

The Thousand Cuts

by Ian Watson

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The *Petrushka* restaurant was a large dim cellar, with theirs the only table occupied. Ballet Russe murals writhed dimly on the walls: exotic ghosts.

As the waiter unloaded the chilled glasses of vodka, Don Kavanagh observed, "I don't think Russian restaurants are very popular these days."

"That's why we came," Hugh Carpenter said. "Bound to get a table."

"Don't blame me," said the waiter. "I'm a Londoner, born and bred."

"Maybe there's a good sketch there," suggested Martha Vine, who was the ugly sister of the team. "You know, restaurants run by the wrong sort of people. Such as an Eskimo Curry House — Or, wait a minute, how about a slaughterhouse for vegetables. Wait, I've got it, protests at *vegetable vivisection!*"

Hugh dismissed the notion, and the waiter, with the same toss of his head. The whole sparkle of their TV show relied on cultivating a blind spot for the *obvious*.

"Not quite mad enough, darling." He cocked his head. "What's that?"

Don listened.

"A car backfiring."

"That many times?"

"More like gunfire," said Alison Samuels, shaking her impeccably corn-rowed red hair. She was beauty, to Martha's beast.

"So it's somebody gunning their engine." Hugh grinned triumphantly. "Okay, where were we?"

Soon after, sounds of crashing and breakages, a woman's scream and incoherent shouting came from the upstairs vestibule of the *Petrushka* —

"This isn't one of your practical jokes, is it, Hugh?" asked Martha anxiously. "Tape recorder upstairs? Is it?"

"No, it damn well —"

At that moment two brawny men wearing lumber jackets crowded down the stairs, thrusting the waiter, who was bleeding from the mouth, and the manager and his beige-blond receptionist ahead of them. A third man stayed up top. All three were armed with machine guns.

"Stay where you are!" The armed man's accent was southern Irish. "You three, get to a table and sit down!"

The manager, cashier and waiter did so, quickly.

The momentary silence that followed was broken by the approaching wail of a police siren.

"I take it," said Hugh loudly, "that we are all hostages in yet another bungled terrorist escapade?"

"Be quiet!"

Out of the corner of his mouth, Don murmured, "*Hush*. You're most likely to get murdered in the first few minutes. Then rapport starts building up. Just — meditate. Do nothing."

"Zen and the art of being a hostage, eh?" Hugh whispered. He sat still as a Buddhist monk.

A police loudspeaker spoke, close by —

"Don't come any nearer!" cried the upstairs man. "We have hostages in here! We'll kill them!"

Lumber jacket number two ran to the kitchen door and kicked it open —

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Hugh's tongue moved inside her mouth. His finger traced the curve of her hip.

He pulled away instantly. He was naked. So was Alison. They were on the bed in his Chelsea flat. Outside was bright with June sunlight.

Alison gazed at Hugh, wide-eyed.

"But," she managed to say.

"But we're in the *Petrushka*, Alison — I mean, correct me if I'm crazy, but I wasn't aware that I'm subject to bouts of amnesia! I mean — how the hell did we get here? I mean, you *can* tell me, can't you?"

"Hugh. I — I can't tell you anything. We're in the restaurant. Those IRA men are — at least — I suppose that's what they were. But we aren't. We're here."

Hugh sat up. Dumbly he stared at a newspaper lying on the yellow shag-piled carpet.

The headlines were: PETRUSHKA SIEGE ENDS PEACEFULLY.

He read the story, hardly understanding it. But he understood the accompanying photograph of himself with his arm wrapped round Alison's shoulders, both of them grinning and waving.

"Just look at the date! June, the *ninth*. This is next week's newspaper."

"So we're in the middle of next week." Alison began to laugh hysterically, then with deliberate irony she slapped her own cheek. "I must remember this trick next time I visit the dentist's.— Why can't either of us remember a bloody thing?"

"I wish I could remember us making love."

Alison started to dress.

"I always wanted us to get into bed," Hugh went on. "It was one of my big ambitions. I suppose it still is! We must have been celebrating our freedom. Our release.—"

"Gas," he decided suddenly. "That's it. They must have used some new kind of psychochemical to knock everybody unconscious or confuse us. This is a side effect."

He studied the newspaper more carefully.

"Doesn't say a thing about gas. It says the police talked the gunmen out. I suppose you can muzzle the press a little — no, this was all too public. The story has to be true as written."

His telephone rang.

Hugh hurried naked into the next room to take the call.

Alison was sitting at the dressing table, concentrating on braiding her hair, when he returned. He noticed how she was trembling. His own body felt hollow and his skin was covered with goose bumps, though the air was warm.

"That was Don. He — he reacted very rationally, for a clown. He's in the same fix we are. After Don hung up, I tried to phone Martha. But I can't get through. All the lines are jammed. I tried to phone the police. I even tried to call — I tried to call the goddamn talking clock. Can't get it either. Everybody is phoning to find out what the bloody time is! It isn't just us, Alison. It's got nothing specifically to do with the *Petrushka*. It's everybody."

"Where's your radio? Switch it on."

"Kitchen."

Hugh fled, still naked, and she followed his bouncing rump.

A punk rock band was singing:

— they'll bomb yer boobs!
they'll bomb yer brains!
they'll bomb yer bums!

The song faded.

The deejay said, "You've just heard the latest track from The Weasels. Hot stuff, eh? Like, *radio*-active — and that's what a radio's supposed to be: active. So I'm carrying straight on, even if you're all as confused as I am. That's right, loyal listeners, none of us here in the studio has any idea how we got here today. Or how it *got* to be today. But if you're all feeling the way I'm feeling, I've got this word of advice for you: stay cool, and carry on doing what you're doing. Keep on trucking that truck. Keep the traffic moving. Cook the lunch, Ma Jones, and don't set fire to the pan...the kids'll be home soon. And now to help you all, here comes a track from an old group, Traffic. It's called, *In a Chinese Noodle Factory* —"

Hugh turned across the dial. One station had simply gone off the air; on others only music was being broadcast.

"Try short-wave," urged Alison. "Abroad."

When he picked up a gabbled French-language broadcast from Cairo, he realized that whatever had happened, had maybe happened world-wide.

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Before the end of June, and during July and August, the effect repeated itself a dozen times. None of the subsequent "breaks" lasted as long as the first one had. Some swallowed up two or three days, and others only a few hours. But there was no sign that they were winding down.

Nor was there any conceivable explanation.

Nor could people get used to having their lives repeatedly broken at random.

For this was not simply like fainting or falling asleep. When awareness resumed...and who could promise that it would, next time?...all the world's activities were found to have flowed on as usual. Airplanes had jetted to and fro between London and New York. Contracts had been signed, and babies born. Newspapers had been printed...and the newsdealers' cry of "Read all about it!" was now an imperative, for how else could anyone find out in detail what had happened? A woman would find herself locked in a jail cell, but the police would have to consult their records before they could break the news to her that she had murdered, say, her husband...which raised strange new questions about guilt and innocence.—

Distressing it was indeed, to find oneself suddenly at the controls of a jumbo jet heading in to land at an unexpected airport, or lying in a hospital bed after a mysterious operation, or running down a street — for what reason?

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"What if we find ourselves in the middle of a nuclear war, with all the sirens wailing?" asked Alison. "I can't stand it. It's driving me mad." She poured herself another glass of gin.

"It's driving everybody mad," said Don. They were in Hugh's flat. "It's like that old Chinese torture."

"Which, the water dripping down on your skull till it wears a hole in it?"

"No, I mean the Death of a Thousand Cuts. I always wondered if the poor victims died from loss of blood. But it must have been from the accumulated shock. One painful shock after another. One, you could survive. A dozen, you could survive. But a thousand? Never! That's what'll destroy the human race. This is the Life of a Thousand Cuts."

"Good heavens," said Hugh, "you've got it." He rubbed his hands briskly. "*Cuts!* That's brilliant."

"It means we're like robots," Don went on, ignoring him. "We don't *need* consciousness. We don't need to be aware. A bird isn't aware. But that doesn't stop it from courting and raising young and migrating. Actually, it helps. No swallow with self-awareness would bother flying all the way to the tip of South Africa and back every year."

"Do you mean we've evolved too much self-awareness, and it's a dead end?" asked Alison.

"And now we're going to become robots again, and the world will run a lot more smoothly. But we won't know it. Any more than a sparrow or a mouse knows. They just *are*. Martha, you mentioned nuclear war. But have you realized how smoothly the Arms Limitation Talks are going all of a sudden?"

"That's because both sides are more scared of an accident than they've ever been."

"No, it isn't. I've been checking back. All the significant advances have occurred during breaks." Don chuckled softly. "Breakthroughs, during breaks! And remember, too, that the *Petrushka* siege ended peacefully...during a break."

"During a cut," Hugh corrected him.

"The *Petrushka* thing could so easily have ended in a bloody shoot-out, with the restaurant being stormed. But it didn't happen that way.—"

Don was driving his red Metro along the elevated section of the motorway into Central London, in fast heavy traffic. Some distance behind, a Volkswagen failed to overtake a large tractor-trailer. The tractor-trailer rammed it, skidding and jackknifing. As following traffic slammed into the wreckage, a ball of flame rose up.

"Bloody hell!" Don glanced at the calendar watch he had thought to equip himself with in the aftermath of the first break, before stocks ran out. "Two days, this time."

Alison was sitting next to him. Hugh was in the back seat. No sign of Martha. He hoped she was still alive.

"For Christ's sake, get us *off* here!" begged Alison. "It's a death trap."

"More like a bloody buffalo stampede! Why don't the idiots slow down?"

Somehow, Don reached the next exit ramp safely. The ramp was crowded with vehicles descending. Horns blared. Fenders and bumpers scraped and banged.

"Mustn't forget what we were talking about," Hugh reminded him, over his shoulder. "The life of a Thousand Cuts."

"There'll be a thousand cuts in the paintwork of this baby ..."

"Stop at the nearest pub, Don. We have to talk before we lose the continuity."

"About cuts," said Hugh, cradling a double Scotch.

The bar of the *Duke of Kent* was packed, but remarkably hushed as people waited for the filler music on the landlord's radio to stop, and the first hastily assembled news to take its place. Many people were not drinking at all, but merely waiting.

"You mentioned the Death of a Thousand Cuts, and of course, those were cuts in the flesh with a knife. But what do *we* mean by cuts?"

"A film," said Alison. "Editing. Switching scenes."

"Good girl!"

"I'm not a girl. Girls are twelve years old or less."

"Okay, *sorry*."

"That's why I wouldn't ever go to bed with you."

"Okay, okay. I prostrate myself. Now, that's it exactly, the editing of a film...the cutting from one scene to the next. You don't need to see your characters drive all the way from A to B. They just leave, then they arrive. Otherwise a film would last as long as real life. Or the director would be Andy Warhol."

"As long as real life *used* to last —"

"Quite. And what if reality itself is really a sort of film? A millennia-long Warhol movie with a cast of billions? Suppose, as holography is to flat photography, so to holography is — *solidography*. Suppose the world is being projected. It's a solid movie made of matter, not of light. We're an entry in the Film Festival of the Universe. *But* —" He paused emphatically.

"— Are we the completed masterpiece? Or are we the rushes on the cutting room floor — of reality? Because suddenly we've lost our own sense of continuity. Two days drop out. Three days drop out."

The music on the radio stopped.

"*Shush!*" hissed a roomful of snakes.

This is the BBC Emergency Service and I am Robin Johnson. The date is September the first. The time is one-twenty-five in the afternoon. The most recent break measured approximately fifty hours. At the Helsinki disarmament talks, preliminary agreement has been reached on the reduction of —."

"Come on, we can read all that stuff later."

Don had not yet started the engine of the Metro. "Wouldn't it spoil the natural flow of this film of yours if all the characters suddenly became aware that their lives are just a fiction?" he asked. "Maybe this is a very subtle, artistic touch. Maybe the director has suddenly gone into experimental cinema. He was making a realistic film before. But now he's into New Wave techniques...*meta*-film...like a French director. I still say we're all really living robots. But we never knew it before. Now we do," Don concluded.

"But that isn't a decline of awareness," Alison pointed out. "That's an increase in awareness."

"It's a bloody decline in our sense of control over what happens in the world. The important things are all happening offstage. They're happening off everybody's stage. Look at this progress in arms control — you heard Robin on the news."

"Maybe," said Alison, "God has decided to cut reality, and re-edit it. Because it wasn't working out. Or it didn't work out the first time. It bombed out, literally. We're in a remake of the film of the world."

Hugh teased her, saying, "Maybe these breaks are for advertisements. Only, we can't see them any more than the characters in a film can see the commercials!"

"Rubbish. When you have a commercial," said Alison, "the film just stops. Then it starts up again from the same moment."

"In that case, you're right. Something *must* be editing reality," Hugh acknowledged.

"How can I possibly agree with that? But I can't disagree, either. Lord knows, reality *needs* editing."

An ambulance wailed by, bearing someone from the motorway pile-up. A police car raced the other way, blue light flashing on its roof.

"It's the Thousand Cuts," said Don. "And it'll drive us mad with stress. Like rats in an electrified maze. We'll go catatonic. We'll become a planet of zombies...a world on autopilot. Like the birds and the bees."

He started the engine. Driving out of the car park of the *Duke of Kent*, he turned left because it was easier to do so, before remembering that he had no idea where they had been heading. He slowed, to let another ambulance race by.

Hugh suddenly began to laugh.

"I've just got it! Don't you see, we've got a way to test my idea. We may even have a way to communicate with the director himself! Listen, we'll do a special show. We'll do a show about editing reality. We'll make a film within the Film...a film *about* that Film. I'll package this as a great morale-booster, which indeed it might well be! We'll get the whole country laughing at what's happening. It'll help keep people sane during the Thousand Cuts."

Alison clapped her hands.

"Thank you."

"Just so long as we aren't cut off," said Don. "You know, 'Normal transmission resumes as soon as the show is over.'"

"If we are cut off, we'll still be going full steam ahead. We can watch it all on videotape afterward — Swing us around, Don. We're going back to my flat to get the whole thing set up. And we'll need to get hold of Martha. If somebody's editing reality, I'm joining in. We'll call the show 'The Making of *Reality, the Motion Picture*'!"

"Don't you mean 'Remaking'?"

"Yes, I do. Quite right, love. 'The Remaking of *Reality, the Motion Picture*'...that's it. I stand corrected." He slouched back in the seat of the Metro.

"So do we all, Hugh, if you're right. So do we all."

"Do what?"

"Stand corrected.—"

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Two weeks later, Hugh cradled a phone and turned to his friends.

"Well, I don't know exactly what I've been *doing* the past four days. But I must have been busting my ass, as our American friends so colorfully put it. Our show's been given the green light for October the

fourth, right after the nine o'clock news. Seven European countries are hooking up, using subtitles...and two major networks in the States are running us the same evening, with Australia and Japan following suit the next day. Even *Russia* is going to screen the show...subject, that is, to content analysis."

Martha sneezed. She had caught a cold. "Shouldn't be a problem," she sniffled. "Soviets have always laughed at God."

"Okay, so where were we, Don?" asked Alison.

"I've been going through this heap of notes. I'll get them knocked into shape with Martha, then we can start rehearsing on videotape, Thursday. See what runs, and what doesn't run."

"Could we please switch the radio on for a moment?" asked Alison.

"Why? Oh, to check out what's been happening in the," and Hugh grinned broadly, "real world? Why not? We might harvest some more ideas."

Fetching the radio, she set it on the bar.

"— Helsinki. This agreement represents a major advance in the lessening of international tension ..."

"How on Earth can an advance lessen something?" Martha asked.

"You should meet my publisher," quipped Don.

"— first genuine reduction in weapons systems, with inspection and verification by neutral observers from the Third World. The actual dismantling and downgrading of —"

"It seems even God can't manage miracles overnight," Hugh remarked.

"Blah to that," said Alison. "They're all scared of what could happen during one of the zombie intervals. Or just after one, when everyone's confused."

"— reported casualty figures following the most recent break are already in the thousands. The worst disaster occurred at Heathrow Airport, where —"

"See? It just takes one poor jerk to jab his finger at the wrong button. And *poof*. If this is an example of divine intervention, it's the most ham-fisted miracle I've ever come across," Alison said.

"When you're cutting film, love," said Hugh, "you waste a lot of good material for the sake of the picture as a whole."

"You sound as if you sneakingly admire what's going on," protested Don. "All this bloody cutting of our lives."

Hugh poured himself a brandy, and squirted some soda into the glass.

"No, it's ludicrous, and dangerous, and it's soul-destroying. But you've got to laugh at it, to get it in the right perspective...and yes, to keep our dignity and free will. It's a mad universe...and it's just turned out to be even madder than anybody could have imagined. Well, in my humble opinion the highest human art isn't tragedy. It's satire. And," here he nodded derisively toward the ceiling, "speaking as one trickster to another, I want whoever or whatever is directing this big show, *Life*, to notice that *I've* spotted what's going on. I've found out that reality is just a movie...and I can stay home and even laugh."

"— have been inundated with requests for Librium and Valium —"

"I laugh, therefore I am. Birds don't laugh. Cows don't laugh. There's the difference. Now let's get on with it. Let's make everyone kill themselves laughing. They deserve it."

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"The Remaking of *Reality, the Motion Picture*," was prerecorded during the afternoons of October the first and second...with Hugh Carpenter in the role of Cosmic Director and the lovely Alison as his continuity-person...and it was edited into shape on the third.

It was, in the opinion of all concerned, just about the sharpest and funniest half-hour of TV in the history of the world.

Hugh turned from the video monitor to wave back to the technicians. Peter Rolfe, who had produced the show, pumped Hugh's hand and slapped him on the back, then embraced Alison and kissed her. After a moment's hesitation, he kissed Martha too. Though the show was prerecorded, the whole team had decided to be present for the transmission.

Hugh popped open one of the champagne bottles he had brought along.

"Out she flies, out she flies! To Manchester and Munich, to Tulsa and Tel Aviv! To Alpha Centauri and all points in the universe, if there's anybody out there! Cheers!"

Before long, Rolfe's telephone was flashing for his attention.

"Yes? Really? Oh superb!" he enthused. "Hugh! The switchboard is absolutely *jammed*. The viewers are just bubbling over. You've stopped them from throwing themselves under a bus tomorrow. You've stopped them from overdosing tonight. You've made the first real sense out of this ghastly mess. You've made the world *fun* again!"

"What, no negative reactions at all?" interrupted Don.

"Oh, there's a teeny little bit from the blasphemy brigade. But, my dear fellow, you can expect that."

"I do. I look forward to it. The negative reactions are so comical."

"Not this time, old son. It's heartfelt gratitude all round. The country's laughing its collective head off."

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"Do you realize," asked Rolfe, as he hosted the celebration party at his Hampstead house the next evening, "this has been a new high for TV? In the last twenty-four hours, you must have clocked up viewing figures of half a billion people? Give or take the Soviets, who don't believe in ratings, mean beasts."

The carpet was strewn with telegrams. Kicking his way among them, Rolfe pressed another whiskey and water on Alison and kissed her again.

"You've probably outdone Armstrong stepping onto the Moon," he called to Hugh.

Tipsy people sprawled on the floor, watching a rerun of the show, chortling and whinnying at the high points. It was almost all high points.

"*Salud!*" Rolfe toasted. "The whole world must be laughing tonight. —"

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"Damn!" swore Don. He glanced at the passing road sign. "Petworth, half a mile — We must be heading down to the cottage."

Hugh was hunched tensely on Don's left, with Martha and Alison behind. Martha was wearing an orange headscarf tied tightly around her black curls...which was remarkably impromptu of her, for a weekend with friends.

The fuel gauge was showing empty, though Don always kept the tank well filled.

Slowing...and really, he had been speeding, doing nearly sixty along this country lane...he relaxed and admired the trees in the reddening sunset of their foliage.

Hugh loosened up too. "You've got to laugh, haven't you?" he asked reflectively.

And then Don looked at his watch. It wasn't the weekend at all; it was midweek.

"Good God, it's October the twentieth. That's the longest break yet. We're at Peter's place in Hampstead, on the fifth...I mean, we *were*. That's a cut of two whole weeks."

"I've got the radio here," said Sarah.

The filler music was Beethoven's. It played jubilantly on and on.

"There's a lot to catch up on," remarked Hugh idly.

Finally the music died away.

"— and I am Robin Johnson. The date is —"

"We'll be at the cottage in another ten minutes," Don said. "I've got a couple of spare gallons I keep there."

"— news will come as a grave shock to you all. Briefly, the Helsinki disarmament talks collapsed in ruins on the eleventh of October. Yugoslavia was invaded by Warsaw Pact forces on the eighteenth, two days ago. Currently, Soviet armor is massing on the West German border. The NATO Alliance is on full alert, but so far — Wait! — I've just received an unconfirmed report that several tactical nuclear weapons have exploded inside West Germany. This report is as yet unconfirmed —"

"But," said Hugh lamely.

"So that's why we're all trying to get down to the cottage on an empty tank — We're trying to be the

lucky ones."

The engine missed several times, coughed, then quietly gave out. The Metro coasted to a halt.

"It seems," said Alison quietly, "that we did *kill* ourselves laughing, after all."

"Do you mean," whispered Martha, "'God...or something...is not mocked'?"

"I don't know about 'God...or something'," said Don bitterly. "But I suppose we have to describe this as, well, a negative reaction. And somehow it doesn't seem comical. The movie's been axed."

"Post-holocaust scenes now, I presume," grumbled Hugh. "No damn sense of continuity —"

He wound the window down.

"Cut!" he screamed at the sky. "Cut! Cut!"

But the sky in the north brightened intolerably for a few seconds. Not long after, a fierce hot wind tore the red and gold leaves from the trees.

The End