

A hilarious novel by the bestselling author of

A YEAR IN THE MERDE

STEPHEN CLARKE



**A BRIEF HISTORY
OF THE**

FUTURE

What if teleportation was really possible?
An Englishman in New York is about to find out.

About the Book

Englishman Richie Fisher and his wife Clara have won a weekend in New York in a newspaper competition.

While Clara is off blowing their spending money, Richie wanders aimlessly, chewing on a veggie-burger, ending up in a gift-shop where he finds himself standing in front of an instant transporter machine. It looks nothing like the open-plan teleporter on Captain Kirk's Starship Enterprise; in fact, it seems more like a glorified microwave oven.

Richie places his burger inside, hits the return key on the linked-up computer - and the burger disappears. But if he can teleport a half-eaten veggie-burger, what else could you do with the machine? The possibilities are endless.

Richie buys a teleporter and takes it back to England. Where the chaos begins...

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About the Author

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A Brief History of the Future

Stephen Clarke



BLACK SWAN

Introduction

Why this novel? Why now?

This novel is part of the *A Year in the Merde* story. It's not a sequel or prequel or anything like that, but it's from the same stable.

It all started in 2004, when I self-published *A Year in the Merde*, having been told that no one wanted to read yet another book about France. I didn't believe this, so I got two hundred copies of the novel printed, set up a website and waited for eager buyers to get clicking.

At that time, self-publishing was not the done thing. Those were the days B.Y. (before YouTube), when it was very rare for anything cultural to emerge from the internet and be taken seriously. For this reason, I wanted to make it look as though I wasn't self-publishing.

I therefore invented a publishing company called Red Garage Books, and wrote an angry-sounding manifesto about how annoying it was that only celebrity autobiographies ever got published, and announcing that we, a bunch of expats based in Paris, had vowed to take a risk and publish comedy novels to give people something different to read. We (it was never made clear who 'we' were) had discovered three young, unpublished writers and were giving them a chance.

So it was that on April Fool's Day 2004, Red Garage Books brought out three novels - *A Year in the Merde*, *Who Killed Beano?* and *A Brief History of the Future* (which was then known as *Beam Me Up*).

The three novels really existed, but only one of the 'young, unpublished writers' did (*moi*), and he wasn't very young, unless you were comparing him to someone like Barbara Cartland. As a publishing house, though, Red Garage Books needed a varied catalogue, so while admitting that *A Brief History of the Future* was by a certain Stephen Clarke, I decided to invent two other authors.

With *A Year in the Merde*, the solution was obvious - I claimed that the book was the real-life confessional story of a young food marketing exec called Paul West, whose only previous publications were things like *Coulis to be Kind or She Loves Jus: Why Brits Need Help Translating Menus in London these Days* and *Giving Good Head*, an analysis of the expectations of beer drinkers. (By the way, I still get people emailing me asking where they can get a copy of these two non-existent booklets.)

Who Killed Beano? was more problematic. I felt that it ought to be written by a woman. After all, only a sexist publishing house would have an all-male catalogue. The problem was that if by some miracle the novel actually started to sell, journalists might want to interview the author. Was I going to do a falsetto, or brief a female friend to play the role? No, safer if the authoress, whom I dubbed Chris Kent, was dead. The biographical note in her first and last novel therefore lamented her tragic demise in a diving accident, and claimed that her family had found the unpublished novel on her computer. And, just in case, it mentioned that they'd found a second, almost complete, book as well, which was being prepared for publication. It's what you call forward planning. Or absurd optimism.

Enemies of self-publishing usually say things along the lines of 'who are you to decide that your novel is good enough to publish?' They could have said the same thing to James Joyce, Edgar Allen Poe, Marcel Proust, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf and, if they'd wanted to be really nasty,

Beatrix Potter. And to anyone who produces their own films (hello, Tom Cruise) or dares to get up and sing one of their songs in a pub.

In fact, though, two of the Red Garage Books novels had already been OK'd by a publishing professional. In 2000, I had submitted *Who Killed Beano?* to an agent, who loved it and tried to sell it to publishers. It's a spoof murder mystery about a bunch of idiots who set up a website to do online medical diagnosis and get entangled in a huge drug company-government conspiracy. The agent didn't sell it - publishers apparently told her that they'd got their dotcom novel and didn't have room for another one.

By this time, I'd written *A Brief History of the Future*, which the agent liked even more, but this time she got answers along the lines of, OK, it's funny, but why should we publish it? Who is this author, and how old is he? *How old?* And he's still unpublished?

So as soon as the despairing agent (who is not my current agent, I should add) told me that she wasn't going to take on *A Year in the Merde* because, as mentioned above, no one wants to read about the French, I decided it was time to go it alone.

It's true, I was imposing my novels on the public, or at least trying to. And I was lying while doing it. Or rather, I was committing a piece of elaborate fiction, with pretty well everything about Red Garage Books being a fraud except the name of the author of *A Brief History of the Future*.

It was all a bit of a lark, but I'd taken it very seriously - I'd paid a friend to design the covers and do the typesetting, requested samples of books from printers, taken huge care over the jokes on the back and front covers, and made sure that every single detail counted. As the publishers of the book you're now reading can testify, I am obsessive about details, and haggle over every illustration, every word of the blurbs, every dash and

comma in the text, the size and colour of each word in the title. And they, of course, do the same - after all, if an author and the publisher don't care about the book, why should the readers?

As a self-publisher, though, I could get away with things that wouldn't be possible in 'normal' books. I invented fake endorsements from people who'd never even heard of the novels they were supposedly praising. I wrote press releases claiming that Paul West was being threatened with unemployment because his French bosses had found out what he was writing about them. In those first Red Garage Books editions even the copyright information was bursting with jokes: 'This book may not be lent, sold, hired out (are you really reading this?), teleported to other civilizations (are you sure you wouldn't prefer to start reading the novel?), etc.' In short, the self-publishing adventure was a hell of a lot of work, but as much fun as a book-loving practical joker can have without getting arrested.

Why, then, is *A Brief History of the Future* only coming out in a 'real' publisher's edition now?

Good question, even if I say so myself. Well, one answer might be that on April Fool's Day 2004, I had to make a choice. I didn't have time to promote all three books, so I picked one. As I was living in Paris, the obvious choice was *A Year in the Merde*. I sent a few copies out to Parisian journalists, did a quick tour of the English language bookshops, and after one public reading (pretending to be Paul West - I said I lied about my age but everything else was true) and one review in a French freebie newspaper, *A Year in the Merde* took off. Suddenly, my previously ignored website was generating a hundred emails a day, not only from companies keen to help me 'improve my performance' at various unspecified activities, but also from people wanting to read a new book about the French.

And the rest is *merde* - that is, it's an extension of *A Year in the Merde*. When the novel was picked up by a

'real' publisher in the summer of 2004, I was already writing the sequel *Merde Actually*, and have been producing new books ever since. But I never forgot that I had these other novels in stock, or rather in boxes in my basement. A few months ago, after finishing my latest book about France, *Paris Revealed*, I pulled out a copy of *A Brief History of the Future*, and started reading it. It needed serious updating (was the internet really so young and innocent back in 2004?), but seemed to hold its own. I still loved the gentle-giant hero Richie and his brother Martin, the least scrupulous man on the planet. I still hoped that the UK would one day have a mischievous ex-punk female Prime Minister, and I was still left wondering why it is that so many scientists spend their time and their considerable budgets trying to make workable versions of the gadgets imagined forty-odd years ago by Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*. It was fun, I thought, and I felt that old urge to impose it on the public, and give it a real go this time.

These days, I'm in a much more fortunate position than I was in 2004. Instead of 'who is this author and why should we publish his novel?', I am, officially, 'the bloke who wrote *A Year in the Merde*' and its follow-ups. This doesn't, I'm very relieved to say, mean that the publishers will accept anything. An author should never publish a book that he or she is not proud of. It would be like deliberately singing out of tune. After all, if you're lucky, one day you're going to have to stand up and read excerpts of your book to an audience. I always bear this in mind when writing. I want the audience to laugh, not snore or throw bookshop red wine at me. And I hope that you, dear reader, will one day come to a reading of *A Brief History of the Future* and decide to drink the wine rather than chucking it at the author.

All of which explains why I am very happy, and very proud, to be writing this introduction to the new edition of

A Brief History of the Future. Oh, and I'd just like to take the opportunity to thank those lovely people at Red Garage Books for giving me my first chance back in 2004. Sorry, I still have trouble remembering that it was all a fake. All, that is, except the novels themselves.

Stephen Clarke, Paris, January 2011

Why is it that whenever a new technological breakthrough is reported, someone always compares it to *Star Trek*? 'Police are developing a phaser-like stun gun' ... 'Scientists are developing a *Star Trek*-like teleporter'.

Is it just journalistic laziness? Is it an attempt to make boring technology sound sexier? Or is there something bigger going on?

In 1997, a team of scientists in Innsbruck announced that they had carried out the first-ever successful attempt at teleportation. They were, the media said, boldly going where no man had gone before.

This novel aims to answer the fundamental question: why the hell did they bother?

Shore Leave

THE SUN was melting the tarmac on the pavement or sidewalk. The taxis growled through the traffic like parched dogs. The omnipresent police cars were emblazoned with the NYPD motto 'Courtesy, Professionalism, Respect', but inside them the officers looked sweaty and dangerous.

The upshot was that Richie suddenly loved shopping.

'Hey, twenty-five per cent off all shoes. Let's have a look,' he told his surprised wife. Then, in the next street, 'Oh, yeah, those skirts are cool. Go in and try some on.'

It was only when he developed an interest in furniture - a purchase unlikely to fit into their suitcases - that his wife Clara twigged.

They were standing just inside the entrance of a swish sofa shop. It smelled of chilled leather. Richie turned his face up into the jet of ice-cold air streaming down from an overhead ventilator.

'It's the air-conditioning, isn't it?' Clara said.

'Course not,' he assured her, discreetly taking a step backwards so that the draught hit his shirtfront and freeze-dried the sweat on his stomach. 'We're in the shopping capital of the world for a long weekend. You've got to make the most of it.'

'Liar. I wondered why you kept hanging round near the door. You've just been air-conditioner-hopping across the

city!’

By the time Richie’s defensive laughter had faded she was gone, swallowed by the throng. He looked both ways along the street and finally caught sight of her, doing ten miles an hour and accelerating. He enjoyed one last second of ice-cool air and set off in pursuit.

It defied the laws of physics, he thought. She was a foot shorter than him, but she could walk fast enough to make him jog just to keep up. He still wasn’t gaining on her. She was swerving through the shopping crowds as if it was mid-December and she needed some brisk exercise to stay warm. Half a minute with no air-conditioning, and Richie was working up a mean sweat.

Richie was not a heat man. He lived in Bournemouth, England, where May had been cool and blustery, about twenty degrees cooler than here – centigrade, that is. He was too big for heat – a heavily built six foot five, an inch less than usual since he’d shaved his hair off the day before. Clara had screamed when she’d seen him emerge from the bathroom, but this city was just too hot for hair.

As he jogged along, he was heartened by seeing a woman who looked as if both buttocks were pregnant, and who had a miniature Colorado River running down her rear canyon. Then immediately demoralized by the sight of a bare-shouldered black kid whose bone-dry muscles hardly rippled as he walked. Talk about a melting pot, Richie thought, I’m draining away.

At last Clara slowed down. She was looking in the window of a shoe shop. He caught up and tapped her on the shoulder.

‘Hi, Clara, remember me?’

‘This is where I tried on those orange trainers. I’m going to buy them,’ she informed him.

‘But they were over two hundred dollars!’

‘Yes, well, the shop’s got to pay its air-conditioning bill, hasn’t it?’

From his vantage point under yet another arctic hairdryer, Richie observed Clara. She was trying on the orange trainers. They suited her, unfortunately. They went well with the slight reddish tint in her dark brown hair - a legacy of her mum's Scottish genes. They'd look good with a tan as well, dammit. The salesgirl was chirpy. Clara must have already said she'd take them.

How could she even think about buying *more* items of clothing in this heat? It was as if one of those force-fed foie gras geese had decided to nip out for a bag of chips.

Clara came over to him with a large, bright plastic bag and an equally large, bright smile.

'Why don't we take a rest from shopping now?' Richie pleaded. 'Just go and chill out for an hour? Literally chill out, I mean.'

'Fine,' Clara agreed, taking his arm and steering him towards a coffee bar. 'I need to work out which other shops I want to go back to.'

Richie's groan was drowned out by the honking of five or six cars at once. A yellow taxi had stalled, and its overheated engine was puffing out a slow cloud of steam into the shimmering, polluted air. The afternoon sun was reflecting off the stalled car's windscreen or shield right into Richie's eyes.

They turned away from the hooting and walked past a multimedia store. In its window was a large poster of William Shatner, circa 1968, advertising a box set of *Star Trek* episodes. Even Captain Kirk looked faintly worried by the atmosphere in twenty-first-century New York.

The Origins of Man

THE STRANGER seemed to arrive from nowhere.

One minute it was a blue, empty morning, the next he was standing there by the roadside.

His car was a dark grey Ford with an Iowa licence plate. But it didn't look like a local car - not enough dents.

Riverside, Iowa had seen strangers before. They came in carloads, campervanloads, in *Star Trek* fanclub minibusloads, for the annual Trekfest. Because Riverside (population 850) was, or is, or will be, the birthplace of James Tiberius Kirk, Captain of the *USS Enterprise*. Little Jimmy will be born there, so the future historians or historical futurists say, on 22 March in the year 2233, with light brown hair and hazel eyes.

Mr Muller, the owner of the Kirk Birthplace (known locally as 'the empty lot where the barber's shop used to be'), looked out of his window at the stranger, who stood almost as tall as the large model of the *USS Riverside* on its pyramidal plinth. This was a seven-foot-high plastic spacecraft, a not-quite-exact likeness of the Starship *Enterprise*. Initially, Muller had wanted to mount a bronze statue of Kirk himself, but Paramount had demanded \$40,000 for the rights. Then he'd asked permission to set up a model of the *Enterprise*. Permission refused. So *USS*

Riverside it was, with just enough differences in the spaceship's design to avoid a lawsuit.

Muller was curious. People often stopped off on their way somewhere to look the place over, even outside of Trekfest times. But this stranger was different. He wasn't taking photos. And he wasn't wearing a Captain Kirk t-shirt, Mr Spock ears, a Klingon uniform or any of the other accoutrements that the more extreme Trekkies wore on their pilgrimages to Riverside. This one was dressed in an open-necked shirt and chinos. Casually military-looking. Short-cropped grey hair and tanned face. He was standing there staring at the spaceship, a faint smile on his lips, as if he was dreaming.

But he must have been paying attention to his surroundings because he suddenly turned towards the house and caught Muller's eye. The stranger smiled at Muller and nodded.

'Good morning,' he said pleasantly when Muller went outside two minutes later. Educated accent, Muller thought. Very white smile. Expensive smile.

'Morning,' Muller said, and shook the outstretched hand.

'My name's Max, Max Blender.'

'Sam.'

'Sam Muller, right, you own Kirk's birthplace?' The stranger nodded beyond the spaceship to the empty lawn that would supposedly be the exact site of the birthplace in 2233.

'Yeah,' Muller admitted warily. It suddenly occurred to him that this might be a taxman. The car looked kind of federal in a dusty way. And Muller didn't *always* declare *every* penny of the cash payments for the Kirk Dirt (soil dug up from under the lawn) he sold for \$3 a vial. 'I don't charge people to visit, you know,' he said.

'Well, maybe you should. As things stand, I don't see this town producing a starship captain.' The stranger jabbed a

thumb over his shoulder at the sleepy rural backdrop. Well, more comatose than sleepy, he thought.

'Validated by Mr Roddenberry himself,' Muller defended his source of income.

'So I heard. Smart move on your part - you convinced him, right?'

'Yeah. I read in his book that Kirk was born in "a small town in Iowa" so I asked why not Riverside, and Mr Roddenberry said, "First come, first served."'

'A brilliant piece of entrepreneurship,' the stranger said. He smiled with warm approval at Muller. This brilliant entrepreneur looked like most of the other people Max had seen on his way into town - late middle age, stocky, with plenty of rural German blood in his veins. Only difference was, he was wearing plain urban pants and shirt instead of the regional uniform of overalls and an old baseball cap. The only blemish on this urban sophistication was that he seemed to have pyjamas for underwear.

'But I can't get over the paradox of Kirk being a fictional character,' the stranger went on, a teasing glint in his eyes. Piercing eyes, kind of icy blue. 'So how come anyone wants to visit a real birthplace?'

Muller had heard this one before. There were people, not many but they existed, who came just to mock this quasi-religious infatuation with a mere TV character. *Star Wars* fans, mostly. Or journalists.

'You a reporter?'

'Oh, no. An interested visitor.'

Ultimately, Muller didn't give a damn what the stranger thought about the Trekkies. The fact was that the *Star Trek* link had revitalized, or at least saved from immediate extinction, a town that had been dying of old age, its young people sucked away to nearby Iowa City or beyond.

'Well, anyway, Mr Roddenberry agreed that this is the place, and he's the man who should know,' Muller said.

The stranger laughed. 'True, true. And he's dead now so there's no going back.' He looked around at the small wood-and-brick houses with their low picket fences and their little statues of the Virgin Mary in the front yards. Above the trees on the skyline, he could see the steeple of the red-brick Church of the Assumption. A sleepy Catholic town that called itself a city. 'You tried to get someone to change their name to Kirk, didn't you?' he asked.

'Yeah.'

'Did it work?'

'Sure. You can go have a beer with his ancestors at the Bar Trek on Main Street.' Muller didn't say this with his usual tourist-industry enthusiasm. There was something about the stranger that prevented him. Something cynical, mocking.

'OK, so you've got the name, but the whole genetic problem remains.' The stranger suddenly looked more earnest. He pointed almost accusingly at Muller. 'James T. Kirk has to have ancestors who will produce a fearless leader of men, an ambassador for the human race. Not, with all due respect, a barman.'

Muller didn't take kindly to this literalism. 'I don't get you. You criticize people for talking about him like he was a real person and then you start doing the same.'

'Yeah, I see your point.' The stranger relaxed, smiled. 'I guess you could say that Kirk is fictional now, but he has until the twenty-third century to get real.'

'Sorry?'

'I mean, you have Kirks in Riverside now, so what's to stop a boy called James being born into their family in the twenty-third century?'

Muller was beginning to wish he'd stayed indoors. All in all, he preferred the guys with the Spock ears. 'Listen, Mister,' he replied, 'I was more worried about making it into the twenty-first century. Can you imagine this place

without the Trekkies? They're going to be our only source of income until the twenty-third century.'

The stranger nodded. 'Yes. You're right. Your problems are right here, right now. Mine are more in the future,' he said. 'That's why I'd like to buy it.'

'The spaceship?' People had tried to steal it before but not buy it. This guy looked normal but he talked crazy. 'We got postcards of it, or posters. Or you can get models of the real thing. The official licensed merchandise, I mean.'

'No, no, the actual birthplace. This.' The stranger swept his arm around to embrace the whole lawn.

'Oh. No. Sorry but it's not for sale. I make a good living from it. Well, enough to pay my taxes anyway,' he corrected himself.

The stranger examined Muller for a moment, and then he reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and brought out a long, slim piece of paper. He held it towards Muller. It was a cheque, already filled out.

Sam Muller leaned forward and squinted at the figures.

'My only conditions are that the transaction remains a secret and that you continue to run the place,' the stranger said. 'You can keep the profits.'

Muller took the cheque, turned it over, ran his finger along the stiff edges of the paper. He felt tempted to smell it, like a melon, to see if it contained everything its colour promised.

He was used to living on the fringes of fact and science fiction. He found it hard to believe this cheque was fact.

Burger to Go

THE TRIP to the café wasn't as relaxing as Richie had hoped. The iced latte was good, the seats comfortable, the air temperature perfect. But no matter how much he complimented Clara on her new shoes, she was determined to check out more shops.

'Look, I'm not trying to be awkward,' he explained. 'Shopping Fatigue is a recognized medical condition. It's all to do with testosterone levels.'

'Ah, they're what causes men to become balding, homophobic, macho slobs, aren't they?' Clara asked.

'No, that's *excess* testosterone. I'm talking about normal male levels. Most women have very low levels. That's why you're so shopping-tolerant and we men suffer if exposed to prolonged high doses.'

Clara leaned across the table to kiss him. Her hair fell forward to brush his cheeks.

'Tell you what, we'll split up. Meet back here in, say, an hour. OK?' she offered.

'You don't mind?'

'No. You've told me which skirts you liked. All I need to do is pay for everything. You've done all the hard work for me.'

Clara left to do some spending.

After buying a multi-storeyed veggieburger to go, Richie was surprised to find that he was being drawn towards another shop, too. Perhaps it was some addictive shopping drug that Americans had invented. They'd put it in Manhattan's coffee supply to give the economy a boost.

This was a gift shop. He stood in front of the window display (it was on the shady side of the street) and wondered about presents to take home for the kids. George, his four year old, would love a model taxi or a police car. Ella (six) was more difficult. She'd want something flashy. A 'gift'. He went inside.

Richie's first impression was that everything was too expensive. The shelves were packed with highly tasteful Americana. And there was a large sign - 'Thank you for NOT eating' - by the door. He slipped himself and his burger behind a display and looked around in the vague hope of finding something fun like an Oprah Winfrey Barbie or an inflatable Hillary Clinton.

He could hear the shop assistant talking to a customer.

'For only five dollars extra, we can transport the gift instantly to your giftee.'

'By courier, you mean?'

'No, I've never heard of an *instant* courier,' the salesgirl replied with a schoolma'am's exaggerated patience.

'How, then?' The customer, a woman of about forty-five, had a classy, intelligent voice that the assistant seemed to be mistaking for ditheriness.

'Let me explain ...'

Richie caught sight of some model cars a few yards away. A copmobile and some vintage-looking limousines. He went to check them out. He half-listened to the assistant's attempts to explain her delivery service as he surreptitiously munched his burger. They seemed to be discussing a 'biscotti machine' or something similarly Italian. What could Italian rusks have to do with sending presents? he wondered idly. A Mafia plot to assassinate the

President with a rusk? He stopped in mid-munch as it dawned on him what they'd actually said.

It was so improbable that he came out into the open, at risk of having his burger confiscated.

'Yes, that's it,' the assistant was saying with some relief.

She and the customer walked over to a small machine. Richie moved closer, holding his burger behind his back and feigning interest in what appeared to be a real bison-skin miniature bison. 'Guaranteed farm-raised', it said. Bonsai bison?

'Gosh, I never knew they existed,' the customer said.

'Yes, the system's only just been put in place.'

Richie was even more convinced that he had heard right. She hadn't said 'biscotti', it was 'Beam me up, Scotty'. Involuntarily he tightened his grip on the bison. It moored; he winced. The assistant shot him a disapproving glare but carried on with her sales pitch.

'It's exactly like *Star Trek*, ma'am,' the assistant explained. 'You give us the address, we beam it there.'

'Yes, but how does it work?'

This was what Richie wanted to know. He held his breath, put down the bison without a moo, and edged closer. He was still stuck somewhere in the Great Plains, feeling the smoothness of an Apache-made buckskin cellphone holder.

'I'm not exactly sure,' the assistant said. 'We've only had it a week. I guess it breaks the object down into molecules, then reassembles it.'

The customer was frowning, trying to work out whether she wanted her expensive gift broken down into molecules.

'It's fully guaranteed, ma'am. If your gift gets broken in transit or reassembles wrongly, you get a refund.'

'But you don't know how it works?' the customer asked, frowning even more doubtfully.

'No, ma'am. But I don't know how a TV works either, and the picture seems to travel OK.'

‘Yes, I suppose you’re right. Isn’t technology wonderful? To think that, in a few seconds, this could materialize in front of my sister’s eyes a thousand miles away.’

‘So do you want to try it?’

‘Oh, no, thanks, I’ll take it with me on the plane. If you could gift-wrap it for me ...’

‘Certainly.’ The assistant hid her irritation well. ‘How will you be paying?’

As the two women went off to discuss credit cards and wrapping paper, Richie homed in on the machine. He’d given up all pretence of being interested in authentic American knick-knacks. Half a tepid burger clutched in his fist, he looked down on the transporter machine, much as Stone Age man would have gazed at the first chocolate éclair.

He’d read rumours on the internet that the technology had been fine-tuned at last, and that machines might be coming on to the market soon, but he hadn’t taken them seriously. There was over-excited webchat about teleportation all the time. And there’d certainly been no announcement that the machines actually existed. This was like seeing a real live yeti.

The machine was nothing like the open-plan teleporter on the *Enterprise*. It had clearly been modelled on, or cannibalized from, a microwave oven. A metal box with a door in the front, linked up to a normal-looking computer. You could only transport things of a certain size. A football just about. A basketball was out of the question. The door was open, and all he could see inside was bare metal plating.

‘Please don’t touch that, sir.’

He looked up to see the assistant smiling nervously over at him. People often smiled nervously at him since he’d shaved his head.

‘No, sorry. I was just wondering ...’

'I'll be with you in one moment, sir.'

He turned back to the machine. The metal box bore an American maker's name that he didn't recognize: IOA Instruments. The computer was a standard make of PC. It looked as if you typed in the coordinates on the PC - must be some incredible software - then put your object in the box and hit return ... and whoosh! Or maybe not whoosh. Maybe several minutes of gradual disappearance as the molecules were dematerialized. Not that he knew anything about molecules beyond faint memories of school blackboards and floppy models made out of drinking straws. But, yuk, just imagine watching yourself disintegrate! That was probably why he'd never heard of the machine. They couldn't have tested the process on people yet.

Even so, it was amazing. A real teleporter. He worked with computers every day, but one touch of this keyboard, and—

'Sir, please ...' the assistant called out.

Richie started, and his finger hit return.

There was a faint whirring from the machine.

Richie lifted his hands in the surrender position, but it was too late. Something was happening in there. The door was shut. He must have shut it, but couldn't remember doing so.

'Excuse me, ma'am.' The assistant was on her way, looking anxious but determined, like some rookie cop who has to deal with her first gang fight.

'I'm sorry. I don't know how ...' Richie did his best to look inoffensive, but in his case it wasn't easy.

The whirring had stopped. The computer played a major chord to express its self-satisfaction at having achieved something.

'Can I just get a look at the screen, please, sir?'

Richie stepped aside, his hands still held up. He shot an 'oo-er' look across at the customer, who turned away,

exactly as you would if you were stuck on a train platform with a madman.

The assistant had called up some figures on the screen.

‘Did you put anything in the machine, sir?’

‘No, of course not. Oh!’ Richie looked around - at the counter where the machine was standing, at the floor behind him - knowing it was hopeless. ‘My burger. I must have ...’

‘A hamburger?’ The girl twitched with forced calm.

‘Veggieburger. I’m a vegetarian.’ He hoped it might make a difference.

Calvin Declines

THE PRESIDENT would be pissed.

In the American sense of the word, that is.

Max Blender had had few direct dealings with his leader before, but he suspected that the head of state would be far from happy. Far like Iowa is far from Saturn.

It would not be a good time for Blender to request vast amounts of money and logistics support for his project. Which was a damn' shame, because that's exactly what he was scheduled to do in a few hours' time.

When they weren't outright dictators, world leaders were invariably puppets, of course. You could almost see the ventriloquists' hands stuffed up the back of their shirts, controlling their mouths. At any one time, however independent he might look in public, the President of the USA had dozens of hands up his back (or his more intimate rear area). The military, the judiciary, tobacco, oil, guns and every other lobby, the farmers, the unions, Congress, the Senate, public opinion ... and, if he was lucky, a hot young intern or two, all trying to manipulate him to their advantage.

And now Blender wanted to get his own hand up there, preferably without getting it too dirty. A tricky manoeuvre, even metaphorically.

So it was a shame that the President would be pissed, and therefore keeping his metaphorical buttocks tightly clenched.

It was all a journalist's fault. Blender had read an article in that morning's *Washington Post* saying that the President was impotent. In the non-sexual sense of the word, that is. Even so, it was a potent insult. And according to the article, the President was not only impotent - despite the excitement when he got elected, he had turned out to be boring too. The headline was 'Grey Man in the White House'.

Blender's initial reaction was, so what? Maybe it wasn't a bad thing for him to be boring compared to some of his predecessors, who'd been bare-faced liars, bare-cheeked adulterers, or shot. Or more than one of those.

The writer went on to say that it was a relief to have a bore in the White House. It proved, he suggested, that real executive power was 'in the hands of people who know how to use it', and confirmed the fact that modern presidents were little more than TV news anchormen, presenting other people's decisions to the world.

The worst thing was that the article would be picked up on the morning news, and apparently the President always watched that to see whether his previous day's soundbites had made the grade.

Getting laughed at on TV was bound to inflame the President's ego. He'd try to resist the twists of the ventriloquists' fingers. His advisors wouldn't let this situation last for very long, but even if it lasted for just one meeting - Blender's meeting - it could have dire consequences.

Sitting on the morning flight from Des Moines to Washington, Blender let the newspaper fall into his lap and stared angrily out over the vast Iowan flatness. Why had the journalist picked today to unleash his unhelpful opinions on the world? Couldn't he have chosen a weekend

edition so that the President had time to forget the insults by Monday?

The article ended with a crushing quote from ex-President Calvin Coolidge: 'It is a great advantage to a president, and a major source of safety to the country, for him to know that he is not a great man.'

Not great? Shit, the President was going to be so pissed that it would ruin his after-lunch nap.