had been predicted never materialized. At a steady 3.8 knots, Great Britain was unaffected by the motion of the waves, even during the fiercest storms: It was almost as if she had been designed for travel, and built for comfort, not for speed. A few of the smaller Scottish islands had been stripped away and had, alarmingly, sunk; but the only real damage was on the east (now south) coast, where the slipstream was washing away house-sized chunks of the soft Norfolk banks. The King was seen on the news, in

muddy hip boots, helping to dike the fens against the wake. Taking a break from digging, he reassured his subjects that the United Kingdom, wherever it might be headed, would remain sovereign. When a reporter, with shocking impertinence, asked if that meant that His Majesty didn't know where his Kingdom was headed, King Charles answered coolly that he hoped his subjects were satisfied with his performance in a role that was, after all, designed to content them with what was, rather than to shape or even predict what might be. Then, without excusing himself, he picked up his silver shovel with the Royal Crest, and began to dig again.

* * *

Meanwhile, at Mrs. Oldenshield's, all of London was abuzz with Lizzie's loss. Or supposed loss. Only Lizzie (and Messrs. Fox and Trollope) knew that the diamonds had been, not in her strongbox, but under her pillow. Mr. Fox's letter from his niece arrived a day earlier still, on the third of the month, underscoring in its own quiet manner that England was indeed underway. The letter, which Mr. Fox read in reverse, as usual, ended alarmingly with the words "looking forward to seeing you." Forward? He read on backward and found "underway toward America." America? It had never occurred to Mr. Fox. He looked at the return address on the envelope. It was from a town called, rather ominously, Babylon.

Lizzie was one for holding on. Even though the police (and half of London society) suspected that she had engineered the theft of the diamonds in order to avoid returning them to the Eustace family, she wasn't about to admit that they had never been stolen at all. Indeed, why should she? As the book was placed back up on the shelf day after day, Mr. Fox marveled at the strength of character of one so able to convince herself that what was in her interest, was in the right. The next morning there was a small crowd on the West Pier, waving Union Jacks and pointing toward a smudge on the horizon. Mr. Fox was not surprised to see a familiar face (and hairdo) among them.

"Bermuda," said the African. Mr. Fox only nodded, not wanting to provoke the girl, whom he suspected was waiting on the other side of the African, waiting to strike. Was it only his imagination, that the smudge on the horizon was pink? That night and the two nights following, he watched the highlights of the Bermuda Passage on the telly over the bar. The island, which had barely been visible from Brighton, passed within a mile of Dover, and thousands turned out to see the colonial policemen in their red coats lined up atop the coral cliffs, saluting the Mother Country as she passed. Even where no crowds turned out, the low broads of Norfolk, the shaley cliffs of Yorkshire, the rocky headlands of Scotland's (former) North Sea coast, all received the same salute. The passage took nearly a week, and Mr. Fox thought it was quite a tribute to the Bermudans' stamina, as well as their patriotism.

Over the next few days, the wind shifted and began to drop. Anthony was pleased,

noticing only that the boys had to run harder to lift their kites, and seemed to need a dog yipping along beside them more than ever. But Mr. Fox knew that if the wind dropped much further, they would lose interest altogether. The Bermudans were satisfied with their glimpse of the Mother Country, according to BBC; but the rest of the Commonwealth members were outraged as the United Kingdom turned sharply north after the Bermuda Passage, and headed north on a course that appeared to be carrying it toward the USA. Mr. Fox, meanwhile, was embroiled in a hardly unexpected but no less devastating crisis of a more domestic nature: Lizzie had had her diamonds stolen—for real this time! She had been keeping them in a locked drawer in her room at the loathsome Mrs. Carbuncle's. If she reported the theft, she would be admitting that they hadn't been in the strongbox stolen in Scotland. Her only hope was that they, and the thieves, were never found.

COMMONWEALTH IN UPROAR

CARIBBEAN MEMBERS REGISTER SHARP PROTEST

BRITS TO BASH BIG APPLE?

The British and American papers were held up side by side on BBC. Navigation experts were produced, with pointers and maps, who estimated that on its current course, the south (now north) of England would nose into the crook of New York harbor, where Long Island meets New Jersey; so that Dover would be in sight of the New York City skyline. Plymouth was expected to end up off Montauk, and Brighton somewhere in the middle, where there were no place names on the satellite pictures. Harrison kept a map under the bar for settling bets, and when he pulled it out after Our Daily Log, Mr. Fox was alarmed (but not surprised) to see that the area where Brighton was headed was dominated by a city whose name evoked images too lurid to visualize:

Babylon.

On the day that Lizzie got her first visit from Scotland Yard, Mr. Fox saw a charter fishing boat holding steady off the shore, making about three knots. It was the Judy J out of Islip, and the rails were packed with people waving. Mr. Fox waved back, and waved Anthony's paw for him. An airplane flew low over the beach towing a sign. On the telly that night, Mr. Fox could see on the satellite picture that Brighton was already in the lee of Long Island; that was why the wind was dropping. The BBC showed clips from King Kong. "New York City is preparing to evacuate," said the announcer, "fearing that the shock of collision with ancient England will cause the fabled skyscrapers of Manhattan to tumble." He seemed pleased by the prospect, as did the Canadian earthquake expert he interviewed; as, indeed, did Harrison. New York City officials were gloomier; they feared the panic more than the actual collision. The next morning there were two boats off the shore, and in the afternoon, five. The

waves, coming in at an angle, looked tentative after the bold swells of the mid-Atlantic. At tea, Lizzie was visited for the second time by Scotland Yard. Something seemed to have gone out of her, some of her fight, her spunk. Something in the air outside the tea room was different too, but it wasn't until he and Anthony approached the cricket ground that Mr. Fox realized what it was. It was the wind. It was gone altogether. The boys were struggling to raise the same kites that had flown so eagerly only a few days before. As soon as they stopped running, the kites came down. Anthony ran and barked wildly, as if calling on Heaven for assistance, but the boys went home before dark, disgusted.

That night, Mr. Fox stepped outside the Pig & Thistle for a moment after supper. The street was as still as he had always imagined a graveyard might be. Had everyone left Brighton, or were they just staying indoors? According to Our Daily Log, the feared panic in New York City had failed to materialize. Video clips showed horrendous traffic jams, but they were apparently normal. The King was . . . but just as the BBC was about to cut to Buckingham Palace, the picture began to flicker and an American game show came on. "Who were the Beatles," said a young woman standing in a sort of bright pulpit. It was a statement and not a question.

"The telly has arrived before us," said Harrison, turning off the sound but leaving the picture. "Shall we celebrate with a whiskey? My treat tonight."

* * *

Mr. Fox's room, left to him by Mr. Singh, the original owner of the Pig & Thistle, was on the top floor under a gable. It was small; he and Anthony shared a bed. That night they were awakened by a mysterious, musical scraping sound. "Woof," said Anthony, in his sleep. Mr. Fox listened with trepidation; he thought at first that someone, a thief certainly, was moving the piano out of the public room downstairs. Then he remembered that the piano had been sold twenty years before. There came a deeper rumble from far away—and then silence. A bell rang across town. A horn honked; a door slammed. Mr. Fox looked at the time on the branch bank across the street (he had positioned his bed to save the cost of a clock): It was 4:36 A.M., Eastern Standard time. There were no more unusual sounds, and the bell stopped ringing. Anthony had already drifted back to sleep, but Mr. Fox lay awake, with his eyes open. The anxiety he had felt for the past several days (indeed, years) was mysteriously gone, and he was enjoying a pleasant feeling of anticipation that was entirely new to him.

* * *

"Hold still," Mr. Fox told Anthony as he brushed him and snapped on his little tweed suit. The weather was getting colder. Was it his imagination, or was the light through the window over the breakfast table different as the Finn served him his boiled egg and toast and marmalade and tea with milk? There was a fog, the first in weeks. The

street outside the inn was deserted, and as he crossed the King's Esplanade and climbed the twelve steps, Mr. Fox saw that the Boardwalk was almost empty too. There were only two or three small groups, standing at the railing, staring at the fog as if at a blank screen.

There were no waves, no wake; the water lapped at the sand with nervous, pointless motions like an old lady's fingers on a shawl. Mr. Fox took a place at the rail. Soon the fog began to lift; and emerging in the near distance, across a gray expanse of water, like the image on the telly when it has first been turned on, Mr. Fox saw a wide, flat beach. Near the center was a cement bathhouse. Knots of people stood on the sand, some of them by parked cars. One of them shot a gun into the air; another waved a striped flag. Mr. Fox waved Anthony's paw for him.

America (and this could only be America) didn't seem very developed. Mr. Fox had expected, if not skyscrapers, at least more buildings. A white lorry pulled up beside the bathhouse. A man in uniform got out, lit a cigarette, looked through binoculars. The lorry said GOYA on the side.

"Welcome to Long Island," said a familiar voice. It was the African. Mr. Fox nodded but didn't say anything. He could see the girl on the African's other side, looking through binoculars. He wondered if she and the GOYA man were watching each other. "If you expected skyscrapers, they're fifty miles west of here, in Dover," said the African.

"West?"

"Dover's west now, since England's upside down. That's why the sun rises over Upper Beeding."

Mr. Fox nodded. Of course. He had never seen the sun rising, though he felt no need to say so.

"Everyone's gone to Dover. You can see Manhattan, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, all from Dover."

Mr. Fox nodded. Reassured by the girl's silence so far, he asked in a whisper, "So what place is this; where are we now?"

"Jones Beach."

"Not Babylon?"

"You bloody wish," said the girl.

* * *

Mr. Fox was exhausted. Lizzie was being harried like the fox she herself had hunted with such bloodthirsty glee in Scotland. As Major Mackintosh closed in, she seemed to take a perverse pleasure in the hopelessness of her situation: as if it bestowed on her a vulnerability she had never before possessed, a treasure more precious to her than the Eustace family diamonds. “Mr. Fox?” asked Mrs. Oldenshield.

“Mr. Fox?” She was shaking his shoulder. “Oh, I’m quite all right,” he said. The book had fallen off his lap and she had caught him sleeping. Mrs. Oldenshield had a letter for him. (A letter for him!) It was from his niece, even though it was only the tenth of the month. There was nothing to do but open it. Mr. Fox began, as usual, at the ending, to make sure there were no surprises: But this time there were. “Until then,” he read. As he scanned back through, he saw mention of “two ferries a day,” and he couldn’t read on. How had she gotten Mrs. Oldenshield’s address? Did she expect him to come to America? He folded the letter and put it into his pocket. He couldn’t read on.

That evening BBC was back on the air. The lights of Manhattan could be seen on live video from atop the cliffs of Dover, shimmering in the distance through the rain (for England had brought rain). One-day passes were being issued by both governments, and queues were already six blocks long. The East (now West) Kent Ferry from Folkestone to Coney Island was booked solid for the next three weeks. There was talk of service to Eastbourne and Brighton as well. The next morning after breakfast, Mr. Fox lingered over his tea, examining a photograph of his niece, which he had discovered in his letter box while putting her most recent (and most alarming) letter away. She was a serious-looking nine-year-old with a yellow ribbon in her light brown hair. Her mother, Mr. Fox’s sister, Clare, held an open raincoat around them both. All this was thirty years ago but already her hair was streaked with gray. The Finn cleared the plates, which was the signal for Mr. Fox and Anthony to leave. There was quite a crowd on the Boardwalk, near the West Pier, watching the first ferry from America steaming across the narrow sound. Or was “steaming” the word? It was probably powered by some new type of engine. Immigration officers stood idly by, with their clipboards closed against the remnants of the fog (for England had brought fog). Mr. Fox was surprised to see Harrison at the end of the pier, wearing a windbreaker and carrying a paper bag that was greasy, as if it contained food. Mr. Fox had never seen Harrison in the day, or outside, before; in fact, he had never seen his legs. Harrison was wearing striped pants, and before Mr. Fox could speak to him, he sidled away like a crab into the crowd. There was a jolt as the ferry struck the pier. Mr. Fox stepped back just as Americans started up the ramp like an invading army. In the front were teenagers, talking among themselves as if no one else could hear; older people, almost as loud, followed behind them. They seemed no worse than the Americans who came to Brighton every summer, only not as well dressed.

“Woof, woof!”

Anthony was yipping over his shoulder, and Mr. Fox turned and saw a little girl with light brown hair and a familiar yellow ribbon. “Emily?” he said, recognizing his niece from the picture. Or so he thought. “Uncle Anthony?” The voice came from behind him again. He turned and saw a lady in a faded Burberry. The fog was blowing away and behind her he could see, for the first time that day, the drab American shore.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” the woman said. At first Mr. Fox thought she was his sister, Clare, just as she had been thirty years before, when she had brought her daughter to Brighton to meet him. But of course Clare had been dead for twenty years; and the woman was Emily, who had then been almost ten, and was now almost forty; and the girl was her own child (the niece who had been growing up inexorably) who was almost ten. Children, it seemed, were almost always almost something.

“Uncle Anthony?” The child was holding out her arms. Mr. Fox was startled, thinking she was about to hug him; then he saw what she wanted and handed her the dog. “You can pet him,” he said. “His name is Anthony too.”

“Really?”

“Since no one ever calls us both at the same time, it creates no confusion,” said Mr. Fox.

“Can he walk?”

“Certainly he can walk. He just doesn’t often choose to.”

A whistle blew and the ferry left with its load of Britons for America. Mr. Fox saw Harrison at the bow, holding his greasy bag with one hand and the rail with the other, looking a little sick, or perhaps apprehensive. Then he took his niece and great niece for a stroll along the Boardwalk. The girl, Clare—she was named after her grandmother—walked ahead with Anthony, while Mr. Fox and his niece, Emily, followed behind. The other Americans had all drifted into the city looking for restaurants, except for the male teenagers, who were crowding into the amusement parlors along the Esplanade, which had opened for the day.

“If the mountain won’t come to Mahomet, and so forth,” said Emily, mysteriously, when Mr. Fox asked if she’d had a nice crossing. Her brown hair was streaked with gray. He recognized the coat now; it had been her mother’s, his sister’s, Clare’s. He was trying to think of where to take them for lunch. The Finn at the Pig & Thistle served a pretty fair shepherd’s pie, but he didn’t want them to see where he lived. They were content, however, with fish and chips on the Boardwalk; certainly Anthony seemed pleased to have chips fed to him, one by one, by the little girl named for the

sister Mr. Fox had met only twice: once when she had been a student at Cambridge (or was it Oxford? he got them confused) about to marry an American; and once when she had returned with her daughter for a visit.

“Her father, your grandfather, was an Air Raid Warden,” Mr. Fox told Emily. “He was killed in action, as it were, when a house collapsed during a rescue; and when his wife (well, she wasn’t exactly his wife) died giving birth to twins a week later, they were each taken in by one of those whose life he had saved. It was a boarding house, all single people, so there was no way to keep the two together, you see; the children, I mean. Oh dear, I’m afraid I’m talking all in a heap.”

“That’s okay,” said Emily.

“At any rate, when Mr. Singh died and his Inn was sold, my room was reserved for me, in accordance with his will, in perpetuity, which means as long as I remain in it. But if I were to move, you see, I would lose my patrimony entire.”

“I see,” said Emily. “And where is this place you go for tea?”

* * *

And so they spent the afternoon, and a rainy and an English afternoon it was, in the cozy tearoom with the faded purple drapes at the west (formerly east) end of Moncton Street where Mrs. Oldenshield kept Mr. Fox’s complete set of Trollope on a high shelf, so he wouldn’t have to carry them back and forth in all kinds of weather. While Clare shared her cake with Anthony, and then let him doze on her lap, Mr. Fox took down the handsome leather-bound volumes, one by one, and showed them to his niece and great-niece.

“They are, I believe, the first complete edition,” he said. “Chapman and Hall.”

“And were they your father’s?” asked Emily. “My grandfather’s?”

“Oh no!” said Mr. Fox. “They belonged to Mr. Singh. His grandmother was English and her own great uncle had been, I believe, in the postal service in Ireland with the author, for whom I was, if I am not mistaken, named.” He showed Emily the place in The Eustace Diamonds where he would have been reading that very afternoon, “were it not,” he said, “for this rather surprisingly delightful family occasion.”

“Mother, is he blushing,” said Clare. It was a statement and not a question.

It was almost six when Emily looked at her watch—a man’s watch, Mr. Fox noted—and said, “We had better get back to the pier, or we’ll miss the ferry.” The rain had diminished to a misty drizzle as they hurried along the Boardwalk. “I must apologize

for our English weather," said Mr. Fox, but his niece stopped him with a hand on his sleeve. "Don't brag," she said, smiling. She saw Mr. Fox looking at her big steel watch and explained that it had been found among her mother's things; she had always assumed it had been her grandfather's. Indeed, it had several dials, and across the face it said: "Civil Defense, Brighton." Across the bay, through the drizzle as through a lace curtain, they could see the sun shining on the sand and parked cars.

"Do you still live in, you know . . ." Mr. Fox hardly knew how to say the name of the place without sounding vulgar, but his niece came to his rescue.

"Babylon? Only for another month. We're moving to Deer Park as soon as my divorce is final."

"I'm so glad," said Mr. Fox. "Deer Park sounds much nicer for the child."

"Can I buy Anthony a goodbye present?" Clare asked. Mr. Fox gave her some English money (even though the shops were all taking American) and she bought a paper of chips and fed them to the dog one by one. Mr. Fox knew Anthony would be flatulent for days, but it seemed hardly the sort of thing one mentioned. The ferry had pulled in and the tourists who had visited America for the day were streaming off, loaded with cheap gifts. Mr. Fox looked for Harrison, but if he was among them, he missed him. The whistle blew two warning toots. "It was kind of you to come," he said.

Emily smiled. "No big deal," she said. "It was mostly your doing anyway. I could never have made it all the way to England if England hadn't come here first. I don't fly."

"Nor do I." Mr. Fox held out his hand but Emily gave him a hug, and then a kiss, and insisted that Clare give him both as well. When that was over, she pulled off the watch (it was fitted with an expandable band) and slipped it over his thin, sticklike wrist. "It has a compass built in," she said. "I'm sure it was your father's. And Mother always . . ."

The final boarding whistle swallowed her last words. "You can be certain I'll take good care of it," Mr. Fox called out. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Mother, is he crying," said Clare. It was a statement and not a question.

"Let's you and me watch our steps," said Emily.

"Woof," said Anthony, and mother and daughter ran down (for the pier was high, and the boat was low) the gangplank. Mr. Fox waved until the ferry had backed out and turned, and everyone on board had gone inside, out of the rain, for it had started to rain in earnest.

That night after dinner he was disappointed to find the bar unattended. “Anyone seen Harrison?” he asked. He had been looking forward to showing him the watch.

“I can get you a drink as well as him,” said the Finn. She carried her broom with her and leaned it against the bar. She poured a whiskey and said, “Just indicate if you need another.” She thought indicate meant ask. The King was on the telly, getting into a long car with the President. Armed men stood all around them. Mr. Fox went to bed.

* * *

The next morning, Mr. Fox got up before Anthony. The family visit had been pleasant; indeed, wonderful; but he felt a need to get back to normal. While taking his constitutional, he watched the first ferry come in, hoping (somewhat to his surprise) that he might see Harrison in it; but no such luck. There were no English, and few Americans. The fog rolled in and out, like the same page on a book being turned over and over. At tea, Mr. Fox found Lizzie confessing (just as he had known she someday must) that the jewels had been in her possession all along. Now that they were truly gone, everyone seemed relieved, even the Eustace family lawyer. It seemed a better world without the diamonds.

“Did you hear that?”

“Beg your pardon?” Mr. Fox looked up from his book.

Mrs. Oldenshield pointed at his teacup, which was rattling in its saucer. Outside, in the distance, a bell was ringing. Mr. Fox wiped off the book himself and put it on the high shelf, then pulled on his coat, picked up his dog, and ducked through the low door into the street. Somewhere across town, a horn was honking. “Woof,” said Anthony. There was a breeze for the first time in days. Knowing, or at least suspecting what he would find, Mr. Fox hurried to the Boardwalk. The waves on the beach were flattened, as if the water were being sucked away from the shore. The ferry was just pulling out with the last of the Americans who had come to spend the day. They looked irritated. On the way back to the Pig & Thistle Mr. Fox stopped by the cricket ground, but the boys were nowhere to be seen, the breeze being still too light for kiting, he supposed. “Perhaps tomorrow,” he said to Anthony. The dog was silent, lacking the capacity for looking ahead.

That evening, Mr. Fox had his whiskey alone again. He had hoped that Harrison might have shown up, but there was no one behind the bar but the Finn and her broom. King Charles came on the telly, breathless, having just landed in a helicopter direct from the Autumn White House. He promised to send for anyone who had been left behind, then commanded (or rather, urged) his subjects to secure the kingdom for the Atlantic. England was underway again. The next morning the breeze was brisk. When Mr. Fox and Anthony arrived at the Boardwalk, he checked the compass on his watch and saw

that England had turned during the night, and Brighton had assumed its proper position, at the bow. A stout headwind was blowing and the seawall was washed by a steady two-foot curl. Long Island was a low, dark blur to the north, far off the port (or left).

“Nice chop.”

“Beg pardon?” Mr. Fox turned and was glad to see a big man in a tweed coat, standing at the rail. He realized he had feared the African might have jumped ship like Harrison.

“Looks like we’re making our four knots and more, this time.”

Mr. Fox nodded. He didn’t want to seem rude, but he knew if he said anything the girl would chime in. It was a dilemma.

“Trade winds,” said the African. His collar was turned up, and his dreadlocks spilled over and around it like vines. “We’ll make better time going back. If indeed we’re going back. I say, is that a new watch?”

“Civil Defense chronometer,” Mr. Fox said. “Has a compass built in. My father left it to me when he died.”

“You bloody wish,” said the girl.

“Should prove useful,” said the African.

“I should think so,” said Mr. Fox, smiling into the fresh salt wind; then, saluting the African (and the girl), he tucked Anthony under his arm and left the Boardwalk in their command. England was steady, heading south by southeast, and it was twenty past four, almost time for tea.