

**'WE'LL NEVER KNOW'**

**by Matthew Tree**

**Based on a true story**

## PART ONE

## I

I didn't have much to do with my father and he never had much to do with me, partly because when I was in my late teens I decided to knuckle down to my studies on the far side of the biggest ocean I could find and partly because during the last years of his not overlong life he was a feckless drunk. During that period I went to see him just a couple of times at his last bolt-hole, a Riviera village so small it couldn't boast as much as a Mayor, and I didn't stay long, either time. And to see this man who was crawling towards his sixtieth birthday, see him doing nothing but hanging about with a bunch of locals talking about cars and the weather as they worked their way through a merry-go-round of beers, wines and spirits in one or t'other of the village's two bars, was not something that was about to stir up whatever embers of filial love that might still have retained a little warmth; to add disdain to disappointment, in his pre-alcoholic life he'd been a failed artist reduced to teaching watercolour techniques at a variety of council-funded evening classes, until his father passed away and left him a house in Pinner whose sale kept him in enough clover from then on to quietly sweep whatever creative itching he'd ever felt under his mental carpet and dedicate himself to what amounted to biding his time until the Reaper ran him to earth at age fifty-nine. In 2029.

I felt sorry, for him, my Dad, in the same way I felt sorry for writers who nobody's ever heard of, for musicians with one hit wonders that no one can remember, or for actors who never make it out of the supporting cast; or for retired clowns who've spent their working lives at children's parties; or for pigs scuttling up to the ramp to the gas stunner. Dear God, I would think, when

waking up some mornings, what must have it been like for him, opening his eyes every single day to face the daylight with a hangover kicking him in the head, knowing that he had bet his life, time and again, on losing numbers and low cards; that time and again he'd seen the chips swept away from him until there was nothing under his eyes except worn baize? Sisyphus, eat your fucking heart out.

And it was because I felt sorry for him that from an early age I knew that whatever I did with my life, it would have to be done in a way that was the precise opposite of my father's. I didn't want anyone, anywhere, to be pitying me. Instead of his fluffy nonchalance I would have ambition; instead of the lack of self-confidence that ended up blighting his life, I would be proud of myself, no matter what; instead of farting about with a career to which I was not suited – he had wasted his unpaid time making paintings that were no good and never would be – I'd choose something I knew I was good at or that I would make myself good at. In short, I would make his feebleness the foil to my future, until he'd become little more to me, in my imagination, than an unvisited gravestone. I didn't hate him, even though it'd have been easier if I had; I just felt it was a shame that he'd been my father. After all, like anyone else, I could have done with some paternal guidance, but instead of that I had to steer my way around him, keeping my distance lest any of his pusillanimity should rub off on me.

I studied myself sick, going from master's degree to master's degree until I had a thorough command of the formal, social and natural sciences – from systems theory to Earth science, from astronomy to anthropology; and of on-going developments in all these fields, as well as the history of science itself. But I never

planned on a career as a professional scientist, because the peeks I'd had into the scientific world put me off right from the start, it being full of people, so it seemed to me, who were more competitive than athletes, each trying to out-research the other, often working for donkey's years on identical or similar projects and then when a rival pipped them to the post, some of them would lapse into a clinical depression or, on occasion, top themselves.

My path lay elsewhere, and I'd already mapped it out: I'd barely turned thirty when I became the chief science correspondent of one of England's most respected broadsheets. I gained a reputation as someone who could explain the most complicated scientific phenomena in a way that every layman and laid woman could understand. Which is why, alongside my regular columns, my paper decided to open up a weekly Q&A section for readers with pertinent questions which I answered shooting straight from the hip with clear, accurate and well-written replies. Which is probably why the two popular science books I wrote over that same period sold in reassuringly satisfactory quantities. In short, when my thirty-fifth birthday rolled around, I'd become one of the go-to experts on matters empirical.

By which time, in my head my late father was deader than ever.

## II

At the paper, I had my own king-sized, screened off work station. I could have worked perfectly well from home, but home wasn't for working in, home was a three room flat in South Kensington, a stone's chuck from the V&A. Home was a wall-mounted eighty-eight inch television screen, a floor-standing single speaker, a double bed, a small, shiny kitchen, a couple of armchairs, a coffee table, parquet flooring and a view of a square. Home was for eating, watching TV, reading and sending and receiving messages on a tablet. As for sex, I preferred to take the temporary work experience students who passed through the editorial office on their six month tours of duty to medium-priced hotels, because I didn't want them sniffing around my work-free home. They – or at least the pretty ones – were more than enough to satisfy my needs and their fleetingness meant that I could steer well clear of anything resembling a relationship.

(That was something else that my father had allowed to fuck him up: after being dumped gently by Mum he fell into the arms of a younger woman who a few months later died prematurely in Belarus, in circumstances I've never been able to clarify and which he refused to talk about. He never got over losing Mum and afterwards he never got over losing this other woman, so for quite a while he was pining for both of them simultaneously, which must have been a humungous bummer and yet there was no one to blame for it except himself: if he hadn't allowed himself to wallow in sentiments that no longer had any point to them, he would have been a happier, more personable man, instead of the disconsolate non-entity he apparently preferred to be).

I would sit myself down at my work station at ten, go out for a sandwich at twelve, get back at half past and work until four. Five days a week.

From time to time, I had to go to – or was invited to – various scientific congresses and conferences around the world, to make sure I heard about the latest discoveries from the horses' mouths.

As scientific events do not happen on a daily basis, the writing of my informative articles took up little more than one afternoon per week. But for the Q&A section I received dozens of emails, asking me about everything under and beyond the sun. I had to wade through all these queries and fish out one or preferably two to which the weekly answer would make good copy. First I weeded out the jokers ('Do flatulent surgeons contaminate the operating theatre?') followed by the nutters ('What is the exact location of Atlantis?'); I would also have to eliminate the science students and on occasion bona fide scientists whose enquiries tended to be too *recherché* for a general readership ('What is a likely source for deep space neutrinos?'); only then did I finally get around to the ones that would interest a wide range of readers ('How long is Earth going to exist?').

I'd sit there in my Timberlands, my jeans and my button-down shirt, loving the regularity of the routine, loving the knowledge that I was making good money with each tap of the keys, loving the praises that more often than not were embedded in the emailed questions I received, loving having a by-line in a big newspaper, which was a fine form of fame, making me well-known without turning me into a clown or a ham, like, say, so many TV celebrities. Like all of them, in fact.

Back then I revelled in my ability to take no shit from a soul; and also in the sexism I wore on my sleeve, partly because I'd discovered that it turned some women on; and in the forthrightness that made it possible for me to give orders – or make requests – in a way that ensured they were never ignored. I knew there were people who thought I was far too full of myself, who despised my macho mind-set, who might even, indeed, have considered me to be a pompous, self-important bastard, but I didn't give a damn and was proud of not giving it. My life was a one way street with just me walking its length, and I wasn't about to let anyone or anything pull me in any wrong directions. And if my mind was ever crossed by any self-doubt about my self-confidence, I would flick such qualms into the wastebasket with the conviction that I simply was the way I was and there was nothing I could do about it even if I wanted to. Which I didn't. Not back then.

From time to time, my work address being available on the paper's website, I got requests for a personal meeting from women who invariably attached a photo. Attractive as they sometimes tended to be, I would always politely decline, not wanting to run any risks: you never could tell if they were who they said they were; or, for that matter, if they were infatuated, or even ill in the head.

Then, one day, I got a request for a personal meeting from a woman who wasn't trying to seduce me. And she didn't attach a photo, either.



## III

*'Dear Mr Wyndham, I am writing to you concerning a matter of the greatest importance, convinced that you will be able to help. It concerns my husband. I really don't want to go into any details in an email. For that reason, It would be better if we met personally. Please let me know when and where would be convenient for you. Kind regards, Melissa Hogg.'*

I found this downright impertinent. She wasn't *asking* me, she was as good as *telling* me to meet up with her, even though I didn't know her from Eve. I deleted the message and got on with my work. Just before I left the office she sent me another mail.

*'Please don't give me the brush-off, Mr Wyndham, I promise you, this is not a crank message. My husband has been involved in matters scientific, and that is why I – and he - believe you may be able to help. More than that I really cannot say except in a private conversation. Please be so kind as to accept my request for an appointment. Yours, Melissa Hogg.'*

This second message - both, I now noticed, had been sent from a mobile phone - had a note of desperation in it that rubbed me up the wrong way. Besides, if this was to do with her husband, why didn't he contact me himself? I decided to brush this female pest off.

*'Dear Ms Hogg, I am sorry to inform you that you are writing to the wrong person. It sounds as if your husband is in some kind of trouble,*

*but I am not a policeman. However, as you are surely aware, there are plenty of people who are. I suggest that you get in touch with them.'*

And with that, I picked up the small rucksack containing a couple of peer-reviewed journals, the latest issue of New Scientist, and a science-orientated book I happened to be reading at the time, and headed for the exit, pausing only to chat for a moment with a new intern, a truly gorgeous-looking red-head who had made it quite clear that she didn't object to my ostensibly solicitous enquiries about how she was fitting in. As I took the lift, I felt pretty sure I could offer to take her out for dinner sometime towards the end of the week, and get yes for an answer.

The paper was located not far from the Tate Britain, and I had come to enjoy my daily after-work walk along the river and through Victoria Tower Gardens on my way to Westminster tube station. There was something about the water-scented breeze that I found comfortingly Londonish, as if the city were telling me I was in the right place at the right time with the right job: in short, that all was right with my world.

No sooner had I walked into the gardens, when a woman who had been tapping furiously on her mobile looked up, saw me and stood up from a bench that was tucked in to the right of the entrance. She had long, straggly, starting-to-grey hair and one of those concerned, intense faces I've always found off-putting. On top of which, being at least half way through her forties as I surmised she must have been, she was way too old for me.

"Mr Wyndham!"

This bloody woman – Melissa Hogg, *sans doute* – was wearing a hippyish cotton dress with a dark brown and blue

pattern that might have suited her when she was twenty. She held out a hand. I raised mine.

"How did you know I'd be walking through here at this time of day?"

She put down her hand, disconcerted.

"Your photo appears next to your by-line so I know what you look like. I assumed you might ignore or reject my messages. After all, we don't know each other and you're a busy man. So yesterday, I took the liberty of checking what time you left work and which route you took. I'm so sorry, I know that this is highly-"

"It's what the law calls stalking. And if you bother me just once more, I'll let the law know about it."

That made this ridiculous woman flinch.

"I wouldn't have done something so unusual if time wasn't of the essence."

Her face, intenser than ever. The gall of this middle-aged bag! I confess, however, that her talk about time being of the essence piqued my curiosity. But not enough.

"I'm not in the dilly-dallying mood, so I'd appreciate it if you would run along and let me proceed on my way home."

She gawked at me, mouth casting about for words, clearly not about to give up. Maybe, I fretted, she was something worse than a pest.

"My husband works for the MoD. A special unit. He's not allowed to talk to the media. He's monitored. Closely. He would like to set up a discreet meeting. Well, clandestine, really."

A nervous half-laugh. She didn't *sound* as if she was making it up.

"If your husband works for the MoD, you need to talk to our Defence and Security Correspondent. I can text you her details, if you wish."

"My husband's work is strictly scientific."

"Is it now? What's his speciality?"

I said, mentally kicking myself for having continued the conversation.

"He's an astrophysicist."

Eh?

"What's an astrophysicist doing working on a defence project?"

"You'd have to talk to him, I'm a bit hazy on the technical details."

Mainly because I wanted to get her out of my hair, and partly because my curiosity had been piqued a little more, I pulled out my wallet and handed her a business card.

"I can't promise anything. But if your husband wants to set up a meeting and I happen to be free, I'll try and make it. Text only, no phone calls."

"Thank-you!"

Said with a bleat to it. I left her standing there and hurried off to what had become the welcoming beacon of Westminster station.

## IV

If time was of the essence for that woman, she wasn't in a hurry to show it: the days went by after that Monday meeting without a texted dicky bird from her and by the time Friday had rolled around I'd written her off as an eccentric old moo. Meanwhile, I was spending incrementally longer periods of time pretending to be solicitous about the red-headed intern's progress, standing by her desk, checking her work, offering advice. (I made sure, as per usual, not to do anything inappropriate, such as gently stroking her shoulder).

On Friday morning, when things were quiet in the office I ambled over to her desk.

"Everything OK?"

She looked up at me with those large blue pupils of hers.

"Everything."

I winced and hummed and hawed for a few moments, making out I was a bit nervous about what I was about to say, a technique which usually worked wonders. Then I went in for the kill.

"I wonder if I could ask you something which isn't to do with your work?"

Without taking her eyes from her screen nor her fingers from her keyboard, she said:

"Go ahead."

"If you say no, I'll understand completely and promise that I won't repeat the question."

"What question?"

There was a nonchalance in her voice which I found unusual.

"Do you think you could bear to have dinner with me tonight?"

She glanced at me then went back to concentrating on her screen.

"Where would this dinner be?"

I wasn't expecting the question, but I had the answer anyway.

"There's a new Argentinian near Hyde Park which I'd love to try but am loathe to do so on my own."

"Is that because you haven't got a girlfriend?"

Sassy, this kind of banter. I found myself liking it.

"How did you guess?"

"What time?"

Wow.

"Would Marble Arch tube at seven be OK?"

"Only if you're punctual. I don't like to be kept hanging around."

Double wow.

"I'll get there a few minutes earlier, just to make sure."

"You do that."

Face still facing the screen, she fluttered a handful of fingers at me by way of terminating the conversation. As I wandered back to my work station, it occurred to me that I didn't know her name.

\*

Adalyn. I'd had to ask her how it was spelt. She was looking at the menu on the far side of a thick oak table, the restaurant's open brick work – on which a row of maté gourds were displayed – behind her. Now that I had the time to observe her hair, it seemed

to have something electric about it, literally, as if it were wired up to something. Her lips were not too thick and not too thin and not made-up. Her skin was on the pale side, something I'd always found attractive.

Once we had our steaks in front of us, I did my usual trick of asking her what she wanted to do with her life after she'd finished her stint at the paper (taking care to say this in a way that implied I might be able to help). Carefully cutting off a piece of the sirloin steak she'd ordered almost raw.

"I've already done quite a lot. I'm twenty-seven years old."

Twenty-seven! She didn't look it, but the matter-of-fact, no-monkey-business manner in which she'd told me, left me in no doubt that she was telling the truth.

"That's a little odd. Most of the interns tend to be in their late teens, twenty, tops."

She looked at me, chewing the piece of meat, and only after the time it had taken her to do that and swallow it, did she say:

"Do you prefer younger women?"

It was a genuine question, bereft of criticism. I had to think.

"Not necessarily. It depends."

"On what?"

"On who they are, what they're like as people, not what age they are."

I hoped that one would pass.

"So if you met a for you ugly fifty year old who was an interesting person, you'd try and date her?"

Oh God.

"I don't know. I haven't yet had the pleasure."

Flippancy to the rescue, so I hoped. And thankfully, she changed the subject.

"What got you interested in science?"

The answer to this, I had off pat.

"Because it deals in reality. Everything science does is about investigating or harnessing reality. And in an age when reality is constantly being pushed aside by false information, wishful thinking, or superstition masquerading as knowledge, well, science is a balm, a solace. A place of safety, if you will."

Off pat I might have had it, but I'd never delivered it with such conviction, such seriousness. It was as if I didn't want to let this ever more attractive young woman down.

"And what," she said, having ingested another chunk of meat, "does science do when it comes up against phenomena which might or might not be real?"

"Such as?"

Her eyes on mine, she shrugged, deliciously.

"Oh, say, telepathy."

Had I known she was going to say that?

"ESP, under whose umbrella, as I'm sure you know, telepathy comes, has been investigated exhaustively for over a century and not only is there no evidence for its existence, but there is not even a plausible hypothesis for its existence."

"Uh-huh."

Or at least that's what I thought I heard her say, muffled as her voice was by food.

\*

When we'd finished our meal, I suggested she try an Armagnac (which impresses them because they usually don't know what



Armagnac is; and besides, it gets them into the mood). She shook her head.

"I don't like Armagnac. I'll have a Frangelico, if they've got any."

They had, and I found myself feeling relieved, as if the restaurant's not having Frangelico would have reflected badly on me. When our respective liqueurs came I raised my glass and she raised hers. I took a sip from mine and she knocked hers back in one swift go, then placed it back on the table. I looked at her and she looked back.

"Was it good?"

She gave a non-committal shrug.

"It was OK. It always is."

\*

We stepped out of the restaurant fastening up our coats: it was autumn: the evenings were turning cold. She sniffed the air.

"Dead leaves," she said.

"It's autumn," I said.

"Uh-huh."

"I'm guessing you must live in a park-free, leaf-free borough."

We had started to move in the direction I had gently taken.

"I don't live in London."

That surprised me.

"You commute in for an unpaid job? That must be costing you a fortune."

Walking slowly next to me but at a distance that precluded any shoulder rubbing, she kept her eyes on the pavement.

"I like travelling."

She really was different from the others. Different age, different tastes, different answers. That excited me. We were approaching the end of Strathearn Place. Not far to go now. As we turned into Stanhope Terrace, I made my usual play.

"Look, I don't want you to think I'm being forward, but that's exactly what I'm going to be. There's a very comfortable hotel not far from here. I'm sure you know what I'm getting at."

And I gave her my best twilight smile, understanding and cheeky. She finally looked up.

"You wish to sleep with me."

It wasn't a question. *Wish?*

"I do."

She stopped right at the start of the street that led directly to the hotel I had in mind. She touched my arm without taking hold of it, as if checking I was real.

"I have other plans for tonight."

My heart, as they say, sunk.

"I wasn't aware you had a boyfriend. I'm sorry."

"I don't, so don't be."

"I'll walk you to the nearest tube."

But before I could set off, she tugged my sleeve, gently, to stop me.

"Stop. If you want, I could masturbate you."

Taken aback, I blinked several times.

"I'm sorry?"

"We could go into the park, and if needs be, I could masturbate you."

This was the kind of suggestion I had, on occasion made to a couple of the others who hadn't wanted to go all the way. And

although the suggestion had come, unusually, from her and not me, had she been any of the others I would have said 'Why not?', taken her by the hand – *that* hand - and accompanied her into the bushes. But looking into those calm blue eyes and at her electric red hair, I decided there and then that I would seduce her to the point where she would want to do whatever I wanted to do with her.

"Thanks for the offer," I said, jokingly, "but I think that would be a bit sordid, don't you?"

Without frowning, she said:

"Sordid?"

As if she didn't know what the word meant. I didn't feel like providing a definition.

"Look, you've got your somewhere else and I've always got some work to catch up on, so why don't we call it a night? A night which I've very much enjoyed, by the way."

"It was fine," she said, without stressing a single word.

"Maybe we could do dinner again some time."

She nodded.

"I know where the tube station is; no need to accompany me."

With which, she walked off. I hailed a cab, feeling an inexplicably urgent need to get back home as soon as possible, to the three rooms, the TV screen, the shiny kitchen, the view of a square.

\*

Before lying down single in my double bed, I checked my mail.

*'Could you please be at the Croydon Park and Ride, tomorrow at 7am?  
I'm sorry to be so precipitate but, as I think I mentioned to you, time is of  
the essence. Thank-you. Melissa.'*

'Thank-you'? As if I'd already agreed to be there, the pushy cow.

## V

It was bloody cold out in Croydon's bloody park and ride. I was standing there like a proper berk, shivering and staring at the sea of cars that surrounded me under a sky the colour of whipped cream. The cafeteria was closed, of course, at that time of morning. Only the occasional stopping of a bus heading for central London provided any sign of human life.

So quiet was it, such a hush reigned over the lacklustre metal rooves and bonnets that the beep of my cell phone gave me a start. A message from a number I didn't recognise, telling me to walk two rows up and five cars along until I found a Renault Four.

\*

It was a beat-up off-white heap that must have slid off the assembly line some forty years ago. I leaned down to peek through the window, expecting to see that wrinkled hippy again but instead there was a jumpy man at the wheel, signalling with a flapping hand that I step into the front passenger seat.

"Thank-you for coming."

He was wearing a red suit with a tartan pattern on it and a navy blue shirt. He had a high forehead on the crest of which clumps of dishevelled grey hair bobbed as he leaned across me and closed my door.

"Can't be too careful."

A milky smile. He stuck out a hand.

"Quentin Hogg."

I shook it. He gave an inappropriate giggle.

"I don't really know where to start!"

For fuck's sake.

"How about telling me why you've asked me to this benighted car park at the crack of dawn? Because if you don't, I'm out of here, pronto."

He made rapid calming gestures with his hands that only riled me some more.

"Of course, of course! As my wife told you, I work for the Ministry of Defence."

The car door on my side swung open.

"You have to slam it hard, otherwise it won't close properly."

I slammed it hard. It closed properly.

"Wait a minute. If you're working for the MoD, how come you're driving this old crock?"

"Oh, I paid a friend to buy it for me."

"You haven't answered my question."

"As it's been purchased just for this meeting, I didn't want to spend too much money."

I looked at his apologetic face.

"Just for this meeting?"

"At home I have a somewhat smarter vehicle. A Jaguar actually, but that's neither here nor there."

"But, why -?"

He cut in, agitatedly.

"My other car would have been traced and followed. Nobody knows about this one."

I wondered if he was more seriously ill than his wife. Paranoiac, perhaps. Schizophrenic?

"Why would anyone want to follow you?"

"I was getting round to that. What my wife didn't tell you, because she doesn't know very much about it, is the department I've been assigned to."

"And what department would that be?"

"The Office of Special Investigations. The OSPI, in the jargon."

"Which does...?"

"We look at artefacts that are difficult to classify."

I had a nasty feeling that I knew where this might be going.

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"My job deals with elements forwarded by a small unit of the Fleet Air Arm, known as Code Orange – which liaises on a regular basis with its American opposite number, by the way - to the DIS and then -"

"DIS?"

"Defence Intelligence Staff. And if the DIS think it's worth it, they pass it on to the outfit I work for. The OSPI."

"And what kind of things do they find 'worth it'?"

He looked away, took a deep sigh, and, as if ashamed, said:

"Recovered aerial craft of unknown origin."

I should have bloody guessed.

"You're into UFOs?"

Now he looked at me, his eyes dilated, his lips quivering.

"Well, I suppose you could put it like that. Except they're not unidentified."

"What?"

"We have them. Before our eyes. As visible as my hand."

He held up his hand, palm out. My turn to sigh.

"And they're from outer space, I presume."

"All the evidence certainly points that way, yes."

“Mr Hogg, in my capacity as a science correspondent I’ve had more than a few people ask me about this particular subject and, tedious waste of time though it was, I looked into it long enough to be able to tell them without hesitation what I am about to tell you. There is no evidence whatsoever for the existence of alien craft, be they disc or cigar shaped or black triangles half a mile wide; nor is there any proof that anyone except a gullible nitwit would give the slightest credence to the theory that extra-terrestrials, be they blonds or greys or humanoid giants, have made contact with human beings, be they world leaders or died-in-the-wool non-entities; or that said aliens have built undersea bases on this planet or any other; or that any of the contactees who have made a fortune by writing sheaves of twaddle about their supposed experiences complete with photographs of light bulbs attached to surgical lamps or scale models photographed using a double exposure, have been anything but shamelessly unscrupulous frauds; nor could I find any confirmation that the government of the United States or of any other country has been dismantling spaceships for the last half century in a process dubbed ‘reverse engineering’, thus giving the world such technological marvels as velcro and ballpoint pens that write upside down. I’ve looked them up, the contactees and abductees, and every single one of them has been debunked, from Adamski and his trees on the Moon and his unlikely mate Orthon from Venus, or the Italian Friendship group with their alien pals who looked like nothing so much as very tall Italians. In fact, I investigated the so-called UFO phenomenon until I grew so sick of it, I vowed I’d never bear it in mind again, as long as I lived. On which note, I believe I shall say goodbye.”



I opened the door of the car and got out, slamming the thing behind me. He wound down the window in a hurry.

"Please, Mr Wyndham, this is a matter of life and death!"

I looked at his fearful face.

"Oh, piss off."

With that, I walked away but not fast enough to prevent him from catching up with me three cars along and thrusting a brown envelope into my hands.

"These were taken on an RAF base down in Somerset. It's because of them that I - and other people there too - are in danger."

A real nutter. Without a word, I left him standing there.

## VI

When I got back to the flat, for a reason I wasn't able to put my finger on, I double locked the door before opening the envelope. It contained a series of five fifteen-by-twenty-one-sized colour prints. The first showed a glittering grey disk sitting on a concrete floor. To judge from a section of wall to the object's right, it was housed in a tall building, possibly a hangar. The object looked as if it were about fifteen metres wide and some three metres high. The second, third and fourth pictures, taken from different angles, showed the same disc in the same place, only this time it was hovering roughly a metre above the concrete floor. The fifth picture showed what I supposed to be the interior of the disc, with three small seats facing a shiny black panel which didn't have any visible switches or lights or keys on it. What looked like half a dozen screens of different sizes were embedded in the wall. From a scientific point of view, it all looked quite interesting. I knew that the US and the UK - and probably the Russians and Chinese too - had been experimenting with saucer shaped flying machines since the 1950s, so I assumed this vehicle must be some kind of military prototype. I'd always taken it for granted that the most reliable reports of unidentified flying craft - such as those provided by professional pilots - were of man-made objects whose existence the government wished to remain secret. Why Mr Hogg felt it necessary to claim they were from outer space, I had no idea. And why on earth did he say he and his wife, and some unnamed others, were in danger? If he was working on a classified project he would have signed the Official Secrets Act and been given a suitable security clearance. Nothing to be afraid of there.

Either that, it occurred to me, or he might simply be making the whole thing up, and that in real life, he was a grocer or a bank clerk. After all, there had been plenty of pathological liars, charlatans and con-men in the ufological world. Indeed, with a little help from Photoshop or some similar programme he could easily have faked the photographs he'd given me. And besides, if he really was working on a hush-hush government project, why would he risk losing a highly lucrative job by giving sensitive material to a journalist?

I switched on my tablet. He wasn't on Wikipedia, and Google gave me nothing but dozens of entries for a long dead Conservative politician called Quintin Hogg. I tried a variety of sites and search engines and was about to give up when I decided to try Amazon. After all, long shot though it was, maybe he'd patented something, or written something, or designed something, that was on sale there.

Quentin Hogg turned out to be a children's author. He had three books out published by 'Whole Hogg Editions', featuring a little boy called Orthon - the same name as the fraud Adamski's imaginary Venusian friend - who took trips in a flying saucer piloted by friendly aliens. 'Orthon and the Sirusians'. 'Orthon Goes to the Hidden Planet'. 'Orthon and the Mountain Chamber.' All three titles had been published over a decade ago and were over two million on the Bestsellers Rank. So, Hogg was doubtless a *frustrated* children's author. And one familiar with UFO lore. I shut down the tablet and hoped that would be the last I'd hear of Quentin Hogg, not to mention his addled wife, who I supposed he had roped into his play-acting.

It was then I caught sight of the back of one of the pictures, which I had tossed onto the coffee table. It was stamped with the

Royal Air Force logo, under which was a name: 'Weston Zoyland'. The base, presumably. Hogg had mentioned something about it being in Somerset. Irritated with myself, but feeling I had to do it, I switched the tablet on again. Weston Zoyland existed, all right and yes, it was in Somerset; it had been used extensively by fighter squadrons in World War Two and later, during the Cold War. I googled some recent images. The airfield itself looked pretty run down, but there was one building whose windows were now covered with what looked like brand new steel plates. Odd, I thought; then thought about it no more.