

Voyage to the End of the Room



a NOVEL

By the author of UNDER THE FROG

TIBOR FISCHER

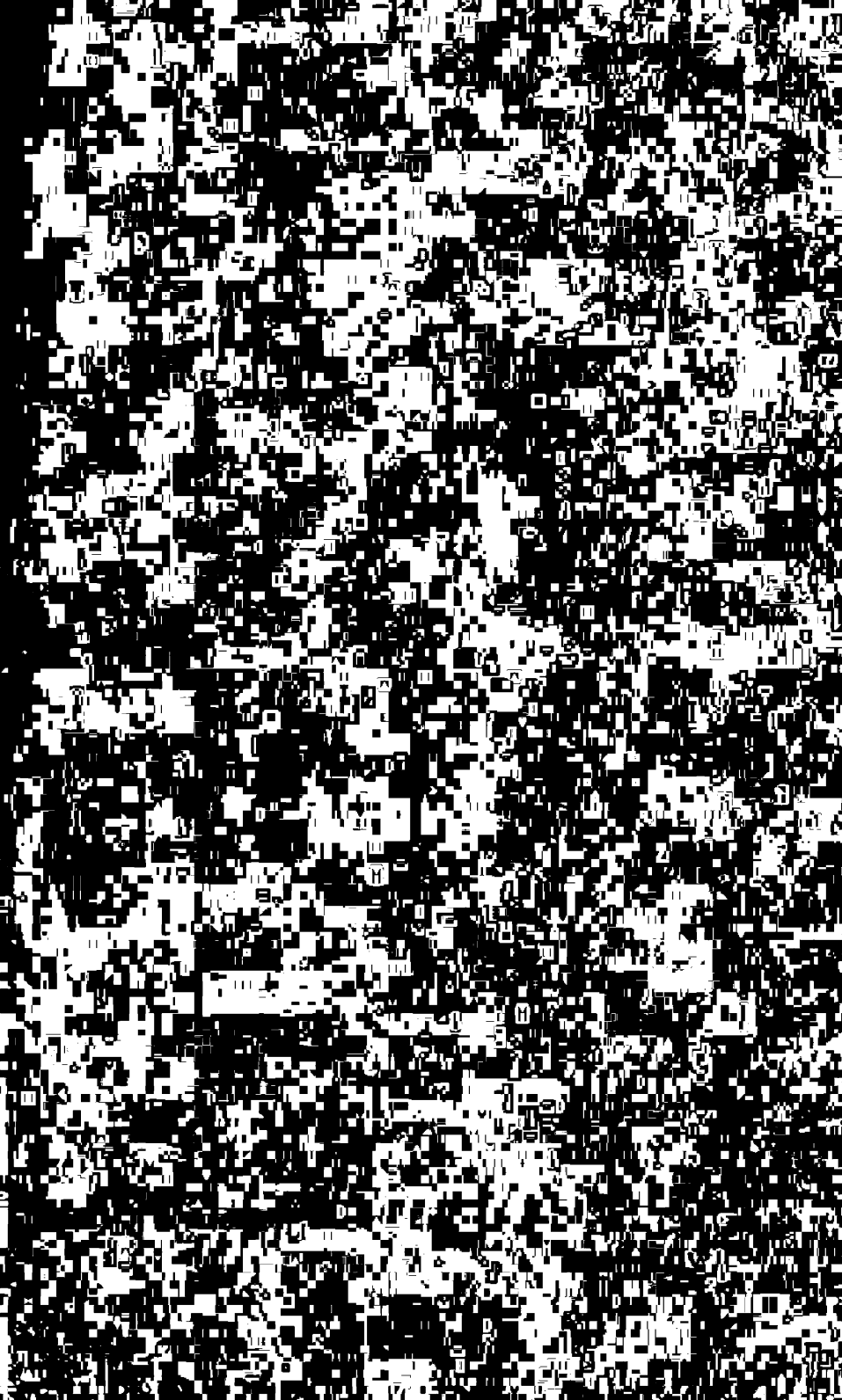
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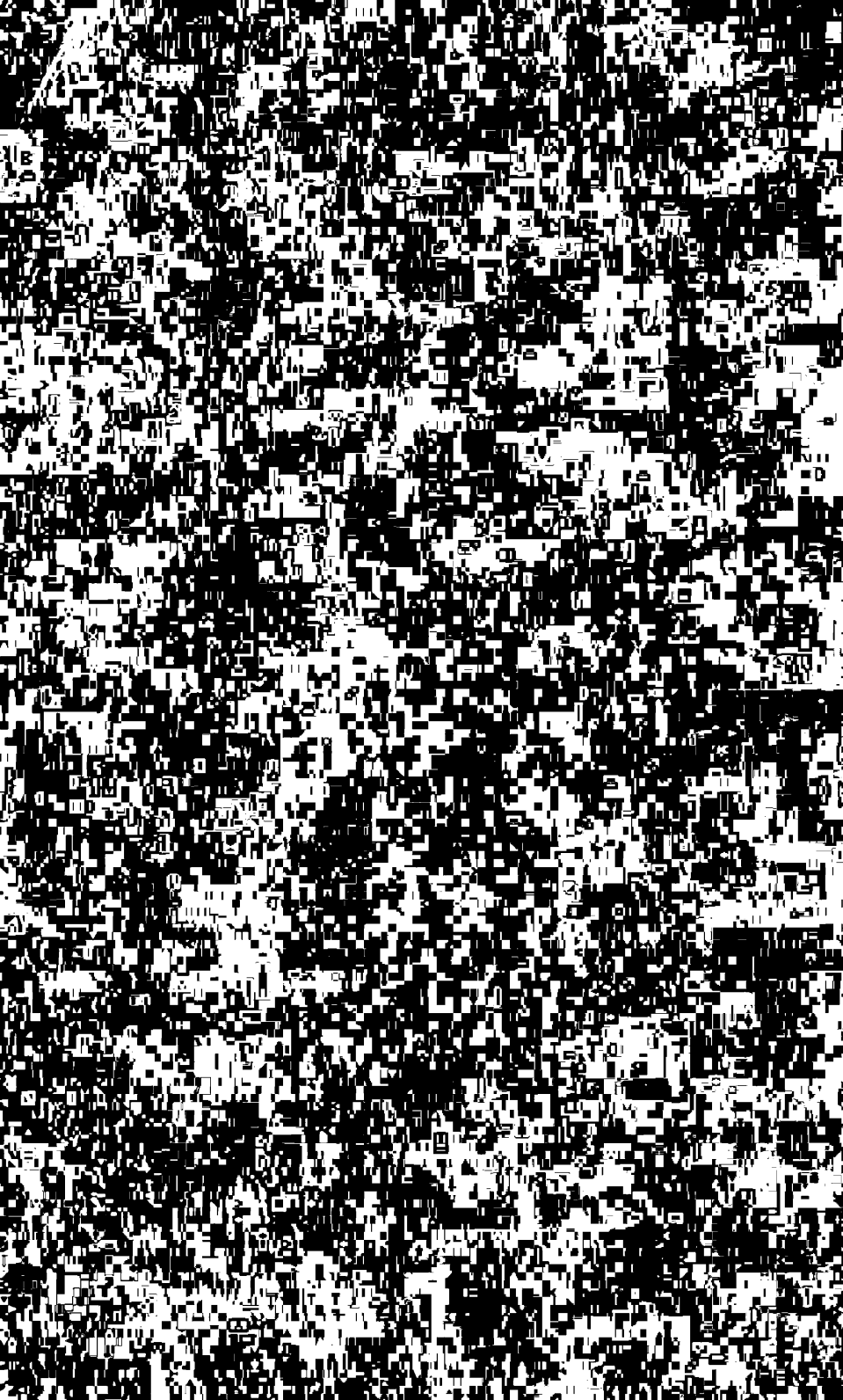
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Oceane, successful computer graphics designer and former erotic dancer, likes to travel, but doesn't like to go out. In fact, she never leaves home. She satisfies her wanderlust by bringing the world to her South London flat using courier, satellite, radio, the Internet, and cooperative foreign visitors. Her meticulously constructed lifestyle suits her until she receives a letter from an ex—an ex who died ten years ago. The mystery forces her into action and she seeks out the help of Audley—failed mercenary, former personal trainer, and proprietor of the Dun Waitin Debt Collection Agency. When the first letter is followed by a string of missives, Oceane has to start searching the world to understand her past.

Tibor Fischer's new novel is *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island* updated for the twenty-first century, weaving from the sex clubs of Barcelona and the battlefields of Yugoslavia to the deadly diving of Chuuk lagoon. Combining his trademark sardonic wit and offbeat imaginative flair, *Voyage to the End of the Room* is Tibor Fischer in top form: a compelling page-turner that is at once a brilliant and darkly hilarious meditation on a random world, on what you can know, what evil looks like, why ketchup is among a soldier's most important equipment, and how bubble gum can be used to collect on old debts.





VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE ROOM



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Also by Tibor Fischer

Under the Frog
The Thought Gang
The Collector Collector
Don't Read This Book if You're Stupid

VOYAGE TO THE END
OF THE ROOM

Tibor Fischer

COUNTERPOINT

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FOR MY PARENTS

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THIS IS how I became rich: I was at home at four-thirty on a Friday afternoon.

Rich? Rich for many. Comfortable for some. Comfortably well-off I would say. By most standards. I own a flat which is more than adequate for one person, a space which, in many cities of the world (both the rougher and ritzier ones), would be judged excessive. I have a majestic study. I have two bedrooms, though the second one could be considered a bedroom only by estate agents, since if you were to put a bed in it, there really wouldn't be room for anything else. I have a reasonable lounge, a respectable kitchen and bathroom, and – here's a real extravagance – there's another would-be bathroom, containing a toilet and a tiny basin. The flat's split-level and the generous staircase adds to the sense of expanse. I always find walking up and down its chunky carpeting soothing. Being at the top of the house, the light's always good and the walls are old and solid enough to limit my neighbours' sonic invasions, and, as I'm two storeys up and muffled by trees (thoughtfully planted a hundred years ago and not yet entirely destroyed by the fumes and shenanigans of motorists), the din from the road doesn't reach me either. In the two weeks of sunshine that pass for summer in this country I have the luxury of a roof terrace and the chance to give some of my plants an outing.

I've often wondered why I'm so fond of plants; at first I thought it was a hankering for nature, the reassurance of green. Then I began to suspect plants are pets for those who are unsure about their ability to care for quadrupeds. When a plant expires you have a bout of guilt, but an aspidistra won't give you reproachful looks if you don't take it out, and you can't mourn a cactus. And how else can you get oxygen these days?

So, I have a lot of room. Many families have to make do with less. I have an excess of wardrobe space so all my clothes can be located at a glance. My disc storage is exemplary, and – here comes the embarrassing part – the small bedroom has become a shoe-stack, housing a hundred and nineteen pairs of shoes. This, I confess, is real indulgence, because I'm not a great one for going out and I generally pad around my flat barefoot. In my defence, I would like to point out I amassed them over a ten-year period and they are the way I like to reward myself for good performance. As vices go, fairly harmless.

Although my possessions and I enjoy an uncramped lifestyle, our location is not the most exclusive part of London: the communal garden in front of our block – a game tangle of green in a tundra of construction – attracts few birds (the pollution seems to have exterminated all of the flying fauna apart from the most disgusting pigeons) but many transients. Riots, gunplay, car-jacking, robbery, punch-ups, mattress-dumping, urinations – a quite comprehensive range of unpleasant activities are all observable from the comfort of my rattan armchair.

In the beginning I used to phone the police and it took me quite a while to understand that they didn't want to hear about any of this. Either they wouldn't turn up or they would saunter up forty minutes after the call, giving the most slothful transgressor plenty of time to make himself scarce. The solution to this problem is plain and simple, and it's interesting that the many ministers, politicians, civil servants

and various layabouts of various bureaucracies who are well paid to solve these problems don't.

But here's the clincher.

I also own the flat underneath, on the first floor. Although not palatial, it's more than enough for one or two, should I ever decide to rent it out. It came up for sale during my first wave of affluence, and property after all is one of the best investments. No argument over that, as Ethiopian taxi-drivers, Albanian accordionists, Swedish dotcomers and mugged-up Russian aluminium barons beat a path to London. Owning the flat underneath also removes the risk of disturbing anyone with late-night music.

There is more. Sickeningly, I also have money in the bank. High-interest account. Not a lot, but enough for a family to live on for a year or two, and of course, I'm still earning. Better ways of investing it exist, but, and I appreciate this sounds terrible, I'm not interested in money. I love spending it, but I can't bear racking my brains over investing it in some clever scheme. Deep down, I simply don't care. I don't enjoy leaving the money in the bank, because principally it rots there, and like everyone else I hate bankers (I love the old joke: What do you call a thousand bankers barbecued alive? A good start).

These days I don't spend much apart from the travel. On the clothes front, I'm ready for anything. Weddings, funerals, parties, interviews, seductions: I've got designer frocks, prepped and in cellophane. Embarrassingly expensive lingerie is untouched in its packaging. My wardrobe doesn't get much wear and tear because as I work at home, my pyjamas and very old tracksuits take the strain.

As for music, I already have more than I can cope with.

My flat isn't enormous, but I have thousands of slaves to do my bidding. I have Lithuanian pianists, Korean violinists, Icelandic tenors, Dutch divas, American harpsichordists, Senegalese cellists, Balinese drummers, slaves living and dead,

of almost every nation to play music for me. I can make them play again and again, louder or quieter.

The choice every time I want to listen to some music is almost tiresome. The first stage of choice is easy: up, down or hanging around. Then it's a question, if you want to go up or down, how far up or down you want to go. If you're glum, is it the sort of glumness that you want to ornament with another layer of dejection? Or is it a vexatious misery you want to dispel? Or, if you're elated, do you want to be driven into a frenzy? Guessing what sort of music you want to listen to can be exhausting, but on occasion getting it wrong can be surprisingly pleasant.

Finally, how much music can you listen to? Working at home means I can listen a lot more than the average officenik, but I have over five hundred discs that represent fifteen years of collecting, of birthday presents, of Christmas presents, of I-would-like-to-take-your-clothes-off presents. If you listened for twelve hours a day, every day, that would be six weeks without repetition; and a lot of music, usually the more rewarding, requires half a dozen plays before you begin to get a grip on it. The great pieces you can listen to dozens of times, naturally, with the enjoyment growing and changing all the while. I've concluded it would be profligate to buy any more since I have every field covered, two or three discs to accompany every emotional permutation, though I will doubtless succumb to some new release promising more.

And a great piece by a great composer is an almost undrainable pleasure. I have twenty-five different recordings of a double piano concerto; though it was with the purchase of the twenty-fifth that I worried I might be fiddling with my sanity.

There's something slightly embarrassing about liking a great composer. Of course you do. It looks so obvious, so lazy, so dull. There's always this tension in your tastes; no one wants to fit in with the crowd, to bellow herdishly. This

desire is contrasted with the desire to evangelise for a new discovery; we want others to share our pleasure, but only to a certain point. I can't imagine anyone, even those who go for the most obscure and awful music, enjoying something and not wanting to share it with someone. We might not want to share our food or our money, but we do want to share our judgement. We want to be considered of good judgement, knowledgeable. We want others to think we have more fun. But we need meeting-places of the mind. A Kilimanjaro of the spirit that we've all visited so we can say of other things: it's shorter, or taller, or the same height as Kilimanjaro.

Apart from the music, I have my huge film library, and, from the dish, hundreds of television channels. And while their controllers do their best to keep anything intelligent out, they fail periodically. So although my wealth is modest, I defy any dictator, any potentate, anyone richer than me to have better home entertainment. Even those with unspendable fortunes only have one mind, one mouth, two ears, two eyes and one pleasure station. There's only so much fun you can take. A hundred years ago not even someone with their own country or a shocking fortune could have had it this good, even fifty years ago it was magnates only, and by now the crackheads have more entertainment than they know what to do with.

Richness descends not when you have a choice of yachts, but when you have abundance and freedom. Oh, and you are likely to retain them. I could go out and buy new furniture, new clothes or jet off to any part of the world and loaf for a month in a suite with a mammoth minibar and a barn-sized bathroom.

The financial distance between scraping along and galore is, cruelly enough, quite small if you're single. If you want to raise eight children, that's another matter, but once you can escape the gravity of rent and credit-card payments, things go your way. Few pleasures are greater than knowing you can close your door, ignore the world and create your own.

Moreover, my becoming as-good-as rich wasn't the result of any astuteness or hard work on my part. It was a by-product of my wanting to take some flamenco classes.

Dance is very much like a cult, you get sucked in further and further, and you pay more and more and you rarely get a chance to make any money out of it.

At sixteen, I tormented my father for some extra cash to take up flamenco in addition to the innumerable dance classes I was already attending. Knowing he'd yield, he made a stipulation: 'Owww, you have to sign up for something useful as well.' We understood each other well enough for me to know he had in mind something that might give me a chance of earning a living. I kept my side of the bargain, but I left it late. By the time I got to enrol at the local college all the worthwhile courses, like the one in computer graphics that I had been honestly keen on, were full; even worse, all the tempting courses were full. There was only one course that was presentable and that had vacancies: slightly harder maths. I desperately hunted for slightly easier maths but it didn't exist. So it looked as though my career in graphics was finished in its intentional stage and I gritted my teeth to find out what the maths were slightly harder than.

I didn't find out, because the slightly harder maths tutor sold his car, bought a pneumatic drill and started digging a hole in his basement in an attempt to reach the earth's core in order to prove some theory. So the computer graphics tutor took over, and the course became slightly harder maths meets computer graphics and sits quietly in the corner, though this was at a time when courses in computer graphics consisted of little more than switching on the computer. But my father was right.

When I finally had to knock dancing on the head years later, I evolved into a designer, largely because I could switch on a computer and draw. If I were trying to get into the business now with those qualifications, I wouldn't even get an interview as a receptionist.

So I suppose my contribution to my fortune was not failing as a designer. I had a reputation and a phone and that's why I became rich. It was Friday afternoon and I was locking the door on my way out to buy some peppermint tea when the phone rang. I could have gone off and left it to the answering machine, but I picked up the phone and was offered the job.

I didn't want the job. It was one of those we-need-it-yesterday things you get offered a lot as a freelance. They needed one more character for a computer game. My weekend would have become a sleepless hell, and I wasn't in the mood. My prospective employer, an embittered Japanese project manager, didn't want to give me the job either. He complained venomously about how he had been let down at the last minute by a designer who had decided he wanted to be a ladyboy in Bangkok; how the hundreds of other experienced, well-qualified designers he knew in Japan were busy, on holiday, suffering spiritual crises, having skiing accidents, giving birth or had become contestants on game shows. He seethed as he listed the countries he had scoured for help: America, Germany, France, Spain, Bulgaria, Poland, India.

As he enumerated the implausible events that had prevented hundreds of talented designers from taking up his offer, I could smell his bad sweat, the rancid tobacco on his clothes (it took me a while to twig what a long day he must have had because they're nine hours ahead in Tokyo); he was very angry with me, indeed he hated me, and I sensed he wanted an apology from me for all his toiling. Despite his clear and immediate need for a designer, he still chewed over my CV with me before, with incredibly bad grace, offering me the job.

I didn't want it. But as a freelance you can't bring yourself to say no. You are in a constant terror that no one will ever talk to you again let alone employ you. The word 'no' cannot pass your lips. Uttering that word would bring career

calamity; it would incur the wrath of the payment gods. However, I wanted this job to vanish.

So what I said was: 'You'll have to talk to my lawyer.' I went off to get my tea, confident that I'd hear no more about the job, since I didn't have a lawyer. On top of which, the lawyer I didn't have would undoubtedly have gone off for the weekend; or even if he hadn't, he would have forgotten about me.

I hadn't forgotten about him. I was getting my coat at a party when this lawyer had walked up to me and said, 'I specialise in intellectual property and I'd like to shag your brains out.' A lame line, but well delivered, and it wasn't accompanied by a slimy leer as if it had been delivered by, say, a human-resources manager. It wasn't one of these offensive propositions where the pleasure lay in being offensive. He was drunk and I was in the mood. He had given me his card afterwards, but I had never taken up his offer of representation because I hadn't needed to and because, as any woman knows, favours are rarely executed after the event.

Funnily enough, I had ripped up and put his card in the bin that morning. I hate clutter and unnecessary things (the shoes are essential for my peace of mind) and I like everything in its place, and I really had no place for a card from a married intellectual-property lawyer. But it would be a suitable way of dodging the work: I rescued the card from the bin and read out the number. I was confident that that was that.

Afterwards, I learned that the lawyer had been locking his office door when the phone rang and had only gone back in because he had been expecting a call from a Syrian lacrosse player. He not only remembered me but by the time I had returned from the shops he had ferociously cut me a deal which gave me a shedload of money and, more significantly, a percentage of the royalties. 'I love it when you can hear

them sobbing at the other end of the phone.' I was furious with him, but I couldn't say so.

I had four hours' sleep that weekend, finished the job by Monday afternoon and the rest is a stream of steady payments. It's odd that they paid me, because it would have been easy for them not to. Collecting money from companies two streets away is hard enough.

I've never met anyone who's played the game. I've never even seen the game on sale here (mind you, I haven't looked very hard), but it was, judging by the cheques that have been forwarded to me, successful in Japan. In normal circumstances, the fee would have bought me two or three good pairs of shoes, but I ended up with a half a house and thermal stability.

So my only tip for becoming rich is not to try.



I go down to the hallway. I always think of it as a beach, where debris and wrack get washed up.

There are several letters, face-down – so none of the other residents have appeared yet, or they went off before the postman delivered – but nothing for me. Four envelopes loitering in a corner of the hallway, which I have been tolerating for weeks, I scoop up for disposal. I am slightly disappointed there's nothing for me, because although, like most of us, my mail consists largely of junk, at the heart's core is an irrepressible hope that one day some good news will glide in.

I walk back up the six flights of stairs to my kitchen. I chose a top-floor flat precisely because it forces you, whether you like it or not, to exercise a little. Even a trip to the newsagent's becomes a modest work-out. I prepare breakfast and deal with the unclaimed envelopes. I let the post loaf downstairs for a while even though I know the addressees

won't be turning up to collect it. They haven't been here for years so why would they start now? But I feel I have to give correspondence some respect, even if it's clearly flannel, until the pile starts to annoy me or gets to the size where it might be concealing my letters, and thus possible good news.

If I had a forwarding address for any of the previous residents, many of whom I knew (in the loosest sense), I'd probably suffer from enough guilt to forward them, but I don't. Unwanted post waiting for long-gone addressees, clogging up the beach.

While I drink my coffee, I gut the envelopes. Why do I carry on doing this? There is an excitement in opening others' letters, but it wears off when you discover their lives are as monumentally uneventful as yours, and when you can see the letter is from a credit-card company, you know no amusement is in the offing. But I open the letters before I chuck them in the bin just to verify that there are no desperate messages from unfortunates kidnapped and awaiting ransom, and because along with the hope of good news, is the hope for some amusement.

The first envelope is large and manila. It was getting on my nerves because of its size, capable of covering smaller but more important letters to me which might contain some good news. The addressee is one E. Lambert. No E. Lambert has been living here for the ten years I've been here, and this is the first time an E. Lambert letter has turned up here.

The envelope divulges a thick catalogue of sex toys. Millions of these are sold every year, apparently, and it leads to the question whether there can be a man, woman or child in the country without the solace of a butt-plug. The address on the envelope is entirely correct, down to the postcode, so this is no slip or misguess by the postman. Does the company send a catalogue to every building in the country surmising that most of the time, sooner or later, someone will open it?

The next envelope is a press release addressed to a journalist who left here four years ago, correcting an earlier