He belonged to that class of men – vaguely unprepossessing, often bald, short, fat, clever – who were unaccountably attractive to certain beautiful women. Or he believed he was, and thinking seemed to make it so. And it helped that some women believed he was a genius in need of rescue. But the Michael Beard of this time was a man of narrowed mental condition, anhedonic, monothematic, stricken. His fifth marriage was disintegrating and he should have known how to behave, how to take the long view, how to take the blame. Weren't marriages, his marriages, tidal, with one rolling out just before another rolled in? But this one was different. He did not know how to behave, long views pained him, and for once there was no blame for him to assume, as he saw it. It was his wife who was having the affair, and having it flagrantly, punitively, certainly without remorse. He was discovering in himself, among an array of emotions, intense moments of shame and longing. Patrice was seeing a builder, their builder, the one who had repointed their house, fitted their kitchen, retiled their bathroom, the very same heavy-set fellow who in a tea break had once shown Michael a photo of his mock-Tudor house, renovated and tudorised by his own hand, with a boat on a trailer under a Victorian-style lamp post on the concreted front driveway,

and space on which to erect a decommissioned red phone box. Beard was surprised to find how complicated it was to be the cuckold. Misery was not simple. Let no one say that this late in life he was immune to fresh experience.

He had it coming. His four previous wives, Maisie, Ruth, Eleanor, Karen, who all still took a distant interest in his life, would have been exultant, and he hoped they would not be told. None of his marriages had lasted more than six years and it was an achievement of sorts to have remained childless. His wives had discovered early on what a poor or frightening prospect of a father he presented and they had protected themselves and got out. He liked to think that if he had caused unhappiness, it was never for long, and it counted for something that he was still on speaking terms with all his exes.

But not with his current wife. In better times, he might have predicted for himself a manly embrace of double standards, with bouts of dangerous fury, perhaps an episode of drunken roaring in the back garden late at night, or writing off her car, and the calculated pursuit of a younger woman, a Samson-like toppling of the marital temple. Instead, he was paralysed by shame, by the extent of his humiliation. Even worse, he amazed himself with his inconvenient longing for her. These days, desire for Patrice came on him out of nowhere, like an attack of stomach cramp. He would have to sit somewhere alone and wait for it to pass. Apparently, there was a certain kind of husband who thrilled at the notion of his wife with other men. Such a man might arrange to have himself bound and gagged and locked in the bedroom wardrobe while ten feet away his better half went at it. Had Beard at last located within himself a capacity for sexual masochism? No woman had ever looked or sounded so desirable as the wife he suddenly could not have. Conspicuously, he went to Lisbon to look up an old friend, but it was a joyless three nights. He had to have his wife back, and dared not drive her away with shouting or threats or brilliant

moments of unreason. Nor was it in his nature to plead. He was frozen, he was abject, he could think of nothing else. The first time she left him a note – *Staying over at R's tonight. xx P* – did he go round to the mock-Tudor ex-council semi with the shrouded speedboat on the hard standing and a hot tub in the pint-sized back yard to mash the man's brains with his own monkey wrench? No, he watched television for five hours in his overcoat, drank two bottles of wine and tried not to think. And failed.

But thinking was all he had. When his other wives had found out about his affairs, they raged, coldly or tearfully, they insisted on long sessions into the early hours to deliver their thoughts on broken trust, and eventually their demands for a separation and all that followed. But when Patrice happened across some emails from Suzanne Reuben, a mathematician at the Humboldt University in Berlin, she became unnaturally elated. That same afternoon she moved her clothes into the guest bedroom. It was a shock when he slid the wardrobe doors open to confirm the fact. Those rows of silk and cotton dresses, he realised now, had been a luxury and a comfort, versions of herself lining up to please him. No longer. Even the hangers were gone. She smiled through dinner that night as she explained that she too intended to be 'free' and within the week she had started her affair. What was a man to do? He apologised one breakfast, told her his lapse meant nothing, made grand promises he sincerely believed he might keep. This was the closest he came to pleading. She said she did not mind what he did. This was what she was doing – and this was when she revealed the identity of her lover, the builder with the sinister name of Rodney Tarpin, seven inches taller and twenty years younger than the cuckold, whose sole reading, according to his boast, back when he was humbly grouting and bevelling for the Beards, was the sports section of a tabloid newspaper.

An early sign of Beard's distress was dysmorphia, or perhaps it was dysmorphia he was suddenly cured of.

At last, he knew himself for what he was. Catching sight of a conical pink mess in the misted full-length mirror as he came out of the shower, he wiped down the glass, stood full on and took a disbelieving look. What engines of self-persuasion had let him think for so many years that looking like this was seductive? That foolish thatch of earlobe-level hair that buttressed his baldness, the new curtain-swag of fat that hung below his armpits, the innocent stupidity of swelling in gut and rear. Once, he had been able to improve on his mirror-self by pinning back his shoulders, standing erect, tightening his abs. Now, human blubber draped his efforts. How could he possibly keep hold of a young woman as beautiful as she was? Had he honestly thought that status was enough, that his Nobel Prize would keep her in his bed? Naked, he was a disgrace, an idiot, a weakling. Even eight consecutive press-ups were beyond him. Whereas Tarpin could run up the stairs to the Beards' master bedroom holding under one arm a fifty-kilo cement sack. Fifty kilos? That was roughly Patrice's weight.

She kept him at a distance with lethal cheerfulness. These were additional insults, her sing-song hellos, the matinal recital of domestic detail and her evening whereabouts, and none of it would have mattered if he had been able to despise her a little and plan to be shot of her. Then they could have settled down to the brief, grisly dismantling of a five-year childless marriage. Of course she was punishing him, but when he suggested that, she shrugged and said that she could just as easily have said the same of him. She had merely been waiting for this opportunity, he said, and she laughed and said in that case she was grateful to him.

In his delusional state he was convinced that just as he was about to lose her he had found the perfect wife. That summer of 2000 she was wearing different clothes, she had a different look around the house – faded tight jeans, flip-flops, a ragged pink cardigan over a T-shirt, her blonde hair cut short, her pale eyes a deeper agitated blue. Her build

was slight, and now she looked like a teenager. From the empty rope-handled glossy carrier bags and tissue paper left strewn on the kitchen table for his inspection, he gathered she was buying herself new underwear for Tarpin to remove. She was thirty-four, and still kept the strawberries-and-cream look of her twenties. She did not tease or taunt or flirt with him, that at least would have been communication of a sort, but steadily perfected the bright indifference with which she intended to obliterate him.

He needed to cease needing her, but desire was not like that. He *wanted* to want her. One sultry night he lay uncovered on the bed and tried masturbating himself towards freedom. It bothered him that he could not see his genitalia unless his head was propped up on two pillows, and his fantasy was continually interrupted by Tarpin, who, like some ignorant stagehand with ladder and bucket, kept wandering onto the set. Was there another man on the planet apart from Beard attempting at this moment to pleasure himself with thoughts of his own wife just thirty feet away across the landing? The question emptied him of purpose. And it was too hot.

Friends used to tell him that Patrice resembled Marilyn Monroe, at least, from certain angles and in a certain light. He had been happy to accept this status-enhancing comparison, but he never really saw it. Now he did. She had changed. There was a new fullness in her lower lip, a promise of trouble when she lowered her gaze, and her shortened hair lay curled on her nape in a compelling, old-fashioned way. Surely, she was more beautiful than Monroe, drifting about the house and garden at weekends in a haze of blonde and pink and pale blue. What an adolescent colour scheme he had fallen for, and at his age.

He turned fifty-three that July, and naturally she ignored his birthday, then pretended in her jolly new style to remember it three days later. She gave him a kipper tie in Day-Glo mint green, telling him the style was being 'revived'.

Yes, the weekends were the worst. She would come into a room where he was, not wishing to talk, but perhaps wanting to be seen, and she would look about in mild surprise before wandering off. She was evaluating everything afresh, not only him. He would see her at the bottom of the garden under the horse chestnut, lying on the grass with the newspapers, waiting in deep shade for her evening to begin. Then she would retire to the guest room to shower, dress, apply make-up and scent. As if reading his thoughts, she was wearing her lipstick red and thick. Perhaps Rodney Tarpin was encouraging the Monroe notion – a cliché Beard was now obliged to share.

If he was still in the house when she left (he tried so hard to keep busy at night), he found it irresistible to ameliorate his longing and pain by observing her from an upstairs window as she stepped into the evening air of Belsize Park and walked up the garden path – how disloyal of the unoiled garden gate to squeak in the same old way – and climbed into her car, a small and flighty black Peugeot of wanton acceleration. She was so eager, gunning the engine as she pulled away from the kerb, that his *douleur* redoubled because he knew she knew he was watching. Then her absence hung in the summer dusk like garden bonfire smoke, an erotic charge of invisible particulates that caused him to remain in position for many pointless minutes. He was not actually mad, he kept telling himself, but he thought he was getting a taste, a bitter sip.

What impressed him was his ability to think of nothing else. When he was reading a book, when he was giving a talk, he was really thinking of her, or of her and Tarpin. It was a bad idea to be at home when she was out seeing him, but since Lisbon he had no desire to look up old girlfriends. Instead he took on a series of evening lectures about quantum field theory at the Royal Geographical Society, joined radio and TV discussions, and at occasional events filled in for colleagues who were ill. Let the philosophers of science

delude themselves to the contrary, physics was free of human taint, it described a world that would still exist if men and women and all their sorrows did not. In this conviction he was at one with Albert Einstein.

But even if he ate late with friends, he was usually home before her, and was forced to wait, whether he wanted to or not, until she returned, though nothing would happen when she did. She would go straight to her room, and he would remain in his, not wanting to meet her on the stairs in her state of post-coital somnolence. It was almost better when she stayed over at Tarpin's. Almost, but it would cost him a night's sleep.

At 2 a.m. one night in late July he was in his dressing gown on his bed listening to the radio when he heard her come in and immediately, without premeditation, enacted a scheme to make her jealous and unsure and want to come back to him. On the BBC World Service a woman was discussing village customs as they affected domestic life among Turkish Kurds, a soothing drone of cruelty, injustice and absurdity. Turning the volume down, but keeping his fingers on the knob, Beard loudly intoned a fragment of a nursery rhyme. He figured that from her room she would hear his voice, but not his words. As he finished his sentence, he turned up the volume of the woman's voice for a few seconds, which he then interrupted with a line from the lecture he had given that night, and made the woman reply at greater length. He kept this going for five minutes, his voice, then the woman's, sometimes artfully overlapping the two. The house was silent, listening, of course. He went into the bathroom, ran a tap, flushed the lavatory and laughed out loud. Patrice should know that his lover was a wit. Then he gave out a muted kind of whoop. Patrice should know he was having fun.

He did not sleep much that night. At four, after a long silence suggestive of tranquil intimacy, he opened his bedroom door while keeping up an insistent murmur, and

went down the stairs backwards, bending forward to beat out on the treads with his palms the sound of his companion's footfall, syncopated with his own. This was the kind of logical plan only a madman might embrace. After seeing his companion to the hall, saying his goodbyes between silent kisses, and closing the front door on her with a firmness that resounded through the house, he went upstairs and fell into a doze at last after six, repeating to himself softly, 'Judge me by my results.' He was up an hour later to be sure of running into Patrice before she left for work, and of letting her see how suddenly cheerful he was.

At the front door she paused, car keys in her hand, the strap of her book-crammed satchel cutting into the shoulder of her floral blouse. No one could doubt it, she looked shattered, drained, though her voice was as bright as ever. She told him that she would be inviting Rodney for dinner that evening, and that he would probably stay the night, and she would appreciate it if he, Michael, would stay clear of the kitchen.

That happened to be his day for travelling to the Centre out at Reading. Dizzy with fatigue, he began the journey staring through his smeared train window at suburban London's miraculous combination of chaos and dullness, and damning himself for his folly. His turn to listen to voices through the wall? Impossible, he would stay out somewhere. Driven from his own home by his wife's lover? Impossible, he would stay and confront him. A fight with Tarpin? Impossible, he would be stamped into the hallway parquet. Clearly, he had been in no state to take decisions or to devise schemes and from now on he must take into account his unreliable mental state and act conservatively, passively, honestly, and break no rules, do nothing extreme.

Months later he would violate every element of this resolution, but it was forgotten by the end of that day because Patrice arrived home from work without supplies (there was nothing in the fridge) and the builder did not come to dinner.

He saw her only once that night, crossing the hallway with a mug of tea in her hand, looking slumped and grey, less the movie icon, more the overworked primary-school teacher whose private life was awry. Had he been wrong to berate himself on the train, had his plan actually worked, and in her sorrow had she been forced to cancel?

Reflecting on the night before, he found it extraordinary that after a lifetime of infidelities, a night with an imaginary friend was no less exciting. For the first time in weeks he felt faintly cheerful, even whistled a show tune as he microwaved his supper, and when he saw himself in the gold-leaf sun-king mirror in the cloakroom downstairs, thought his face had lost some fat and looked purposeful, with a shadow of cheekbone visible, and was, by the light of the thirty-watt bulb, somewhat noble, a possible effect of the sugary cholesterol-lowering yoghurt drink he was forcing himself to swallow each morning. When he went to bed he kept the radio off and lay waiting with the light turned low for the remorseful little tap of her fingernails on his door.

It did not come, but he was not troubled. Let her pass a white night re-examining her life and what was meaningful, let her weigh in the scales of human worth a horny-handed Tarpin and his shrouded boat against ethereal Beard of planetary renown. The following five nights she stayed home, as far as he could tell, while he was committed to his lecture and other meetings and dinners, and when he came in, usually after midnight, he hoped his confident footfalls gave the impression to the darkened house of a man returning from a tryst.

On the sixth night, he was free to stay in, and she chose to go out, having spent longer than usual under shower and hairdryer. From his place, a small, deeply recessed window on a first-floor half-landing, he watched her go along the garden path and pause by a tall drift of vermilion hollyhocks, pause as though reluctant to leave, and put her hand out to examine a flower. She picked it, squeezing it between newly

painted nails of thumb and forefinger, held it a moment to consider, then let it drop to her feet. The summer dress, beige silk, armless, with a single pleat in the small of her back, was new, a signal he was uncertain how to read. She continued to the front gate and he thought there was heaviness in her step, or at least some slackening of her customary eagerness, and she parted from the kerb in the Peugeot at near-normal acceleration.

But he was less happy that night waiting in, confused again about his judgement, beginning to think he was right after all, his radio prank had sunk him. To help think matters through he poured a scotch and watched football. In place of dinner he ate a litre tub of strawberry ice cream and prised apart a half-kilo of pistachios. He was restless, bothered by unfocused sexual need, and coming to the conclusion that he might as well be having or resuming a real affair. He passed some time turning the pages of his address book, stared at the phone a good while, but did not pick it up.

He drank half the bottle and before eleven fell asleep fully dressed on the bed with the overhead light on, and for several seconds did not know where he was when, some hours later, he was woken by the sound of a voice downstairs. The bedside clock showed two thirty. It was Patrice talking to Tarpin, and Beard, still fortified by drink, was in the mood to have a word. He stood groggily in the centre of the bedroom, swaying a little as he tucked in his shirt. Quietly, he opened his door. All the house lights were on, and that was fine, he was already going down the stairs with no thought for the consequences. Patrice was still talking, and as he crossed the hall towards the open sitting-room door he thought that he heard her laughing or singing and that he was about to break up a little celebration.

But she was alone and crying, sitting hunched forward on the sofa with her shoes lying on their sides on the long glass coffee table. It was an unfamiliar bottled, keening sound. If she had ever cried like this for him, it had been in his absence.

He paused in the doorway and she did not see him at first. She was a sad sight. A handkerchief or tissue was twisted in her hand, her delicate shoulders were bowed and shaking, and Beard was filled with pity. He sensed that a reconciliation was at hand and that all she needed was a gentle touch, kind words, no questions, and she would fold into him and he would take her upstairs, though even in his sudden warmth of feeling, he knew he could not carry her, not even in both arms.

As he began to cross the room a floorboard creaked and she looked up. Their eyes met, but only for a second because her hands flew up to her face and covered it as she twisted away. He said her name, and she shook her head. Awkwardly, with her back to him, she got up from the sofa and, walking almost sideways, she stumbled on the polar-bear skin that tended to slide too easily on the polished wooden floor. He had come close to breaking an ankle once and had despised the rug ever since. He also disliked its leering, wide-open mouth and bared teeth yellowed by exposure to the light. They had never done anything to secure it to the floor, and there was no question of throwing it out because it was a wedding present from her father. She steadied herself, remembered to pick up her shoes and, with a free hand covering her eyes, hurried past him, flinching as he reached out to touch her arm, and beginning to cry again, more freely this time, as she ran up the stairs.

He turned off the lights in the room and lay on the sofa. Pointless to go after her when she did not want him, and it did not matter now, because he had *seen*. Too late for her hand to conceal the bruise below her right eye that spread across the top of her cheek, black fading to inflamed red at its edges, swelling under her lower lid, forcing the eye shut. He sighed aloud in resignation. It was inevitable, his duty was clear, he would have to get in his car now and drive to Cricklewood, lean on the doorbell until he had brought Tarpin from his bed, and have it out with him, right there beneath

the coach lamp, and surprise his loathed opponent with an astonishing turn of speed and purpose. With eyes narrowing, he thought it through again, lingering on the detail of his right fist bursting through the cartilage of Tarpin's nose, and then, with minor revisions, he reconsidered the scene through closed eyes, and did not stir until the following morning when he was woken by the sound of the front door closing as she left for work.

He held an honorary university post in Geneva and did no teaching there, lent his name, his title, Professor Beard, Nobel laureate, to letterheads, to institutes, signed up to international 'initiatives', sat on a Royal Commission on science funding, spoke on the radio in layman's terms about Einstein or photons or quantum mechanics, helped out with grant applications, was a consultant editor on three scholarly journals, wrote peer reviews and references, took an interest in the gossip, the politics of science, the positioning, the special pleading, the terrifying nationalism, the tweaking of colossal sums out of ignorant ministers and bureaucrats for one more particle accelerator or rented instrument space on a new satellite, appeared at giant conventions in the US – eleven thousand physicists in one place! – listened to post-docs explain their research, gave with minimal variation the same series of lectures on the calculations underpinning the Beard–Einstein Conflation that had brought him his prize, awarded prizes and medals himself, accepted honorary degrees, and gave after-dinner speeches and eulogies for retiring or about-to-be-cremated colleagues. In an inward, specialised world he was, courtesy of Stockholm, a celebrity, and he coasted from year to year, vaguely weary of himself, bereft of alternatives. All the excitement and unpredictability was in the private life. Perhaps that was enough, perhaps he had achieved all he could during one brilliant summer in his youth. One thing was certain: two decades had passed since he last sat down in silence and solitude for hours on end,

pencil and pad in hand, to do some thinking, to have an original hypothesis, play with it, pursue it, tease it into life. The occasion never arose – no, that was a weak excuse. He lacked the will, the material, he lacked the spark. He had no new ideas.

But there was a new government research establishment on the outskirts of Reading, hard against the roar of the motorway's eastbound section and downwind of a beer factory. The Centre was supposed to resemble the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colorado, near Denver, sharing its aims, but not its acreage or funding. Michael Beard was the new Centre's first head, though a senior civil servant called Jock Braby did the real work. The administrative buildings, some of whose dividing walls contained asbestos, were not new, and nor were the laboratories, whose purpose had once been to test noxious materials for the building trade. All that was new was a three-metre-high barbed-wire and concrete post fence, with regularly spaced keep-out signs, thrown up around the perimeter of the National Centre for Renewable Energy without Beard's or Braby's consent. It represented, they soon found out, seventeen per cent of the first year's budget. A sodden, twenty-acre field had been bought from a local farmer, and work to begin on drainage was in the planning stage.

Beard was not wholly sceptical about climate change. It was one in a list of issues, of looming sorrows, that comprised the background to the news, and he read about it, vaguely deplored it and expected governments to meet and take action. And of course he knew that a molecule of carbon dioxide absorbed energy in the infrared range, and that humankind was putting these molecules into the atmosphere in significant quantities. But he himself had other things to think about. And he was unimpressed by some of the wild commentary that suggested the world was in 'peril', that humankind was drifting towards calamity, when coastal cities would disappear under the waves, crops fail, and hundreds

of millions of refugees surge from one country, one continent, to another, driven by drought, floods, famine, tempests, unceasing wars for diminishing resources. There was an Old Testament ring to the forewarnings, an air of plague-of-boils and deluge-of-frogs, that suggested a deep and constant inclination, enacted over the centuries, to believe that one was always living at the end of days, that one's own demise was urgently bound up with the end of the world, and therefore made more sense, or was just a little less irrelevant. The end of the world was never pitched in the present, where it could be seen for the fantasy it was, but just around the corner, and when it did not happen, a new issue, a new date would soon emerge. The old world purified by incendiary violence, washed clean by the blood of the unsaved, that was how it had been for Christian millennial sects – death to the unbelievers! And for Soviet Communists – death to the kulaks! And for Nazis and their thousand-year fantasy – death to the Jews! And then the truly democratic contemporary equivalent, an all-out nuclear war – death to everyone! When that did not happen, and after the Soviet empire had been devoured by its internal contradictions, and in the absence of any other overwhelming concern beyond boring, intransigent global poverty, the apocalyptic tendency had conjured yet another beast.

But Beard was always on the lookout for an official role with a stipend attached. A couple of long-running sinecures had recently come to an end, and his university salary, lecture fees and media appearances were never quite sufficient. Fortunately, by the end of the century, the Blair government wished to be, or appear to be, practically rather than merely rhetorically engaged with climate change and announced a number of initiatives, one of which was the Centre, a facility for basic research in need of a mortal at its head sprinkled with Stockholm's magic dust. At the political level, a new minister had been appointed, an ambitious Mancunian with a populist's touch, proud of his city's industrial past, who told

a press conference that he would 'tap the genius' of the British people by inviting them to submit their own clean-energy ideas and drawings. In front of the cameras he promised that every submission would be answered. Braby's team – half a dozen underpaid post-doctoral physicists housed in four temporary cabins in a sea of mud – received hundreds of proposals within six weeks. Most were from lonely types working out of garden sheds, a few from start-up companies with zippy logos and 'patents pending'.

In the winter of 1999, on his weekly visits to the site, Beard would glance through the piles sorted on a makeshift table. In this avalanche of dreams were certain clear motifs. Some proposals used water as a fuel for cars, and recycled the emission – water vapour – back into the engine; some were versions of the electric motor or generator whose output exceeded the input and seemed to work from vacuum energy – the energy supposedly found in empty space – or from what Beard thought must be violations of Lenz's Law. All were variants on the perpetual-motion machine. These self-taught inventors seemed to have no awareness of the long history of their devices, or how they would, if they actually worked, destroy the entire basis of modern physics. The nation's inventors were up against the first and second laws of thermodynamics, a wall of solid lead. One of the post-docs proposed sorting the ideas according to which of the laws they violated, first, second or both.

There was another common theme. Some envelopes contained no drawings, only a letter, sometimes half a page, sometimes ten. The author regretfully explained that he – it was always a he – declined to enclose detailed plans because it was well known that government agencies had much to fear from the kind of free energy that his machine would deliver, for it would close off an important tax resource. Or the armed forces would seize on the idea, declare it top secret, then develop it for their own use. Or conventional energy providers would send round thugs to beat the inventor to a

pulp in order to maintain business supremacy. Or someone would steal the idea for himself and make his fortune. There were notorious instances of all these, the writer might add. The drawings could therefore only be seen at a certain address by an unaccompanied person from the Centre, and only with the involvement of intermediaries.

The table in 'Hut Two' consisted of five builder's planks set on trestles, supporting sixteen hundred letters and printed emails, sorted by date. To save the Minister's face, all would need an answer. Braby, a stooping, large-jawed fellow, was furious at the waste of time. Furious, but compliant. Beard was for forwarding them all to the Minister's department in London, along with a few model replies. But Braby thought he was in line for a knighthood and Mrs Braby was keen, and upsetting a minister known to be close to Number Ten could blow the gong away. So the post-docs were set to work, and the Centre's first project – designing a wind generator for city roofs – was delayed by months.

All the more time for Beard, not yet a refugee from the near-silent endgame of his fifth marriage, to study the 'geniuses', so named by the post-docs. He was drawn by the whiff of obsession, paranoia, insomnia and, above all, pathos that rose from the piles. Was he finding, he wondered, a version of himself in certain of these letters, of a parallel Michael Beard who, through drink, sex, drugs or plain misfortune, might have missed out on the disciplines of a formal education in physics and maths? Missed out, and still craved to think, tinker, contribute. Some of these men were truly clever but were required by their extravagant ambitions to reinvent the wheel, and then, one hundred and twenty years after Nikola Tesla, the induction motor, and then read inexpertly and far too hopefully into quantum field theory to find their esoteric fuel right under their noses, in the voids of the empty air of their sheds or spare bedrooms – zero-point energy.

Quantum mechanics. What a repository, a dump, of human aspiration it was, the borderland where mathematical rigour

defeated common sense, and reason and fantasy irrationally merged. Here, the mystically inclined could find whatever they required, and claim science as their proof. And for these ingenious men in their spare time, what ghostly and beautiful music it must be – *spectral asymmetry, resonances, entanglement, quantum harmonic oscillators* – beguiling ancient airs, the harmony of the spheres that might transmute a lead wall into gold, and bring into being the engine that ran on virtually nothing, on virtual particles, that emitted no harm and would power the human enterprise as well as save it. Beard was stirred by the yearnings of these lonely men. And why should he think they were lonely? It was not, or not only, condescension that made him think them so. They did not know enough, but they knew too much to have anyone to talk to. What mate waiting down the pub or in the British Legion, what hard-pressed wife with job and kids and housework, was going to follow them down these warped funnels in the space–time continuum, into the wormhole, the shortcut to a single, final answer to the global problem of energy?

Beard devised a rubric inspired by the US Patent Office which advised the geniuses that all plans for perpetual motion and 'above unity' machines should be accompanied by a working model. But none ever was. Mindful of his ambitions, Braby watched over the post-docs closely as they worked through the piles. Every submission had to be answered individually, seriously, politely. But on the planks there was nothing new, or nothing new that was useful. The revolutionary lone inventor was a fantasy of popular culture – and the Minister.

With numbing slowness the Centre began to take shape. Duckboards were laid over the mud – a huge advance – then the mud was smoothed and seeded, and by summer there were lawns with paths across them, and in time the place resembled every other boring institute in the world. The labs were refitted, and at last the temporary cabins were hauled away. The adjacent field was drained, and foundations were