

Circle's End



Delwyn McPhun

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This is a work of fiction. Although many of the events described are history, all the characters are the products of the author's fevered imagination.

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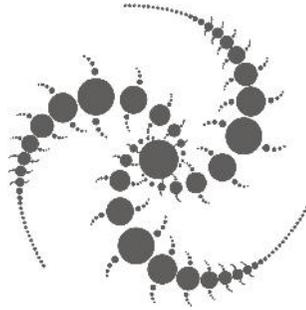
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For Marie

Acknowledgements

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to Sylviane, Claude and Sophie for their enthusiastic help;
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Prologue

I was still caressing Ember, my hands returning to their favourite places where her skin is so soft it seemed to melt under my fingers, when I finally understood. At first I felt my mind trying to flee, to blot out all thought; anything but allow such an unacceptable vision. I sat bolt upright in the circle of flattened barley. I wanted to cry out but something strangled my voice.

“There’s only us!” I croaked.

“Yes.” Ember rolled languorously onto her back and gazed up at the sky. “Incredible isn’t it?”

“You mean, you knew that too?”

“Yes, but I only knew that I knew today, when you decrypted the last circle.” She smiled up at me. “That’s why I wanted us to come back here.”

My thoughts were thrashing with panic. I felt that the future of life in the universe suddenly depended on me.

"We've got to tell everyone. I mean, the world has to *know!*"

"They'd probably say you're mad. No one would believe you. Or worse, they *would* believe you and just give up doing all the good things they've started now."

"But we can't keep it to ourselves. The Earth's responsibility... it's too much! We can't leave it to chance!"

Ember shrugged her shoulders.

"If mankind ends up turning the Earth into a lifeless cinder, they're not going to care about the rest of the universe," she said. "When humanity's responsible enough it will find out for itself. Until then, everyone being terrified of Big Daddy up there is working rather well, don't you think?"

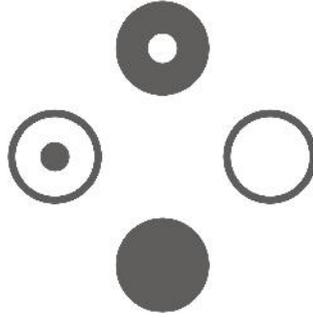
I couldn't help laughing at Ember's offhand way of deciding mankind's fate. It was like playing God.

"So what *do* we do?"

"What we were doing before you started thinking too much. Make love, not war."

She reached her arms around my neck again, pulling me down against her warm flesh. I felt myself sinking into her generous femininity.

I stopped thinking.



1 I, Mathew

I would have been a hippy if I'd had the time. Yes, even in the year 2000 there were still hippies. The world faced Aids, eleven wars including one slap bang in the middle of Europe, oil prices were at a record high and Britney Spears had done it again. Many of my friends were ecologists, pacifists, and friends of mother-earth following every New Age trend that came along. They spent their spare time expanding their consciences by relating to the universal energy, chanting mantras and smoking conscience-expanding substances. I envied their freedom.

Saying that I didn't have the time is just an excuse. Really, I didn't know what I wanted to be because I'd never had the liberty to pose the question. I hadn't been like those kids who dreamed of being a train driver or an astronaut.

Dad always said I was going to take over his grocery shop; for him university was a waste of time. Mum wanted me to have a *proper education* and be a doctor or a lawyer. Mum had won, giving me a brief respite from the shop, but had left me with a strong dislike of both doctors and lawyers. My teachers helped me persuade her to accept a maths degree at Bristol University. It was perfect because it really didn't leave me any time to think about what I wanted to be.

I love maths but am not very good at it. Just not intelligent enough I suppose, though my tutors never had the guts to say so. It took me ages to figure out the course work and complete the assignments we were given. Once I'd understood, I could remember everything I'd learnt, but applying it to the problems spawned by the twisted minds of our professors was painfully difficult. It was clear that I was not cut out for a dazzling career on the forefront of chaos theory – the place to be at the time. My Dad often joked that with a name like Mathew it was only logical that I become a mathematician. He said it was symbolic, but he wouldn't recognise a symbol if one hit him on the head.

Symbols were my hobby (some would say obsession). They consumed any midnight hours left over after maths. My interest had started at school when a teacher had forgotten she was supposed to be teaching us algebra, and for two whole periods had described the history of numbers with contagious passion. Each number had a meaning and even a magical power attributed by philosophers, alchemists, architects and religious fanatics the world over. Take zero for instance, a simple circle representing emptiness or non-existence. Or, if you prefer, a serpent biting its tail and so symbolising eternity. Indians developed arithmetic using zero in the fifth century BC and eighteen centuries later the inquisitors in Europe were torturing people who just wanted to catch up with India. The church said zero was the work of the devil since it had the power to annihilate other numbers. Where would we be now if they

had succeeded in banning it?

I was fascinated by a universe of unseen meaning in a world where numbers are mainly used for counting money. Shapes and geometry, letters and names soon followed my interest in numbers. History had been my most hated subject but by the time I finished school I was practically an authority on European and Egyptian mythology and symbols, and had started on the South Americans. My head was permanently in a book. Instead of losing my virginity, I was losing my eyesight and developing a stoop to boot. I had become an introverted library mole.

Linda got me back on track to adolescent normality. She was a small bubbly girl a year older than me who was re-taking her exams. I accidentally crossed her gaze at the library and a second later she was sitting next to me asking if I found her pretty because she thought *I* was fantastic. All I saw was her big adoring eyes and curves bubbling out of her skin-tight tee shirt. My brain must have short circuited because I didn't ask myself if she was joking or simply mentally ill. Luckily I didn't have to say anything coherent; Linda took me completely in hand – literally. Twenty minutes later she continued my initiation in a wheat field (was she aware that wheat symbolises death and resurrection?). I practically died of shame because I didn't really know what to do, and as she tried to guide me through all her strange fuzzy hair, I exploded in her hands. I guess Linda was a nymphomaniac, but she must have genuinely liked something about me. With patience and encouragement, she took two weeks to show me all the ways she liked to make love; the areas of flattened wheat getting ever larger.

Then suddenly she was going out with another guy with a big motorbike and I realised that I was zero in comparison. He seemed to burst out of his black leather jacket and I...

I had blackheads and pimples on either side of my upturned nose. If my large nostrils didn't put you off it was

probably because you couldn't look away from my ears that stuck out at slightly different heights on either side. My brown eyes were too close together giving me an owlish look and my lips were too thin. The only thing in my favour was my hair, which hung in a chestnut curtain down to my collar – a rare show of teenage rebellion. Even that was too light to stay put and looked like a badly made haystack. No girl would give me a second glance, and Linda must have simply taken pity on me.

My books gave me the means to continue living and eventually pull out of my depression. After all, Linda was just a worthless tart who for two weeks had talked continuously about her nails, hair, skin, clothes and rings, and not for one second had I found that interesting. I suddenly saw much prettier girls everywhere and didn't hesitate long before applying Linda's seduction technique, word for word. Thankfully it worked twice before a neck-breaking slap taught me to be more tactful, but by then I was well on my way. I learnt to dress carefully, make compliments and to appear interested in more than just their bodies. I didn't know how lucky I was to have overcome such a big complex with so little effort.

What had helped me most to forget Linda was stumbling across a correspondence between two ancient artefacts that seemed to me to be the discovery of the century. I was leafing through a tome on Aztec history and suddenly had that strange feeling of déjà vu. Before me was a photograph of a round bowl with a gold band around its rim; a bowl used by the Aztecs to collect blood from sacrifices. I knew I had seen it before and moreover, with a feeling of unreality, I knew as I raised my eyes I was going to find the solution, and there it was.

The catalogue of the Egyptian collection at the British museum was too tall for my shelves so it laid collecting dust on top of the other books. On the cover were a dozen images but the one that transfixed me was a solid gold band, a neck

ornament from a burial chamber. Both the bowl and the neckband had pictograms and hieroglyphs inscribed on them. The languages, cultures and epochs were different, but the translation of these symbols yielded the same phrases:

The End is the Beginning. The Beginning is Light.

This coincidence (because in those days I didn't think in terms of connections) was exciting enough in itself, and probably someone has written papers on the symbolism of the two artefacts. But I was running around shouting "Wow!" because I saw something much more incredible. There was a second message hidden in the symbols, a message that every mathematician knows by heart.

What fascinates me about symbols is the knowledge buried in them. They are like actors, each one having a role to play in the telling of a story, which we can only understand if we have read their scripts.

Uncannily, even if you think you know nothing about symbols, you use hundreds of them, whether you like it or not. Our dreams talk with these symbols to get past the censorship of our conscious mind. But I couldn't help wondering what use this is if we can't interpret the symbols, apart from guaranteeing employment for psychotherapists.

A lot of people think that the meaning of symbols is universal, and a fundamental part of all life. At the tender age of eighteen this mystical side of symbols seduced me, but deep down I thought that in fact men and a few women were responsible. I could too well imagine priests or alchemists during centuries of committee meetings arguing about the precise interpretation of a symbol, whereas in fact they were defining it. These working groups usually kept their findings secret. Only a chosen few had access to the power of the knowledge of symbols. I suppose that guaranteed them employment too.

Despite my sceptic nature, a few symbols did seem to

have a universal importance, and the circle was one of them.



While looking at the inscription around my Aztec bowl, I had automatically associated a number with each symbol. I tend to do this when assimilating a new language as it helps me to memorise them. The first four symbols gave 3, 14, 15 and 9. Looking at the British museum catalogue the same digits seemed to shine out of the hieroglyphs around the neck ornament. I must have subconsciously recognised them whenever I saw the photo. Digits I knew by heart: the distance around a circle compared to its diameter. The sequence was the beginning of the mathematical constant we know as Pi.

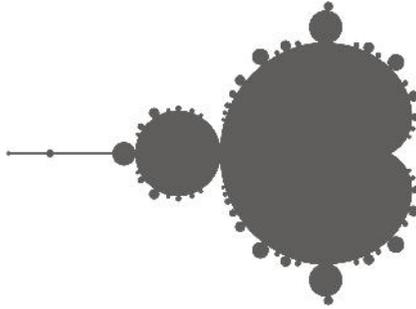
The implications were enormous! Two different cultures had used the same hidden language even though the images and symbols were different. I'd never heard of anything like it. Both inscriptions were on gold circles. "The beginning is the end" is a description of a circle, full of implications about the continuous cycle of creation. 3.14159 is a mathematical description of the perimeter of a circle. It was, it was... It was my guarantee to international fame! Dad could stick his shop where it hurts!

I wrote a fevered article that I sent to the world's three most respected science magazines.

"Unpublishable poppycock!" replied *New Scientist*.

"We do not treat esoteric subjects," excused *Scientific American*.

Nature did not deign to reply. Six months later, my article was finally published in the *Esoteric Review*, the only journal I knew of that sometimes dealt with the study of symbols in between articles on black magic and UFOs. Looking back now, my article was so badly written that I doubt anyone would have got to the end of it.



2 School of Life

Then suddenly it was time to go to university. The period was a blur of applications, interviews and desperate efforts to get any sort of grant that would help me to live through the experience. Thanks to Maggie Thatcher I ended up with a student loan that I would spend the rest of my life working to pay off. Welcome to the freedom of adulthood.

My A-level results gave me the choice of four universities. I chose Bristol, the furthest away from home, suddenly regretting that I hadn't applied to Edinburgh or Dublin. I had hoped to have a room in a student's residence but it transpired that I should have reserved it while still in kindergarten. A week before term started I drove the van – a rickety cast off from Dad's grocery store – to Bristol, still not knowing where I would live. I was finally driving on my own, I was finally getting away from my parents, but all I

saw was the terrible uncertainty of the days ahead.

I soon discovered a world of people trying not to look like Bristol's biggest nerds; people with similar worries and similar hopes; people tasting autonomy and responsibility; people with time to give, and people wanting to make the most of every minute of life. It was wonderful.

Student digs were well organised. I picked the cheapest left on the list of vacancies; sharing with three other people. Was that the choice that changed my life?



Looking back it at that first year, I can't believe how we lived in our digs. There were times I didn't dare go into the kitchen for fear that some deadly virus would have evolved in the stack of putrefying washing up. Near the end of the month, no one would go in there to cook; we ate pub snacks and take-aways. But the day before the Dead Lady came to collect the rent we all would roll up our sleeves, turn up the stereo as loud as possible and attack the mess.

The Dead Lady examined every room and counted all the plates and pans to check we hadn't pawned any. She had been so named when Lyndon, our art student, saw her red eyes bulging out from her black cloak for the first time. He had staggered quaking into the living room whimpering "dead lady" over and over again. Goodness knows what he had been smoking.

Thankfully, she did not live anywhere nearby. We had the whole upstairs floor above a dental surgery. In two years I never saw the dentist below, who was thought to be the Dead Lady's husband. The rare times I was in the house when he was working, I didn't stay long. The high-pitched whine of his drills, the groans of his victims and the acrid fumes of burning teeth were not good for study, nor for that matter, for hangovers.

On her visits, the Dead Lady also collected the pound coins we were supposed to put in the meter to have

electricity.

“Never had such stingy students,” she said, glaring at the candles we put out for her to see.

In fact Gritty had rewired the meter and the few coins we put in for her were strictly out of charity.

Gritty was a highly intellectual electronics student who bolstered his image by showing everyone how intelligent he was. I suppose that means he felt inferior on all other points. He once fell flat on his face at the end of an evening’s beer abuse and for days afterwards had picked gravel out of his oversized pores; hence his nickname. He was small, wiry and permanently cold despite the thick black woolly hat that seemed to be grafted to his head. He wore it in bed and probably in the bath too, if he ever had baths.

Lyndon on the other hand had liberated his spirit from such material needs as clothes and whenever stoned, which was most of the time, preferred to be naked. His full beard grew untended and he had wavy black hair down to his armpits. He was a massive bear with an irresistible happy smile, always talking about the cosmos. You couldn’t tell that he was five years older than the rest of us. Lyndon was studying arts at UWE, but the only art I saw him create was on the backs of beer mats. Come to think of it, I never saw *any* of the others study. They went to some lectures, but if they ever put pen to paper they must have taken pride in keeping it hidden. They passed their exams and kept their tutors happy whereas I worked like crazy and had my tutors on my back because my marks were so poor. I guess that means they were gifted and intelligent, and that well, I’m not.

I don’t know what the others saw in me since I was so often buried in books. But something about our human chemistry caused a chain reaction when the four of us were together, and we couldn’t help having fun. Our friends called us The Animals, not because we were particularly bestial, but because we acted so impulsively. We each came

out of our selves as if by implicit understanding we could neither say nor do anything wrong. It was a bit like being pleasantly drunk without the physical side affects. At the slightest excuse we would set off on crazy expeditions, knowing that we could turn the dullest situation into a happening. Of course it helped that I had the van; it was big enough in the back for us all to crash out if we were too hammered to drive home. All of us except Shagger, of course, who always found a bed to share somewhere.

Shagger invariably looked like he had stepped out of a fashion magazine. He had class even if he didn't have any money. While he didn't look like DiCaprio or Brad Pitt or anyone, Shagger had the same effect on girls. With a couple of compliments he had them eating out of his hands, and no doubt tearing their knickers off as soon as he got them alone. Strangely, his steady girlfriends were difficult and well, the word plastic comes to mind: beautiful, expensively dressed and made up, and always complaining. I suppose they were rich.



It had been Lyndon that started us crop circle hunting. He had burst into the flat one evening, his uncharacteristic excitement making his long hair fly in all directions.

"Guy's, there's one right next to us," he said jabbing a finger at a little Polaroid photo he was carrying. "It appeared last night. We've gotta go and see!"

I had already heard of crop circles – mystical flattened patches in wheat fields that no one could explain – and had dismissed them as New Age stuff. But when I saw Lyndon's photo I started tingling all over. The wheat was carefully flattened to make a clear pattern, a design that couldn't be an accident of nature.

"I've got more," Lyndon said as he dived into his room. He emerged brandishing some newspaper clippings he had kept showing photos of other recent circles. The spark of

interest ignited the most volatile part of my imagination.

"These aren't circles," I cried. "They're *symbols!*"

"Uh oh," said Shagger shaking his head. "*Two* excited people..."

"Means we'd better go take a look!" finished Gritty getting up.

My wonder was so intense it felt like an explosion in my chest and head. For a moment it seemed as though I were looking down on the world from a dizzying height. At the time I put these symptoms down to advanced hypoglycaemia and resolved to buy a Mars bar. I was the last person on Earth to pay attention to my feelings.

"Come on Matt!" cried Lyndon, already clattering down the iron staircase with the others.



Despite Lyndon's advice to "fuck the farmer", we stopped to ask permission at the enormous stone cottage beside the track to the field. Shagger was born for this sort of task.

"Give me two minutes," he said before sauntering up to the path to the front door.

Five minutes later he leaned into the van window.

"You'd better keep your head down Lyndon before he shoots you!" he said. "Boy is he pissed off with having hippies trample all over his farm. Reckons it's cost him over three grand's worth of crop damage. It's OK though, you can go. I'll stay here and sweet talk him."

He turned back to the house.

"Oh yeah? What's she like then?" called Gritty.

"Buxom," said Shagger with a laugh.

From the gate at the edge of the field a well-trampled rut in the wheat wended to the middle where we could see there were larger areas of disturbance.

"People haven't been bothered to go along the tram lines," said Lyndon. "No wonder the farmer's pissed off."

"Tram lines?" I asked.

"The parallel tracks the tractors use for spraying. You can walk along them without doing any damage."

"Come on before the sun sets," said Gritty, plunging along the muddy rut.

With a backward look for the farmer, we followed.

Close up, the circle was far less interesting than those in the photographs. It was hard to imagine that the flattened wheat made a picture.

"Wow!" Lyndon was in his element. "Look at it man, it's incredible!"

It still looked like a patch of flattened wheat to me.

Lyndon advanced into the circle.

"Can't you feel it?" he whispered. "This place is electric!"

"Electric how?" asked Gritty, raising his eyes to the heavens. "Static or magnetic?"

"It's got magnetism, man. It's like a cosmic vortex."

"We'll soon check that out," said Gritty, rummaging in the pockets of his parker.

I laughed at sight of Lyndon spinning in the centre of the circle with his arms outstretched.

"Beam him up Scotty!" I cried into my imaginary walkie-talkie.

The place *did* feel a little eerie, but that was probably because I was expecting the farmer's shotgun to go off any second. The flattened wheat was surprisingly neat and level, following a single clockwise movement, spiralling in slightly towards the centre. The edges, starkly highlighted by the disappearing sun, made the field look like a solid mass that had had the circle routed out of it. Other parts of the pattern led off from our circle but it was impossible to see the design as a whole from ground level.

Gritty cleared his throat noisily, something he only did to announce cataclysms, like the time when the Dead Lady had arrived a day early to collect the rent.

"Guys, you should see this," was all he said.

We hurried over to join him at the edge the circle where he was studying something in the palm of his hand. It was a small walker's compass made of transparent plastic.

"You found a compass?" said Lyndon, clearly disappointed.

"Nah, mine. You should never go anywhere without a compass. Watch."

Gritty took a couple of steps along the rut we had come along and sighted across the compass. Then he moved slowly back into the circle.

"See?" he said.

"See what?" I asked.

"The needle moves." He repeated the process. "Look, out here it's aligned with north while I fix the top of that hill, and in here it's fourteen degrees off to the east."

Lyndon and I looked closely at the compass.

"Fourteen degrees?" I asked.

"Here. Over the other side it's nearer eleven degrees off. And look..." Gritty crouched down to hold the compass at ground level. "Here it's only eight degrees off."

"And what happens in the middle?" asked Lyndon.

"When I first looked it seemed to spin the needle, but now it just shows north where it should be."

Lyndon and I flanked Gritty as he paced around the circle, staring at the compass needle in the fading light.

"So you were right, Lyndon," I said. "There is a magnetic field in the circle."

"Idiot. There's a magnetic field all over the Earth!" said Gritty. "The circle happens to be on a spot where there's some disturbance. A big ferrous deposit probably."

"You don't mean to say you think it's a coincidence?" said Lyndon laughing.

Could there be something more to this circle than a creative human prank? I began scouting around to find evidence of how it had been made.

"Everywhere we've walked, we've left marks," I

remarked out loud. "We've crushed or broken the stalks with our feet. Mostly they're stuck down into the mud too."

"Easy. They did it when it was dry," said Gritty.

"But here where no one has walked," I continued, pointing to an area by the edge of the circle, "the stalks are intact. They're lying straight as if they had been combed. Whoever flattened them didn't walk on them afterwards."

"They used snow shoes like the Eskimos. Don't sink in," said Gritty.

Lyndon was bending down examining the untouched patch.

"Have you noticed how they've bent?" he asked. "Right over, just at the level of this bulge here. They're all the same. Bet *you* can't bend a stem like that."

Gritty immediately wanted to show us how it was done and started furiously bending the upright wheat stalks under Lyndon's bemused gaze. I looked around the circle again imagining how I would have made it. It had looked precisely circular on Lyndon's photo.

"They would need a cord tied to a stake in the middle to trace the circle," I said. "And maybe they attached the cord to something they could roll over the wheat."

"Now you're thinking!" said Gritty, giving up trying to bend stalks. "They would have used one of those plastic garden rollers with just a little water in it. Easy to carry. Wouldn't damage the wheat. It would take a solid stake though, we'll be able to see the hole."

Gritty raced off to the centre of the circle. I didn't bother following; if I had created such a mystery I wouldn't have left such an obvious mark behind.

"How do you explain the little circles then?" asked Lyndon, pointing to a completely separate circle four metres from the rim of our circle. I could see no path leading to it.

"Er, Gritty?" I said, with a wink to Lyndon.

"Pole vault," said Gritty rejoining us.

"Yes! Carrying the stake and a garden roller," I said

playing along.

“Man, why can’t you squares just admit that they levitated,” said Lyndon.

The light was too bad for any more investigation so we ambled back, this time down a tramline, inventing ever more extreme theories to explain the crop circle. At that point I don’t think that even Lyndon thought it was a supernatural phenomenon.

When we got back to the farmhouse, we found Shagger talking to a tall girl in dungarees who could be described as buxom. Judging by the way his arm enlaced her waist, things were going well.

“Back already guys? This is Jill”, said Shagger. He introduced us as his trusty investigators, made signs for us to get moving and promised Jill to meet her on Friday.

“Wurrgh, nothing like a country girl,” said Gritty as Shagger got into the van.

“You said it. She’s doing A-levels in French, Mandarin, and Japanese. No hay in *her* hair!”

Lyndon and Gritty filled Shagger in on what we had found while I drove mechanically back to the campus and my textbooks. Then I had a better idea.

“Well guys, it’s been a hard day!” I said, citing one of our code phrases.

There was a chorus of deadly serious voices agreeing that it had been a very hard day, so I pulled in at the first pub we came across. We needed some sort of compensation for being students.

Armed with fresh frothy pints of ale, we were ready to solve any mystery going. Shagger recounted what he had learned, confirming that the circle had appeared during the previous night.

“Farmer Giles there walked along the track next to the field yesterday evening at about seven o’clock, and he saw nothing. It was the farm hands bringing the cows in at six this morning were the first to see it. One of them said that

returning late last night from this very pub, he saw strange lights in the sky."

"Bet he always sees strange lights in the sky when he's staggering back from the pub," said Gritty.

"What I can't swallow is why extraterrestrials capable of coming here would waste their time making pretty patterns in fields," I said. "Surely they've got better things to do?"

"Ah but they're not coming here," said Lyndon. "They're communicating. You said so yourself."

I suddenly became aware that the group at the table next to us were having an almost identical conversation. I caught the attention of the young woman in a multicoloured jumper who was sitting closest to me and asked her if they had been to see the crop circle.

"Yes, a pretty one isn't it?"

"Have you seen many others?"

"Oh yes, lots now," she said with a short smile. She seemed impatient to get back to her discussion.

"And who do you think is making them?" I asked quickly.

"Ah, if we knew that... But whoever they are, they're trying to send us a message," she said brightly.

I had the disagreeable sensation that she was taking the Mickey.

"So what are they saying then?"

"Oh, just: *wake up down there and stop destroying your planet!*"

"But how do you know?" I pressed. "Is someone interpreting the symbols?"

Her smile disappeared as her features seemed to harden.

"I really couldn't tell you," she said, turning away.

Somehow I was sure she *did* know. There was something strange about this girl. Her oversized hippy style woolly jumper didn't go with her neat short red hair. But it was her blue eyes that lingered in my memory. They were startlingly bright and clear, and I felt they really saw me, saw into me

even. She must have been stoned.



Of course I couldn't resist analysing the symbols used in crop circles, and with Lyndon's help began collecting all pictures we could find. Whenever we heard of a new crop circle nearby we would go and see it. Some were badly made but their designs were still interesting, and a few were breathtaking in their vastness and beauty. When we could find a vantage point on a nearby hill we would sit looking down at the amazing picture in the fields, happily sipping some compensation for our labours. If artists were creating the crop circles, we at least were an appreciative audience.

There was no shortage of ways to interpret any single circle, but some of the deductions explained in New Age articles Lyndon showed me were simply crass. I found connections between the symbology used in many circles, but nothing coherent enough to be called a language, let alone a message. For fun I wrote an article describing the symbols of the Dragon Hill rose crop circle, and showed how symbology could also be used to support three radically different interpretations. I finished it by warning against accepting the first symbolic explanation that came to mind and concluding that if any sense was to be made of crop circles, it would be the fruit of a long and profound study. I was tickled pink when the Esoteric Review published the essay, even though I supposed no one would ever read it.

I was wrong. An Oxford professor with strings of letters after her name wrote congratulating me on the quality of my analysis and asking if she could quote from it in a book she was writing. At first I thought it was a hoax, though the others totally denied being involved.

I was even more amazed when the Esoteric Review sent me a small cheque saying that it would welcome any other articles of a similar nature and quality. I wrote two more about interesting crop circles, little suspecting I was forging

myself a reputation.

Two months later I received a very official looking letter marked *On Her Majesty's Service* that I automatically presumed was a spoof.

"I know those letters," said Lyndon. "It means you've got to join the army. They need you in Serbia."

The letter cordially requested my presence at a meeting in the strictest of confidence.

"That means do not show this letter to your mates," said Gritty plucking it out of my hand.

"So which one of you wants me to go gallivanting off to..." I grabbed the letter back to look at the address, "Chipping Norton?"

"What makes you think it isn't genuine?" asked Shagger. They all looked hurt that I could possibly suspect them of concocting a hoax.



I still didn't believe it when three weeks later I was saluted through the barrier of the Department of Defence base at Chipping Norton. I drove along the line of identical single story concrete buildings till I found unit H. My rusting van looked as out of place in these perfectly ordered surroundings as I felt in my suit and new haircut. There was no enquiries office so I mooched around till I came across an adjutant something-or-other who showed me how to find the Brigadier Bryce-Jones's office.

"Come in, come in, take a seat," said the Brigadier crisply, looking at his watch as if I was late.

Being a Brigadier was not a ticket to luxury judging by the spartan office. I hadn't sat on a moulded wooden chair since leaving school. Bryce-Jones was small and round, I guessed over forty from his greying hair. It was hard to imagine him running anywhere with a gun and a pack; it looked like he was more used to lifting pints. He seemed to be struggling to keep a serious expression on his face; it

couldn't be everyday he had to deal with a long haired civilian kid in a suit. He cleared his throat.

"Now. Everything said in this room must be kept in the utmost confidence. If that presents you with the slightest problem, our interview ends now."

"Well I'd at least like to know why I'm here," I said. It had been a long drive.

"Right," he said as if the possibility had not occurred to him. "Of course."

He leaned forward resting his forearms on the desk, his hands clasped with just the two index fingers aimed at the middle of my chest, no doubt itching to blow a hole in it.

"Questions have been asked at the highest levels about the crop circle phenomena and we have to find answers. Part of the investigation now concerns the meaning of the patterns."

The crop circles! So like it or not, the government was taking them seriously.

"But why have you asked *me* to come? I don't really know anything about them. There must be hundreds of people better qualified."

The Brigadier's face twisted with distaste.

"We are supposed to decipher any *eventual* message the circles might contain. Several authorities recommended you. Apparently your research into crop circle symbols is without peer."

"Really? I've just written a few articles."

"We also prefer a degree of impartiality. Many specialists are devoutly religious or astrologists or whatnot."

"I see."

I saw that he hadn't been able to find anyone else.

"And ah, it is not to everyone's taste to keep the findings of their research secret," continued the Brigadier. "Or to work under military control."

"What does that mean?"

"You will be required to sign the Official Secrets Act."

This group is officially a secret British army unit, under my command. Part of the military hierarchy.”

Good grief, Lyndon had been right; I *was* being drafted.

“Of course,” continued the Brigadier, “as you are a civilian consultant we don’t require you to wear uniform, ha ha. I imagine your part can be done from home with occasional meetings to brief us on your findings. You will be paid a level two consultancy fee on a monthly basis.”

He leaned back in his chair and looked at me expectantly.

“So, are you in?”



That was how I definitively wrecked my chances of getting a maths degree. The Brigadier had made me read all eleven pages of the official secrets act before filling out two enormous forms, which he assured me would be checked in the smallest detail. Then, he proceeded to brief me on the forthcoming briefing phase where I would meet the rest of the ‘unit’.

“The unit was formed nine months ago in order to solve the crop circle mystery and catch the culprits. It consists of four trustworthy scientists who will fill you in on their progress. Their findings are controversial. Their last report concluded that interpretation of the designs could help understand who was designing them. That is where you come in.

“The unit has only a small budget allocation, but so far this has proved sufficient for their detection vehicle and equipment. I don’t expect you’ll need more than a fax machine and a few pencils. You address all requisitions to me using this form. Send three copies.”

He handed me several sheets of paper, jabbing a finger at the one on top.

“That’s the address for your rendezvous next month. And the telephone number of Ms Smart, who coordinates the other scientists. She’s your contact in case of problems or

questions.”

He leaned forward again, this time pointing his double-barrelled fingers between my eyes.

“I cannot over emphasise that strict secrecy is essential. If the press ever get a sniff that we are taking these hoaxes seriously we’ll never hear the end of it. The consequences for the nation could be grave. Tell nobody. Not your mother, not your girlfriend; nobody.”



3 The Unit

“So seriously, I’d be grateful if you’d keep your mouths shut!” I said after recounting my meeting to the others.

“On Her Majesty’s Secret Service,” boomed Shagger.
“Matt Lancing, double oh zero. Licensed to thrill!”

He did a somersault over the settee and aimed an imaginary gun at us, much as the Brigadier had done. In contrast Lyndon was genuinely distressed.

“You’re *crazy* Matt!” he said. “Now you’ve signed they can make you do anything. What if you disagree with what they’re doing? Or uncover something that you just can’t keep secret? They’ll shoot you man! I just can’t believe you’d work for the military!”

“Come off it, I’m just a consultant,” I said, trying to sound convinced. “Really, it’s perfect! They want me to do what I love doing, and they’re going to pay me and feed me

the pictures to figure out. It's like a dream come true."

"Yeah, and we're gonna get a free fax machine!" Gritty pointed out. "And UFO detection equipment. I'd like to see that. What's this unit called?"

"He just called it the Unit. I'm not sure it has a name."

"How much are you getting paid?" Shagger asked.

"Well, a level two consultancy fee, that must be... Um, I don't know," I admitted. "I'll ask at the briefing."



The address that the Brigadier had given me turned out to be a two up two down terraced house on the outskirts of Bristol. Number 10. A numerologist would reduce 10 by adding 1 and 0 to give 1, the beginning of a new cycle. On tarot cards, 10 is associated with the Wheel of Fortune, a scenario showing three strange characters around a cartwheel and symbolising acceptance of the changes that life can bring. But at that stage I was unable to see any new cycles or changes coming up.

The door was opened by a tall man with narrow rectangular glasses and a carefully clipped black beard covering just his chin. He smiled and opened his arms as if someone had just offered him a present.

"Hello, hello! You must be Mathew. I'm Ian Ledbetter. Come in, come in! *Plus on est de fous, plus on rie*, not so? Come and meet the others. Ember's late as usual."

I followed him to a living room. The neat black and chrome rectangles of the furniture reminded me of my hosts face, and I wondered whether we were meeting in his house. Two older men got to their feet as I entered, one tall with a hairless yellowish head, the other round with a shaggy grey beard and shaggy brown woollen cardigan. They wouldn't have looked out of place in a retirement home. They both hesitated as the doorbell rang again.

"That must be her now," said Ian, turning back to the front door.

I went in and introduced myself to the trustworthy scientists, determined to give a serious impression.

“Matt Lancing, symbology consultant,” I said, holding out my hand.

At that moment a young woman stepped quickly into the living room with an air of easy authority, and time stood still – for me anyway. I imagine I must have looked frozen with my hand outstretched and mouth agape while I vaguely heard introductions being given from very far away.

The word *poppy* came into my head and wouldn't go away. She was wearing a forest green business-cut jacket and knee length skirt. Her freckled face was flushed red as if she had been running, and her short hair seemed fiery red in contrast with her jacket. Her small mouth was neutral, but her high cheekbones and small girlish slightly up-turned nose seemed to smile in amusement. Her blue eyes flashed like crystals when she turned to me and I was certain that I knew this woman. I forced myself back into reality.

“Haven't we met—” I started to gabble. My mouth seemed to have trouble getting around words.

“Probably in a crop circle,” she said decisively, shaking my still outstretched hand. “Ember Smart. I'm the technician of the group. That's to say I look after the equipment and run the experiments we set up. A lot of work in the field. Also a lot of paperwork and management that the others don't have time to do. And liaison with the Brigadier. I started off as a part time consultant but it quickly became a full time job.”

“It's true, the rest of us have trouble getting away from our day jobs,” said Ian. “We would have been lost without Ember, and the Brigadier wouldn't hear of us hiring a secretary.”

With an effort I tore my eyes away from Ember and caught a soft smell of honey; perhaps her hair? Funny how the mind works: her odour reminded me of that first taste of a pint of Hook Norton, and suddenly I knew she was the girl

in the pub who hadn't wanted to talk about symbols. I felt myself beginning to freeze again because I sensed that something incredibly important was happening but I didn't have a clue what it was.

"Have you much experience with crop circles?" Ember was asking me.

"I've only visited a few that were close to my area. I'm doing a maths degree. It doesn't leave me much time to chase around the countryside."

"You're a student? And you're a symbols expert?" she said, unable to hide her disbelief.

"Apparently, though it surprised me too," I said with a chuckle.

"Your articles are lucid enough," she continued. "But I suppose you're just another dyed-in-the-wool sceptic like our Brigadier?"

Who the hell did she take me for? After all, I had come here to help. If they didn't want me that was fine: up theirs! I managed to stay polite but an edge to my voice betrayed my annoyance.

"As I understand it, it is *your* job to catch the culprits. I'm just supposed to find out what they're saying. I don't see where scepticism comes into that."

"Ah. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to judge you," said Ember with a smile that flooded the room with warmth. "We have a hard time dealing with the military. They would prefer we didn't exist, and certainly don't want us to uncover anything inexplicable."

Ian fluttered his outspread hands towards us.

"Please everyone, be seated," he said. "I will pour some drinks and we will talk about what we have been doing."

"Not for me, thanks Ian," said Ember quickly, as she flopped into an armchair. "I think that first we should fill Matt in on what's been happening over the last twenty years so he can see our work in context."

The others agreed readily and I wondered if they ever

refused Ember's propositions. Looking at me she patted the chair next to her, clearly impatient to get started.

"People have talked about strange circles appearing in fields for centuries," she said, "but reliable reports go back only to the nineteen-fifties. A few appeared in the sixties; usually just simple flattened disks and not very big. The phenomenon started to take off in the seventies with two hundred odd circles reported, growing into four hundred circles in the eighties. They were still mostly simple circles. Some had rings around them; some had smaller circles around them, usually four."

"Making a cross," I murmured.

Ember pulled a large box file out of her bag and rifled through it. She pulled out a wad of photographs and quickly showed me a few of them. They were aerial shots of green and golden fields with bright circles stamped into them.

"As you can see, nothing compared to the complexity we're getting now," she commented. "But they were getting bigger and attracting attention because of the perfection with which they were made. Circles appeared in the middle of virgin corn with no signs of how they got there, stalks flattened without being broken. Other circles were obviously man made and looked it. The enormous difference between the two is what has fed public belief in a supernatural or extraterrestrial phenomenon.

"Then in 1990 alone nearly three hundred circles appeared, as many as seven were happening per night at times. And they seemed to have meaning. Circles were connected by lines, dashes, semi-circles..."

The photos Ember leafed through reminded me of symbols I had seen carved in stone, very ancient petroglyphs from South America. Others were like the markings on airport runways; easy to imagine UFOs landing there.

"The nineties continued like that – over 2800 circles reported in all – with the designs really taking off."

Ember held up a photo showing an equilateral triangle

containing several concentric rings and a central filled circle. Lines connected the centre to each point of the triangle.

“Barbury Castle Tetrahedron,” she announced.

Centred on two points of the triangle were circles, and on the third a sort of stepped spiral. With some effort I could imagine it was a top view of a tetrahedron, a three-sided pyramid. Something about it wasn't right, but Ember was already holding up another photograph showing a heart shape with small circles attached symmetrically to it.

“A Mandelbrot set!” I said, pleased to remember the name I had learnt in a lecture only the week before.

“Yes. Apparently you need a very powerful computer to draw one,” said Ember.

“Or you just copy a photograph out of a textbook,” said Ian. “That circle was made exactly one year after an article in New Scientist asked when a complete Mandelbrot set would appear in a crop circle. Strange coincidence. It is, however, astoundingly accurate.”

Ember continued holding up photographs for a second or two each, just long enough to be frustrating.

“Just to give you an idea,” she said. “The Wheel of Dharma, 1992.”

The circle had eight symbols around its circumference and an atomic radiation symbol in the centre.

“Bishops Cannings, 1994.”

An alien-looking insect head with a scorpion's tail.

“Froxfield, 1994. It was 350 feet in diameter.”

A flower made with six intersecting circles around a seventh.

“Longwood Warren, 1995.”

Planets on concentric orbits were surrounded by a necklace of circles.

“Alton Priors, 1996. 600 feet long.”

A line of circles were interconnected by two sine waves traced entirely with half circles.

“Stonehenge, 1996. 500 feet across. 149 circles.”

I caught my breath. The aerial photograph showed a centipede turning in on itself in a spiral made entirely of circles increasing in size along the spine. These circles had others leading off each side making curved legs of the same form as the spine itself.

"It's a fractal," I said in wonder. "Each part is a repetition of the fundamental design."

Then I gasped a second time. A road divided the photograph in two, and in the field on the opposite side was the famous circle of colossal standing stones. But Stonehenge was an insignificant dwarf beside the crop circle.

"It was baptised the Julia Set," said Ember.

She leant towards me, eyes shining.

"I was one of the first people to see it. It's the circle that hooked me," she explained. "You see, I flew over that field at five-thirty in the morning and there was nothing there. Stonehenge has always fascinated me and that day I made the most of the bird's eye view. Forty-five minutes later when I drove past on the road, there was a small crowd of people looking at that crop circle, right next to Stonehenge. I couldn't believe my eyes. I cancelled all my appointments and spent the day trying to out how it had been done. I examined every square foot of the formation looking for signs that people had been there. Every circle was perfect, the wheat flattened perfectly, bent an inch from the soil. That evening the papers were full of it. The security guards on the site had seen nothing at dawn, and suddenly it was there."

"Mist on the field?" suggested the bald scientist.

"In *July*?" Ian countered.

"This *is* England," said grey hair, a big smile in his beard. "Let's face it, even a snow storm is very much more probable than extraterrestrials doing mathematical proofs in our fields."

The bald scientist turned towards me.

"We should never underestimate Man's capabilities. Or women's," he added hastily, shooting a glance at Ember.

“People with enough determination can create anything, inventing new technology if need be. To ignore the possibility is also the attitude of a sceptic.”

“Touché,” laughed Ember.

“If we were just dealing with drawings in cereal fields, I doubt whether we would be here now,” Ian explained to me. “We have been studying aspects completely beyond our understanding.”

“Let me just finish with the story of my life,” said Ember, leafing through her photographs again. “At the time, I felt I’d witnessed the most incredible event on Earth. That was, until exactly two weeks later.”

She held a black and white photograph. The slightly blurred image of a three-armed spiral lying in one of a patchwork of fields did not seem exceptional at first glance. It was clearly shot from a good altitude.

“As seen from space ; it’s a satellite image. Very useful for confirming the dates of crop circles. The Air Force used to take photos for us but they attracted far too much attention. Now I take my own photos from a micro-light. Here, this is a prettier view.”

“Holy sh—” I started. The arms of the spiral were each a Julia Set fractal made of hundreds of circles. “It must be gigantic!”

“1000 feet across, 196 circles,” said Ember. “To make it under cover of darkness would have meant positioning, plotting, tracing and flattening one circle every ninety seconds.”

“Or, with a team of twenty people,” said bald head, “each person would have to make a circle every thirty minutes. Seems more plausible.”

“Piece of cake,” said Ember, good-naturedly. “Each circle had a different touch so perhaps there were 196 people stomping the field that night. Seriously, flattening the circles is the easy part. What about plotting the position and size of each one? The geometry of each circle was as perfect as we

could measure at the time, that's to say, correct to within an inch over 1000 feet. No human error."

Ember replaced the photograph and handed me the whole file.

"All for you," she said. "Incidentally, I think we should collect as complete an archive as possible, and if the others are agreed, I'd like you to take charge of that as part of your research."

The other's nodded readily. I opened up the box fascinated by the multitude of images.

"You'll see," said Ember, "the nineties continued like that. More and more complex designs, more themes, more styles; a continuous evolution. Some designs needed so many reference points that just to plot them on paper is a day's work. Even if humans are technically capable, why would they do it? What is their motivation?"

"Attention," said grey beard.

"But they don't get any," Ian countered. "Their works do, but not the authors. They leave no trace, make no claims; as if they want us to believe that these circles are a natural phenomenon. It is the opposite of attention seeking."

"Ian's right," said Ember. "There are a few people who claim to have made circles, but when put to the test, they are not capable of creating reproductions, even in daylight. *They* are attention seekers.

"Then there are so called land artists who all claim their works. They are mostly commissioned for publicity purposes or TV shows, though a few are simply artistic. The owner of the field is paid and of course they don't bother working at night. Indeed, they often take several days to produce relatively mediocre results.

"And there *are* hundreds of circles that are obviously made by people, often quite complex ones. Occasionally they are not finished as if they ran out of time. Even the best examples have inaccuracies in the layout, and the methods used are rough. There are footprints and trails between

circles, the crops are damaged by being flattened, and so on."

"And do these circle makers claim their works?" I dared to ask.

"No," admitted Ember slowly. "At least very few."

"He has a good point," said bald-head. "They're amateurs but they obey the same rules."

"Maybe, but their works are worlds apart from the thousands of *real* circles whose precision and construction are perfect. And the real circles have other unexplainable characteristics. I'll let Ian explain what he has found."

Ian jumped to his feet and started pacing around the room.

"Well, I've been trying to get to the bottom of how the crops are bent, and it's true that there are very unusual transformations occurring inside some crop circles. However, the results are frustratingly inconsistent from one circle to another.

"Firstly, the *pulvini*, the knuckles or nodes on the stalks are often deformed. Sometimes they are bent, but most often they are swollen and elongated up to three times their normal length. Then there are expulsion cavities or blowholes in the nodes where steam has apparently exploded out of them. The best explanation I have for these anomalies is high internal heating due to brief exposure to intense high frequency electromagnetic radiation. I have been able to duplicate the effects in the laboratory but I cannot conceive any natural explanation."

My heart sank as Ian's voice had changed to an even drone. He was no longer explaining, he was lecturing as he went on.

"Secondly, the seeds. Under the microscope I have found some small but consistent anomalies in certain cell walls in the seed-heads. The most interesting experiments concern the germination of the seeds from crop circles in mature wheat and barley that show marked differences from

samples outside the circles. The plants grow with amazing vigour at anything up to five times quicker than the control samples. The seedlings all grow at exactly the same rate as if they were synchronised, and they are uncommonly strong, resisting lack of water or nutrients for much longer periods. In short, the transformed seeds are a farmers dream!

“With immature crops however, the presence of a crop circle has the opposite effect: growth rate is reduced and in some cases the seeds are sterile.”

I was fascinated. Although part of me wanted to believe humans were responsible for crop circles, here was something clearly supernatural.

“Do you have any idea what has happened to the seeds?” I asked.

“Frankly, no. I’m working on the idea of genetic modification, but the results are too damn slow in coming.” Ian said, his calm evaporating suddenly. “It’s expensive research but the *Brigadier* isn’t interested in plants. I have to wait months for each analysis. It’s as if he wants me to run a mile and then cuts off my legs! When you think of how many *billions* they spend on weapons they can’t ever use! Or their stupid exercises! Just games for impotent *cretins!*”

There was an embarrassed silence, but I was trying not to laugh. In Ian’s face, reddened and disfigured by anger, I had seen how Gritty would appear in twenty years time, once severed from his hat.

“Ian doesn’t like the Brigadier,” said Ember.

“*None* of us like the military,” added bald-head. “Except maybe you, Ember.”

“Whatever are you suggesting? The Brigadier has a certain charm, as do most children. I think his emotional development stopped at four years old or so. When you understand that, not only is it possible to like him, he is dead easy to manipulate. That’s how I’ve got our budget quadrupled already, and don’t worry Ian, I don’t intend to stop there.”

"We are controlled by children and psychopaths," Ian grumbled. "Between them, Blair and Bush will start world war three."

"Perhaps if I could fill in Mathew on my work?" proposed baldhead. "I have to go soon; I have a rehearsal in half an hour's time."

"Go ahead Stu", said Ember.

I made a mental note: Stu equals baldhead. He ran his hand over his scalp and cleared his throat.

"I am a simple statistician, charged with finding out who is making crop circles by simply correlating all the data we have. Yes, I know it sounds far fetched, but serial killers have been caught using these techniques so why not extraterrestrials?"

I chuckled politely even though to me it was second nature to use statistics to learn more about a mystery.

"Ember has already summarised crop circle frequency over the years. There was a peak in 1992 with 353 reported, but already this year it looks like we will beat that figure."

"They are seasonal, starting up in April in crops of oil seed rape and peaking in July and August as wheat fields reach maturity. By October, the action is finished."

"As for their distribution, we can say that modern crop circles were born and bred in Wiltshire and Hampshire, where they stayed with vary rare exceptions until the mid eighties. In the nineties they spread into neighbouring counties with other major outbreaks in Oxfordshire and as far a field as Scotland and Ireland. As for the rest of the world, the USA where there is no shortage of wheat fields has only had a tenth the quantity that we have here. Germany and Holland have more than that. Holland had an incredible burst of activity in '96 and '97; years that were relatively calm in the UK. Surprisingly the Czech Republic is next on the list. The rest of Europe has not really been affected."

"Further afield, circles have been reported all over the

world, but rarely more than two or three per year in any one country. The exception there is Australia where there was much more activity in the late sixties and seventies than in the rest of the world. I think in terms of complexity they were ahead of us too, at the time. It's tempting to say that all this started in Australia."

Stu looked at his watch before continuing more hurriedly.

"For all that, crop circles are now essentially an English phenomenon, still concentrated in Wiltshire, Hampshire and the Home Counties. There is a clear correlation between the position of circles and ancient historical sites. At least eighty-two percent of circles are next to or on so-called ley-lines connecting these sites. In fact, you can't move in this part of England for ruins, tumuli, standing stones, and the like, so the correspondence is not as extraordinary as it might be elsewhere. However, it is certainly not just coincidence since a random distribution would give only a twenty-four percent correspondence."

I wondered what ley-lines were, but bald-headed Stu was in full flow.

"Another surprising correspondence is geological, which Humphrey suggested."

So greybeard was Humphrey.

"Eighty seven percent of circles are on the southern English chalk beds," Stu continued. "I'll let Humphrey tell you why that's interesting. That's about my lot. I've analysed the content of circles too, which may interest you. 99% contain circles, 81% contain only circles, 49% are just one simple flattened disk. Ask Ember for the full report."

Stu stood up and came to shake my hand.

"Right, I'm off. Good luck young lad. Let me know if I can help in any way."

He hastily bade his leave of the others and fled.

"Stewart plays trombone in a brass ensemble," explained Humphrey-greybeard. "As I understand it, brass players

need at least two pints down them before their instruments will play in tune; hence his haste.”

I laughed at his unexpectedly down to earth humour, and suddenly I felt myself relax. I had been sitting up straight, stiff as plywood, trying to give my best impression for these select scientists. Of course they were just ordinary people too. At least, at times.

“So what are southern English chalk beds, er, Humphrey?” I asked.

“Ah,” he said, leaning forward. “Land containing chalk strata, which keep the water table near to the surface. It’s important since chalk is porous, and when the water table rises or falls the water that moves through the chalk generates an electric current. Not enormous but enough to create magnetic fields. And that’s where I come in. I have been studying all the land effects in and around crop circles. Electromagnetic and electrostatic disturbances, telluric currents, radiation, infra-red and anything else anyone can think of, like changes to the soil composition, humidity, colour. We have samples where the earth has been baked by a high temperature in the centre of a circle, others containing microscopic iron spheres; there’s all sorts. Lots of reports of electronic equipment failures too.”

Humphrey sat back in his chair and sighed, before continuing.

“The only thing lacking is coherence: never the same story twice. Except with the electromagnetic changes: their form is unpredictable, but they are always present in the big circles. Magnetic deviation occurs in circles over thirty-five metres in diameter. It’s usually between one and four degrees, but can be up to fifteen degrees. Sometimes it peaks in the middle, sometimes at the edges, sometimes it seems to be related to the lay of the flattened crops, sometimes to the time of day. The only thing I’m sure of is that this effect is not related to extra-terrestrial circle flatteners because I’ve measured the same thing in circles made by people. As

Stewart said, nine tenths of circles are on the chalk beds but the question is, where do they come into the equation? Do electromagnetic anomalies caused by moving water attract the circle creators, or does the fabrication process create the anomalies? Ha! If my colleagues knew I was posing such questions I would be a laughing stock."

I felt a shiver of excitement. Humphrey and the others *were* posing these questions. They couldn't explain the electromagnetic disturbances or the changes to the plants as super organised human pranks. I took the plunge.

"So if people aren't making crop circles, do you have any theories about what is?" I asked.

"Theory is rather a strong term," said Ian. "To begin with our favourite idea was that the Americans were testing the accuracy and power of their Star Wars SDI satellites. The satellites are supposed to knock out nuclear missiles with computer guided X-ray beam. It could explain both the effects on plants and the residual electromagnetism. It's a long step to imagining how bases of stalks are persuaded to bend, especially as the roots and heads show no visible signs of being heated or irradiated.

"Against is the fact that the development of these lasers was officially abandoned in 1993 and at that time they didn't yet know whether the idea could work. Even if we imagine that such a satellite was developed in secret, it cannot explain all the previous crop circles. Also, X-ray beams cannot pierce heavy cloud cover, and we know that many circles appeared under thick cloud.

"Lastly," Ian chuckled, "not even the Americans are arrogant enough to bombard tiny British fields with microwaves when they have billions of acres where they could do their tests in secret!"

"Unless they are in cahoots with our military," said Ember.

"In which case they would be unlikely to put a bunch of scientists on their trail."

"So if not the Americans...?" I asked.

"Extraterrestrials," said Ember flatly.

"Which is a non-theory," said Humphrey.

"*Extraterrestrial* is just a name for a supernatural force that we can't understand. It's the same as saying God did it."

"Not really Humph," said Ember. "Acts of God have a meaning and a purpose for the spiritual development of mankind. ET's are creatures like ourselves who are ultimately serving their own interests."

Uh oh, I thought, Ember's a happy-clappy bible basher.

"Thanks goodness we have an *expert* on the matter," said Humphrey.

"And scientifically speaking," Ember continued undeterred, "ET's must exist whereas God must not. Try telling the Brigadier that there's no difference!"

Humphrey conceded the point with a good-natured laugh.

"So, since we accept that ET's are a possible theory," said Ian, "the challenge is to prove it."

"And find out what and why they are trying to communicate," said Ember.

"Um, yes. That would be interesting," I said. I hefted the bulky box file in my lap. "It is going to take a lot of work to make sense of all this."

"And that's just a fraction of it," said Ember. "I'll be sending you photos of each new crop circle plus all the old photos I can collect from my circle watching contacts. Those who are still speaking to me, that is."

"What? Ruffled a few feathers have we?" said Humphrey.

"My report bruised a lot of masculine egos, which apparently don't like women telling them that they're wrong!" Ember turned to me. "Last year I wrote a report about the observable phenomena found in crop circles, and cast doubt on several claims commonly made by so-called specialists. I simply called for rigorous and scientific

working methods. Somehow the Daily Telegraph got hold of it and had a field day denouncing the diabolic plot of a cult of pseudo-scientists who were creating a massive hoax. I can explain till I'm blue in the face that it was not what I said in my report; people prefer to believe the worst. I lost a few friends, but that article led to me being asked to do this job. Everything has its purpose." Ember sighed. "Now I work all day for peanuts, but it *is* fascinating work."

Ah yes, the consultancy fee.

"How much—"

"Twelve hundred pounds per month since I'm now full time. You'll only get six hundred as a consultancy fee. Purely symbolic."

I goggled. Six hundred could buy an awful lot of beer. It could buy a new clutch for the van, or *Elsevier's Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*... I couldn't believe it.

"Per month?" I asked.

"Yes. Sorry, it's the best I've been able to get out of them." Ember sounded disgusted. "And when I say full time, I mean really full time. I'm often working twenty hours a day since the season started."

"Ah, the passion of youth!" said Humphrey. "We were supposed to take turns watching the fields," he explained to me, "but happily Ember adores that. We old fuddy-duddies just aren't up to that sort of all night caper."

"You watch the crop circles?" I asked.

"No," said Ember, "we watch – I watch – the fields where crop circles could form. Stewart has made a program that analyses all his data. For any particular night it gives me a list of probable sites for *attack*, as he calls it. It's based on past appearances, proximity to ley lines, the maturity of the crops and anything else he could think of. Then I pull out the maps and pick a suitable field – big, flat, not too close to houses, viewable in daylight, etcetera – and I stake it out. Statistically I have a one in forty chance of catching them at it."

"She nearly did once, but she was asleep!" said Humphrey with a laugh.

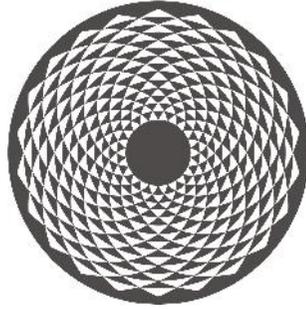
"I can't say what happened," said Ember. "I dozed off for a few minutes; it's unavoidable. But no *alarms* went off. When I next looked at the screen, there was a complete crop formation two hundred and seventy feet across. You can imagine how I felt! I had that field better protected than Fort Knox; *nothing* could have got in or over it without my knowing it."

"Yet something did," said Ian. "We're up against something that either doesn't want to be detected, or simply can't be detected with the equipment we're using."

"Wow." I said, "Some sort of UFO?"

"UFO?" snorted Ember. "In my experience, nothing is more unreliable than the UFO sightings. At crop circles there are often eyewitnesses wanting to talk about the lights they saw in the sky the night before. They've all seen flashes, globes, discs, beams, auras; but their stories never tie up. I'd like to believe they saw *something* that could help, but I can't take them seriously any more. Their need to believe what they're saying outweighs any objectivity."

"Which sums up most so-called scientists doing circle watching too," said Humphrey, turning to me. "We must never fall in love with our own theories or else we're doomed! Bear that in mind when you start seeing some sense in those symbols of yours. Keep your feet on terra firma."



4 Search

I didn't need advice about terra firma. In the real world, exams were coming up and the last thing I had time to think about was about crop circles. Even so, when Ember sent regular packets of photographs and sketches, I couldn't resist looking them over. They never failed to impress me. Each time I got used to a crop circle and stopped thinking how incredible it was, along came another to start me wondering again: how could humans possibly have made that?

The packets began to fill a cardboard box next to my table. How on earth was I going to find time to analyse even one or two of them? And how long would it be before Ember started hassling me for results?

I often found myself thinking about Ember. She was a

strange mixture of cool authority and a warm homey side that showed through when those crystal blue eyes seemed to melt with understanding. It was as if she were two different people: the efficient group leader and the girl in the pub. I would not have thought it possible that the girl in the pub could be involved with the military. But then, who was I to talk?



The exams calmed the Animals down. When we weren't in the examination halls, we spent whole days shut up in our rooms or in the library. Gritty was in a completely unsupportable state of nervous irritation. Shagger stopped talking but he didn't stop smiling; probably more to do with the nights spent with Jill than his revision.

Only Lyndon was himself. If he did revise anything, he did it sitting cross-legged inside a pyramid formed by crystals he had hung on threads from the ceiling. Mind-bogglingly repetitive music and a cloud of incense helped him to maintain contact with his astral tutor. He didn't need books.

As soon as the exams were over there were a few hasty parties and then everyone disappeared from town; going back home or off travelling. I too returned home where Dad had a job waiting for me in the shop. I'd hardly got put my bag down before he started in.

"Just because yer a student don't mean you can't work and earn a living like the rest of us," he said.

I didn't understand why at the time, but I went berserk. I'd just spent nine months working flat out with no one telling me that I had to do it. I had been surrounded by people who were enjoying life, each in their own way. In nine months I hadn't been particularly upset or angry with anyone, and here I was being treated like a naughty child. Me whole body tensed. I seemed to see myself going crimson and clenching my fists. I heard my voice shouting:

“You can stuff your fucking shop up your miserable arse ‘cos there’s no way I’m going to vegetate around here and anyway I’ve already got a better paid job in Bristol so I’m going back *home!*”

Needless to say I slammed the front door as hard as I could. The shock dislodged the photograph of the queen from her place in the hall from which she had reined over my childhood, impassively lending weight to my father’s authority.

Fleeing back to Bristol, my anger eventually subsided and I stopped overtaking every slow lorry before me. Overtaking with the van was a suicidal affair in the best conditions. The thing should have been scrapped years ago but Dad was too tight to throw anything away, let alone buy something new. I didn’t realise at the time, but subconscious guilt was perniciously infusing my mind, sapping the energy of my rebellious bid for freedom. Deep down I knew I was lucky to have the van, lucky to have parents who cared about me even if they were clumsy about it. They had been looking forward to having me home for the holidays and I’d slammed the door on them. I couldn’t believe I’d shouted like that. I hardly ever swore, even with the animals. I shivered as I realised I’d wanted to hit him, almost had.

And what was I going to do now? The Dead Lady was renting out our flat to holiday makers, so I would have to find a room somewhere; one that didn’t charge tourist prices. While the research for the unit could count as a job, I would have to find some other work too. It was not going to be the easy life of a student. I felt suddenly alone; the price of independence.

Had I believed in destiny, I would have been reassured by how events went my way. The landlord of the pub I ate dinner in gave me the number of a nearby farm with a room to let and then asked me if by any chance I didn’t want an evening job behind the bar.

I was woken the next morning at around five o’clock by

the sound of barking dogs, mooing cows and clanking machines. Country life. I was in an old outhouse that Betty-the-farmer's-wife had done up. An antique wardrobe and bed contrasted with the brand new Formica covered desk and kitchen unit. The windows looked over a wheat field and the courtyard where all of the farm's noisiest activity seemed concentrated. I didn't care; it was perfect for my first real paid job as symbologist.



I plunged into the cardboard box of Ember's photographs and started by sorting and classing them. There were some general types of circle design: purely geometrical; pictograms; graphical or artistic; and known symbols. The trouble was that most crop formations fell into more than one category. I was surprised that there weren't many pure symbols apart from simple circles.

It would not be difficult finding interpretations for the symbols in the circles, the difficulty was to find some sort of coherence in the types of symbols used before being able to decipher a message. Most formations contained a wealth of symbolic elements and even the simplest geometric drawings could have symbolic meaning hidden in the numbers and ratios used in their design.

The variety of the designs and styles was however just another brick in my fairly solid wall of scepticism. I felt the circles were experiments; marvellous but rather amateur experiments. As if someone was playing with a giant drawing tool. Would extraterrestrials capable of spanning the stars come just to play drawing in the southern English fields? It seemed far-fetched to me.

Another thing was the time factor. The evolution of crop circles had taken place over the last thirty years; a long time for ET's to be hanging around. It seemed to me more likely to be a human scale of evolution: the time to develop the interest, tools and techniques for making the circles. From

what Ember had told me, the years with most activity had been accompanied by outbreaks of interest in the media. What if the coverage in the media had encouraged more people to play at circle making?

Then there was the geographical aspect. Southeast England had lots of mystical sites that attracted lots of mystical people: hippies, spiritualists, new age travellers, permanent students, pseudo scientists, cults and even witches. I was sure that among them there would be plenty of people who would love making crop circles.

If ET's were the culprits, why would they work at night? Could it be something to do with the crop bending process? Could they manipulate some mechanism in the plants, like the one that makes flowers close at night? Of course humans would *have* to work under cover of darkness, otherwise they would be arrested or shot at by incensed farmers.

But then if people were making the crop circles, it posed even more questions. They would need to be an organised team, trained to be efficient and stealthy. In fact there would have to be several independent teams to be able to make up to six circles in a single night. At least six teams of dedicated circle makers who travelled to some chosen field and spent the night toiling to create something they could never talk about. It was also far fetched.

I had several stunning photograph's of the most impressive circles stuck on the walls of my room, each marked with the date and location of the circle. As I was wondering about what sort of people would get off on this sort of hoax, something went *ding* in my head. The dates! I knew there was something important about the dates, the numbers were telling me something; I could *feel* it! There was a cycle that had nothing to do with the seasons of crops. I furiously hammered the dates into a spreadsheet, converted them into ordinal numbers and looked for a common repeating cycle. At last I would have a repeating symbol that meant something. And there it was: *seven!*

I shivered with excitement. Seven is a supremely sacred number, important in a vast number of sacred teachings from all over the world. It represents beauty incarnate, perfection and creation itself. Traditionally there are seven planets, seven metals, seven colours of the rainbow, and seven centres of energy in the body. The sum of three and four symbolises the union of heaven and earth, the harmony of spiritual and material. Could that be a message? Seven is also a quarter of the lunar cycle, the number of days in the week... I felt a stabbing disappointment and groaned out loud as I had another idea. I quickly checked a few of the dates. Of course that was it. They made the crop circles at weekends; how else could they organise a big group? It was such an obvious proof that people were making crop circles that I was surprised no one had mentioned it at the meeting.

I only had Ember's phone number. Up until then I had avoided making any contact, not wanting to report how little progress I was making. But now I needed know whether Stewart had found the same pattern in the distribution of dates.

I was uncomfortable as I started to dial; it seemed to have warmed up suddenly in the room. Was I overreaching my territory in talking statistics? Ember might jump down my throat for bothering her with such a question. What else could I tell her about my work?

"Good afternoon Miss, er, Ms Smart," I began when she answered. "It's Mathew Lancing."

"Hi, Matt. I'm glad you called," Ember sounded genuinely pleased. "How are you getting on?"

Her manner put me completely at ease and I laughed.

"I was afraid you'd ask me that. I have been trying to find some sense to the style of symbols used in order to establish a reference for interpretations."

"And?"

"And there isn't one style of symbols, there are hundreds. If the circles are messages, they are messages from

hundreds of different people.”

“*People?*” she said. I had been right; I *was* overstepping the mark.

“Er, I think so, yes. You see, a single culture or movement would use symbols it lives with or inherits from its origins. Here we have an incoherent collection of symbols borrowed from all the cultures and spiritualities of the world, not to mention pure mathematics.”

“I see. And you think that is evidence that people are making crop circles.” It was an accusation not a question.

“I don’t think it can be an attempt at communication from a culture foreign to Earth.”

“And what if extraterrestrials monitored Earth to see what symbols we used and then duplicated them,” suggested Ember patiently.

“Well in that case I imagine they would first try to interpret the symbols we use and then pick those they thought would best convey their message. And then perhaps they would repeat the same symbols until they got some sort of acknowledgement out of us. I mean, I’m not an expert in communication, but I think that repetition and feedback must be essential regardless of what culture you come from. But in fact there’s hardly ever two crop circles the same.”

“You forget that before the eighties, the majority of crop circles were just simple flattened disks. They could have been repeating them for thirty or so years waiting for feedback, and now they’ve given up and have gone on to higher things.”

“Ah yes. I hadn’t thought of that,” I said. If Ember didn’t want to hear my arguments, it would be plain suicide to go on. I went on. “There is another thing... Has Stewart noticed that all the big crop circles from the last year or so have appeared on weekends?”

A second of silence before Ember said: “Weekends?”

“Yes. It’s quite a coincidence but there are not many exceptions. The latest ones you sent me were all made on a

Saturday or Sunday. I wondered whether the same pattern showed up in previous years."

"No," Ember said slowly. "No, it was the first thing he looked into. As you say it is a surprising coincidence that the photos you have match that pattern but when you get all of them you'll see that the dates are more or less random, apart from peaking in numbers in July and August."

"The summer holidays," I couldn't stop myself saying.

"The period when the crops are mature," Ember corrected, her voice emphatic as though talking to an irritating child. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a lot to do. Thanks for your call, er, Matt."

She didn't even say goodbye. I was left perplexed by her change of mood from warm interest to open scorn. It was as if I had attacked her personally. Ember was perhaps a touchy redhead, but did she need to defend the extra-terrestrials that badly?

Rebellion brewed in me. She had dismissed my weekend theory a little too easily so I decided to find out more about the past crop circles. Internet seemed the best way to start but Betty the farmers wife did not like the idea of me messing around with their telephone line. I headed into Bristol.

Internet cafés were the latest place to be. Wading through the sightseers in the city centre, I tried two that were overflowing before finding one with some computers free.

The spotty young Chinese guy at the counter said "19" without lifting his eyes from where he was snowboarding. I squeezed into a free seat between two cackling bare-bellied teenage girls who were apparently chatting to DiCaprio in person, and a kid who was noisily exterminating hundreds of soldiers.

I was astounded to get over two million results from my first search. There were whole databases devoted to crop circles, thousands of forums, and sites promoting books, calendars, tee-shirts, doormats, mugs and so on. It had not

occurred to me that people could make money out of crop circles.

I started at the top of the list and hit gold; a web site devoted to circle makers – the people who spent their nights stomping around in wheat fields. There *were* hundreds of them; their works detailed with pictures and accounts of the media interest they generated. There was even a guide showing how they made crop circles using a plank and rope. The site ridiculed anyone who thought crop circles were genuine, tore apart the books written on the subject and slated their authors. It wasn't long before the *look how clever we are* tone started irking me. It was rather childish and often plain offensive. What sort of people were they?

Apparently it had all begun with Doug and Dave, a couple of drinking chums in their sixties who had started trampling crops with planks in 1978 and claimed to have made nearly all the crop circles up until 1991. They must have been a lot fitter than they looked in their photo.

Well that was that; no need to look any further! I did anyway, unable to resist the descriptions of all the other web sites. What I found got me wondering. I visited thirty odd sites and skipped over hundreds more that were all devoted to researching crop circles and verifying their authenticity. It was clear from some pages that the authors were capable of believing in anything they wanted to, but the vast majority were serious, well produced sites with a wealth of photographs and data. The most popular circle making culprits were ET's and UFO's. Among the wackier theories were whirlwinds, plasma vortices, orgone energy and Nephilim giants. I could have spent hours surfing the web sites devoted to these phenomena, but I quickly saw that I wouldn't be much wiser for it.

There were millions of web pages devoted to crop circles and only one site for the circle makers. Could so many gullible people exist? What was it about crop circles that created such a fascination?

I reasoned that there should be just as many sites proving that humans make crop circles, but I was wrong. What I found were sites denouncing the arguments and techniques used by the sceptics who claimed that crop circles were hoaxes. The Doug and Dave duo were critically crucified. If their claims were true, they would have had to make up to six crop circles per night in locations all over England with no outside help and without their wives noticing their nocturnal absences. Even more damning were the demonstrations of their techniques before the press. They took hours in broad daylight to produce a small untidy circle. It was simply unimaginable that they could have made something like the Stonehenge Julia Set.

The official looking site of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal surprised me by their complete lack of any scientific investigations. They seemed as fanatical in their desire to deny the existence of the paranormal as battiest crop circle fanatics were to claim the opposite. The quality of their reasoning was of the same low level. They demonstrated how easy it was to fake a crop circle, but to me their efforts looked no better than those of Doug and Dave. Why didn't one of these sceptics duplicate one of the large complex crop circles at night and have done with it?

I recognised some of the peoples names cited – I had already seen them on the circlemakers site. I found them again in a list of supposedly subversive circle making groups organised and sponsored by MI5, MI6, the CIA, the Vatican and the Trilateral Commission. And these people judged anyone who believed in crop circles to be mentally deficient. I laughed hollowly; they were taking me for a complete idiot!

No wonder Ember disliked sceptics. A feeling of sympathy for her made warm inside and left me smiling at the computer screen. I resolved to keep a more open mind in future.

I had started by browsing the circlemakers site convinced in advance that they were creating the crop circles. When I returned, I realised that the crop circles in the hundreds of photos and reports are not actually claimed by anyone, not even by pseudonym. These people wanted me to assume that because the photos were on their site, they had made the circles; I had jumped wholeheartedly through their hoop. It irked me to think that somewhere someone was getting a buzz out making a fool of me.

Were the sceptics just seeking attention or are they in fact afraid of the possibility that something else exists beyond their understanding? One thing was certain; no one was indifferent to crop circles. I sat mesmerised by the image of a four petalled flower embossed in silver on a field of dark green oil seed rape. Each petal was a three-quarter circle starting in the centre and tracing a path anti-clockwise until it reached the next petal. The flower seemed to be moving, turning clockwise, thrusting like a ship's propeller. To me it was a curved version of the swastika, an ancient symbol of energy in motion.

Energy in motion... I let out the breath I had been holding, making my head ring. There must be tens, if not hundreds of millions of people who visited these web sites. Who or whatever was making crop circles had awakened the interest of millions of people. If only for that reason it was a phenomenon worth serious investigation. For the first time I understood why Ember and her team thought that the solution lay in the symbols used. Could they be communicating to us?

I became aware of the hubbub around me and, shoving myself away from the Internet terminal, leapt to my feet. Time to get back to work. I was striding down the street when a high-pitched voice cried out behind me.

"You no pay!"

It was the spotty snowboarder.



A couple of days later, I carefully looked through the latest packet of photos that had just come from Ember. The dates on the photos were fairly evenly distributed. Perhaps the seven-day cycles I had noticed were just a coincidence as Ember said. I felt vaguely relieved that the mystery could go on.

At the top of the pile were several curious designs different to anything I had seen before. They used graphical effects giving the illusion of three-dimensional shapes standing out from the fields. One of these used 1600 perfectly sized and spaced tufts to giving different shades to four cubes. It was hard to image people with planks getting that sort of precision. While the designs looked impressive, I couldn't think of much to say about them from a symbolic point of view. They looked like exercises in graphic design to me.

Much more interesting was a six-sided sun or lotus flower with one flame or petal corrupted. On one side of the faulty petal, the correct outline had been traced making it obvious that a mistake had been made. The error had been turned into different design: a circle at the heart of a flame. The whole image could now be of the earth burning as it fell into the huge flaming sun. Even if it was the result a mistake, I found the symbolism striking. A more subtle interpretation using Hindu philosophy would be that the lotus was prevented from reaching the perfection it symbolises by a human mistake. A mistake leading to the burning or consumption of the earth prevents the complete unfolding of the enormous lotus.

I chuckled as I noticed that the formation had appeared on Golden Ball Hill. Ember would love this one, I was sure. I quickly typed a page of interpretation, using the word *spiritual* as often as I could.

Shortly afterwards I found another circle with a mistake. Inside the disk of flattened wheat thirty identical triangles

were left standing in a geometric pattern. The triangles formed five pointed stars or pentacles, one in the centre and five around it making a giant complex pentacle. The numbers involved swam before my eyes; if I were to go into all the possible interpretations, I would be here for a week. What caught my eye was that one of the pentacles had a triangle completely misplaced off to one side. It was odd; the triangle wasn't aligned or attached to anything else. Whoever had made the circle must have deliberately spoilt the perfection of their design.

The pentacle classically represents Man, though I'd better say *human* in my report to Ember. A spread-eagled body has its head, hands and feet at each point of the star. These points also represent the five senses and the five elements. As for what the fifth element *is*, that depends where you come from. The Chinese chose metal, the Japanese prefer void, and for centuries in the west it was the aether or quintessence. Luc Besson's film about the stunning Lilo has changed everything. Now the fifth element is love.

Thanks to thousands of horror films, the pentacle is associated with raising the devil and black magic, whereas it began as a sacred sign of the Pythagoreans symbolising the harmony of the body and the mind, and healthiness. The symbol was used to ward off illness, and then evil in general. The enclosed space inside a pentacle forms a pentagon, which is considered protected and impossible to attack. Even the chiefs of the American military wanted this magical protection for their headquarters.

A bell sounded a *ting* in my mind as if an elevator was signalling that I had arrived at the right floor. I was onto something; something I had read about the magic of pentacles; pentacles that were used for magic. I pulled down the first dictionary of esoteric symbols that came to hand and found the entry for *Pentagram* and struggled to read the painfully small text. Pentacles were used to help the invocation of magical formulas and incantations. The

pentacle had to be precisely drawn: one way for white magic; upside-down for black magic. If it was not perfectly closed or contained the slightest fault, the magic would not work. Bingo!

So to recap, I had a representation of the perfect human, the five elements of nature, and a symbol of harmony and healthiness. In fact a collection of these symbols in a big design that would have been perfect except that one pentacle is not complete. Let's suppose it is symbolic of Man. One element has been left off to one side so the magic of nature's design cannot work. The offset element was the equivalent of the right leg: Man's support or foundation, also his connection with the earth, is awry. The right leg: also a means of advancing into the future. And if we supposed the imperfection was one of the essential elements, could it be love? I decided that for Ember it *would* be love and I started typing a new report. I was getting good at this lark.

I was careful to stress that my readings of these circles were just one of many possible interpretations. After all I had got this job by criticising the sort of subjectivity I felt I was now using. But as I continued, I was surprised at how many crop circles lent themselves to this sort of interpretation. The purity of superb designs would be corrupted by an apparent error, and these faults were symbolic of all manner things like fire, greed, arrogance, poison and blindness. I wrote some great reports but I began to think my interpretations were good ones. I was getting familiar with the symbols being used. While the author's knowledge of symbols was not vast, he, she or it still composed messages with designs inside circles and drawn mostly with circles. That was quite a feat! Of course, whether you draw with a compass or a rope and a plank, circles have the advantage of being easy to draw.



I was typing up a report when Betty poked her head

round the door and said there was a young woman to see me. I hardly had the time to be puzzled before Betty's head gave way to long legged jeans, a scarlet cotton shirt and an untidy cloud of ginger hair. What was Ember doing here? Hell, I wasn't even wearing a shirt it was so hot. Was she checking up on me, or just dropping by to fire me? Boy, she was good-looking.

"Ember! Er, come in."

I hastily grabbed a shirt to cover my inadequate body while she observed me with a small amused smile, seeming as ever to see into my thoughts. My room, which I liked to keep orderly, suddenly seemed like a pigsty.

"Hello Matt. Sorry to drop by unannounced. I've been flying all over and forgot my phone. I want you to look at a circle."

I shoved a pile of photographs and books off the end of the bed so she could sit down.

"I was just writing up that last lot of photos you sent me. I think you'll find it interesting."

"Still convinced that people are at work?"

"I don't know. There is an Internet site for circlemakers—"

"Oh, those pricks! I've met them – out to get all the publicity they can." Ember grimaced in disgust. "So you *are* a confirmed sceptic."

"No! I thought the site was a sham. But I don't care who is making the crop circles; the important thing is their effect. I mean, I would like to find out how they are made for personal interest but that doesn't affect my work." I was gabbling but I couldn't stop. "The crop circles are wonderful, whoever is making them. I'm trying to understand the wonder."

Why was I laying it on so thick? Ember's radiant smile reassured me. She threw her head back and laughed with girlish glee.

"Come on Matt, I want to show you the latest circle," she said on her way out through the door. "Bring a warm

jacket.”

Understanding nothing, I unearthed a jumper and trotted outside obediently. Ember was getting behind the wheel of Volvo estate; a new expensive turbo Volvo estate, I thought, looking at my thirty-five year old van next to it.



Ember raced down the sunken lanes at a speed that had me cringing low in my seat. I had to brace myself in the corners and against her harsh braking. My van was incapable of more than forty-eight miles per hour on the flat, which to my mind was already too fast for these narrow roads. I couldn't work out whether Ember was a professional rally driver or just had the luck of the devil. Somehow, whenever we came head on to a car, she happened to be on the correct side of the road with enough room to pass. I would have liked to talk about my interpretations of corrupt crop circles but there was no way I was going to risk distracting her.

“Hold on!” said Ember just an instant before she braked violently and I was forcibly retained by my seat belt. Ahead the road was straight and empty, but the surface was gravel and dust. Any second the wheels would lock and we would spin or roll. The whole car shuddered violently and stopped dead.

“Neat,” said Ember with approval.

“What the hell?” I gasped.

“Great car,” said Ember, turning off the road onto a rutted track. “First time I've got to try out anti-lock brakes. Everyone should have them.”

The track had become two ruts along the edge of a field of tall grass. Ember didn't think it worth while slowing for potholes. I was being jolted around for no good reason that I could see. We stopped next to a huge barn made of rusting corrugated iron. This was a wild goose chase; I couldn't see any wheat, let alone a crop circle. I found my voice.

“What on earth we doing *here*? Where’s your crop circle?”

Ember laughed gaily and got out of the car.

“We’re not *there* yet, come on!”

Her girlish happiness was impossible to resist. Why did I have to be so grumpy?

I followed Ember into the barn and waited a moment for my eyes to get accustomed to the gloom. In the middle was a strange contraption of tubes and wire with a propeller at the back. An enormous triangular kite lay across it at an angle. Ember gave it a push and it rolled easily on three large wheels attached by spindly bits of pipe. She stopped when she was well clear of the barn and started slowly walking around tugging wires here and there as if she was looking for something.

“What are you going to do with that?” I asked.

“It’s a microlight,” said Ember laughing. “We’re going to fly it!”

Despite her laugh, she seemed entirely serious.

“You’re joking! You’re not telling me that thing flies?”

“Have you never seen a microlight before?”

“I’ve seen pictures. They’re like small aeroplanes. This is more like a tent that’s had an accident with a tricycle.”

“This is the simplest type of microlight; it’s like a hang-glider with a motor. I love it because there’s no cabin. Nothing between us and the ground – that’s real flying!”

“Sounds like real suicide to me,” I said, but in reality I was thrilled. I looked closer at the V-shaped wing that was supported by a single tube attached to a framework containing two bucket seats, one behind the other. Behind the back seat was a motor and fuel tank. The whole wing flopped from side when Ember moved it. Something wasn’t right.

“Shouldn’t the wing be firmly attached to the rest?” I asked. “It looks as though it’s about to break off!”

“No. That’s the beauty of these, everything hangs off this

one articulated joint, except the bar there which we use to steer with. No need for any other controls, no ailerons, no rudder, no fuselage. Couldn't be simpler."

Ember climbed into the front seat and demonstrated by pushing a bar hanging in front of her in all directions. The wing moved correspondingly and I began to understand.

"Put your jumper on and get in," said Ember before I could ask any more silly questions.

I clambered into the vacant seat and fished around for the straps of the safety harness. Ember checked me out and then handed over a pair of goggles and a headset, which crackled into life as I put it on.

"So we can talk up there—"

If she said anything else it was lost in the deafening clatter that started behind us. Then we were bumping across the uneven grass into the middle of the field. We came to a strip where the grass was shorter and Ember turned onto it. The roar of the motor increased and with it our speed, and suddenly the ground below my feet was receding. Wow, it hadn't taken more than five seconds! We were climbing in large steep circles. Watching the fields become a patchwork and the roads become ribbons, I had a curious feeling of weightlessness. I couldn't believe I was flying!

"Yee haa!" I screamed into the wind. "This is great!"

There was a click in the headset and distantly I heard Ember talking to someone on the radio in a strange language. Another click and I heard her voice clearly.

"Have you finished screaming?" she asked and laughed. "You should see yourself – if your smile gets any wider the top of your head will fall off!"

"Oh, sorry."

"Don't be, it suits you! It's better than that frown of serious concentration you normally wear. OK, we have enough altitude, we've got clearance, let's go hunting!"

I watched the countryside roll underneath like a film. The cars looked like toys. We were going faster now, the

wind was chilly against my face.

"How high are we?" I was a tourist after all.

"One thousand five hundred feet. Airspeed is sixty-one miles per hour. First crop circle at ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock? I'll be frozen by then! Anyway it'll be dark!"

"Matt, open your eyes will you? It's there in front of us just to the left."

I looked where she was pointing and eventually saw that one of the fields in the distance had something in it. As we got closer, I felt the same thrill as seeing a new photograph. Ember changed course to bring us nearer. It was a large circle containing a series of lines and curves that interfered. Lines like rays of light seemed to shine on a curved triangle in the middle that filled me with wonder. People could never make a pattern so clear and precise!

"It's a hoax," said Ember. "An ambitious one, and better done that most, but not precise enough to be the real thing. On the ground the wheat is trampled any old how. Even from here you can see it's a mess."

Looking again I could see other faults in the construction. No two sides were alike; the rays of light now seemed much less luminous. What was it about the central triangle that was so striking? There were spikes like teeth around what reminded me of the radioactivity symbol. Rows of teeth. *Jaws*, that was it! The triangle reminded me of the image of the open-mouthed shark's head used on the posters. Jaws with atomic waste between his teeth... But surely I was making that up; the image was just a pattern made with circles after all. Could these errors also have a meaning? Nothing sprang to mind.

I was still craning my neck watching the circle disappear behind us when Ember whacked me on the thigh. She was gesturing at her feet but I couldn't see anything special about them. Then I saw the crop circle beyond them.

"Good grief! It's, it's—"

"Perfect," said Ember. "*That's* a real one."

She banked and turned slowly round the field, gradually losing height.

A sunflower, an absolutely ginormous sunflower seemed to fill the field. But was it a sunflower? There were no petals, just hundreds of triangular seeds arranged in spirals around a flattened central disc. There were black specs moving in the centre trailing long shadows. People!

"It's huge," was all I could say.

"Those tramlines are probably a hundred feet apart, so that makes it about four hundred feet across. By no means a record."

As we approached I tried to figure out the geometry. The seeds lay in concentric circles, and got smaller near the middle. Then a system of spirals span out from the centre, turning in both directions. But the spirals were not just arcs of a circle; they were natural spirals, just like those of a sunflower. They opened out as they went along. How was that possible?

The spirals induced a curious effect of motion. They could be concentrating, condensing at the centre or radiating outwards. All the triangles were pointing outwards, as if exploding.

Ember was now making long passes over the circle, occasionally fiddling with a box by her feet that I deduced contained a camera. We could clearly see how uniform the flattened wheat was. The edges of the triangles looked as though they had been cut with a razor, thrown into sharp relief by the lowering sun. The air was warmer here but that couldn't explain the warmth welling inside me.

"Its just lovely! I mean, majestic... awesome. I don't know what to say," I said.

"Just enjoy it. But not for too long; I still have to get home on the fuel that's left."



On the way back Ember pointed out some of the local

sites. Burial mounds, standing stones, a flat-topped hill that was apparently man made. She often banked hard enough for me to see the ground vertically below us. I couldn't get enough. I had the same swooping feeling in my stomach that I had found after falling downstairs in dreams and finding I could fly. All too soon we were spiralling down to the strip we had taken off from. The ground seemed to arrive far too fast and suddenly there was something wrong. The microlight bucked and skewed as if it had decided to kill us. Something must have broken. Ember was wrestling with the control bar trying to stay aligned and level, but the grass was racing up and I held my breath as we seemed to plunge into it. My stomach churned as we hit and bounced and suddenly we were rolling along with hardly a bump. Ember turned towards the barn, hardly slowing down, and stopped just before the doorway. I sat stunned by the sudden silence and started breathing again. Apparently she was unmoved by our near crash landing. Maybe it was normal. She jumped down and was pushing the micro-light into the barn before I'd figured out how to undo my harness.

"Ember," I said as I eventually got down to help her. "Thanks for taking me up. It was wonderful. You've fulfilled one of my dreams. Your machine's great! You're great! Really... thanks."

"Anytime Matt," she said with a chuckle. "If you're hooked you should learn to fly. Microlight lessons are just about affordable, even for students. Now just bear with me a second."

I noticed there was a second plane in the barn. I wandered over to look while Ember made a phone call. It looked like a real aeroplane with a fuselage and a cabin, except that it was covered in a fabric you could put your finger through.

"Great," said Ember, "George has agreed to let me use his car for an hour more. I'm really abusing, but I want to get there tonight. Tomorrow it will be crawling with croppies."

“Who’s George?” I asked following her.

Ember jerked her thumb at the other aircraft.

“We’re all members of one big microlight family,” she said as she got into the car.

Ember accelerated down the track, again making no effort to slow for potholes. I made a mental note to never lend her a car.

“So what do you think about that circle?” she asked me as we turned onto the road. I forced myself to stop expecting an imminent collision. After all, we had just survived her flying machine. Perhaps she could drive a car too.

The sunflower.

“Well it’s pretty. From above it looks as if a computer had drawn it. I counted forty-four arms and fourteen concentric rings. Forty-four divided by fourteen was once thought to be the number Pi, and is still used as a good approximation. So we could say that encoded in this circle is the key to calculating the characteristics of circles.

“As a symbol, the Incas used the sunflower as an image of their sun god. There’s a Greek myth about a girl in love with Apollo who was transformed into a sunflower, daily turning her head to follow Apollo crossing the sky. The geometry reminds me a little of the flower of life, which is the basis of lots of sacred geometry. But the flower of life is made up of circles; what intrigues me about this sunflower are its spirals. I’m pretty sure we’ll find they are based on Phi, like real sunflowers.”

“Who’s Phi?”

“Ah. On the face of it Phi is just a number like the Pi of circles. If you divide a line into two parts with the proportions of one to Phi, the ratio of the larger section to the whole line is also one to Phi. It’s a bit difficult to visualise without a drawing. The Greeks of Pythagoras’s time saw examples of Phi in nature called it the Golden Section or the divine proportion. They thought it defined all the important proportions of the human body, like the height of your belly

button, and the position of your elbow. A shape with proportions based on Phi was thought to correspond to the divine plan, so it's been used in art and architecture ever since. There's a lot of doubt about whether Phi was really used to construct pyramids or to paint the Mona Lisa, but it remains a symbol of beauty and natural perfection."

I paused a moment trying to think up some way of tying all this information together. I had a hunch Ember would like a divine interpretation.

"So our sunflower circle symbolises the divine perfection of nature and describes a circle, which suggests cycles, rebirth and eternity. Powerful stuff. We could say that nature executes its perfect design in an eternal cycle. Whatever, it's the first time I've seen a crop circle that couldn't be traced with stakes and rope!"

"Mmm, you're pretty good at your symbols stuff."

Ember paused and gave me a long look. I looked out of the windscreen hoping she would follow my example. I was about to ask her to keep her eyes on the road when she resumed.

"Yet there's something missing. You describe the powerful meanings of this circle, but you don't feel them. I have the impression that you don't believe what you're telling me."

"Well of course I don't! Sun gods went out of fashion about two thousand years ago. People developed these symbols when they didn't know any better. It's folklore – superstitions for the most part. I think that when life was much harsher, people created whole systems of belief to escape from the everyday reality of wars, plagues, famine and sudden death. They wanted to find some sense I suppose. The fact that people used to put a sign on their door to protect themselves against the plague doesn't mean that we should believe in those symbols nowadays."

"But you want to."

"What?"

“The study of symbols is a passion for you. You are permanently looking for sense. A way to escape the harsh reality of life, as you put it.”

What on earth was she going on about? The only thing I wanted to escape from was the harsh reality of Dad’s shop!

Ember pulled up in a lay by behind two other cars. I followed her over a locked gate and along the side of a field. Only as we neared the middle could we make out the lighter patches of the crop circle. Plunging along the tramline that led through the heart of the circle, Ember smiled at me, her face radiating happy expectation. The vague outlines ahead of us grew as we approached; triangles spreading out on either side as far as I could see. It was awesome! The idea that people could undertake such an operation was unthinkable. What force was at work?

At the perimeter I stopped involuntarily. The wheat inside was laid down perfectly parallel to the wall of the circle. It was nothing like the other circles I had seen. There was not one stalk out of place. Did I have the right to walk on this? Ember hadn’t hesitated and was making her way to the centre. I stepped over the point where two triangles met, careful not to touch any standing stalks. Long shadows cast by the setting sun added another dimension to the forms around me. A strange sensation grew in my chest. Was I being watched? Was whatever made this watching us messing around down here? I rejoined the tramline to catch up with Ember.

The centre was a flattened circle about a hundred feet across. In the middle two people were sitting cross-legged facing the sun, their backs straight and their hands resting palms upwards on their knees. Serious new age head cases. But who am I to judge? Perhaps millions of Incas had worshipped the sun like this. Ember stood behind them, her hair ablaze in the golden light. A low humming sound resonated around us as I approached. None of this was real; time seemed to have slowed down. Each pace was a giant

floating stride over this platter of gold towards Ember: a smiling fiery poppy with her arms outstretched wide before the sun. She was beautiful! How come I hadn't noticed before? Every curve, every feature was appealing. She turned her joyous smile to me.

"Can you feel it?" she whispered taking my hand lightly in hers.

I had a sort of thrilling sensation, similar to when we had taken off in the microlight. It seemed to fill my chest as if my heart were too big. It was strange, but it was also good.

"I suppose I feel sort of, er, happy," I answered.

"You should smile more often Matt, it suits you."

The humming noise changed abruptly as one of the sun worshippers stopped chanting *Om* and turned to frown disapprovingly at us. Smothering our laughter we moved to a respectful distance to watch the last of the giant orange disc disappear behind the hills. That's a powerful symbol. The giver of warmth and life appearing and disappearing every day, no wonder the first religions chose the sun as their god. Why had people needed to find even higher gods?

I was in another world, a world where life was all. I compulsively looked at my watch as if part of me had to get back to reality. I couldn't make out the digital numbers, and pressing the illumination button, I saw why. The display was blank. Hadn't Humphrey said something about equipment failures in crop circles?

In the fading light Ember pulled up handfuls of stalks from several of the triangles and was rewarded by grunts from the sun worshippers that sounded like: " *fucking vandals!*" She labelled each bundle and gave it to me to carry. With the flattened wheat she was more careful. I couldn't see anything strange about it, but maybe exploding nodes were only visible under a microscope. We continued taking regular samples from the wheat outside the circle on the way back to the car.

My watch was working again. Reality was back in gear.



The morning after I was still surfing on the elation I had felt the previous evening. I wrote down my impressions and everything symbolic I could think of associated with sunflowers and logarithmic spirals. Then I started tidying up, classifying the stuff I wanted to keep, chucking the rest. I was going through notes I had jotted at the Internet café when I had a horrible sinking feeling. Something was wrong. I knew I'd seen something that I didn't want to see, an error in my calculations that I was going to have to find and correct. I pulled out Ember's photographs of the crop circles. My notes were just brief scribbles of the name, location and dates of the more recent circles. Shit, that was it! The dates on the corresponding photographs were different. I knew what I would find, but I pulled out my diary checked anyway. The dates in my notes fell on weekends. What was Ember playing at? Why was she deceiving *me*?