

Fern and the Normals by Christine Moore

Fern swayed as she looked down. The podium telescoped to the span of her hand in the distance, one hundred precipitous steps away. Solar tubes diffused a weak beige radiance on the polished wood of four thousand seats and a vast oak floor. The air was thick and warm. The wood gave off a citrus waxy odour.

Telescreens didn't do justice to the sheer size of this place, she thought, perhaps because the prengends were so huge themselves. To be among so many of them in one place made Fern feel like an ant in a beehive. The buzz of their voices filled her head as they moved along the rows of seats greeting one another.

One of them approached her with a welcoming smile. She was around two and a half thousand mills in height with the turquoise eyes and ash-blond hair of a prengend selected through at least three generations.

"Hi, so pleased you could come." The woman touched the black spot on Fern's neck with the fingle on her index finger then flicked her gaze towards her palm tablet. "You're Fern Blake. Welcome." She shook Fern's hand firmly, bending her knees to make level eye contact. "You'll be speaking after the break, Fern. We look forward to a better understanding of the views of young normals."

The woman frowned causing her creamy skin to ripple like a child's before returning to its usual smoothness. She continued to speak from her crouched position.

"You really prefer to be called that do you, Fern? I mean, we don't mind ..."

"It's what I am. It's how I think of myself. It's only prengends who see the word as a term of abuse." Fern's voice was tight and angry. She took a deep breath and painted on a smile. It wasn't the woman's fault, any more than was her ridiculous knee bend.

"Do you mind sitting in the front row, Fern?" The woman took two steps down and stood straight. She surveyed the tiers of seats. "I'm afraid this theatre isn't yet adapted for ... normals, so you may find the seats a little ... unsuitable."

"Yes, they'll be too big," said Fern. She was pleased to find herself putting a prengend at ease. She moved down to the front feeling more confident.

"I'm Chesapelle by the way. I'll be at the back or somewhere in this aisle any time you want me." Chesapelle took care to keep two steps below Fern as she spoke. This is surface politeness, Fern reminded herself. Let's wait and see.

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Daddy sat in his wing-backed chair, stained a greasy brown where his head rolled but never left the surface. He stared at the garden and the river. That's what he did now; he stared. He didn't look.

"Hello, darling." He turned his head without raising it from the chair back and lifted his hand towards his daughter, leaving his elbow on the arm rest. Fern squeezed his fingers.

“You know I’m going to the Dartford Conference, don’t you, Daddy?”

He turned away and stared at the hollyhocks bobbing in the breeze and the sunshine. Beyond them, two old men, clearly normals, rowed on the River Ant where it flowed past the end of the garden. He didn’t seem to notice, though normals had only recently begun to venture onto the river again in daylight hours.

“Best not to make trouble, darling,” he said towards the grass and the flowers. “All that fuss is like a dream. Don’t start it up again.” Daddy’s chins rested on his collar. His belly overhung his trousers. His eyelids began to droop. As his eyes closed the bloated flesh ran together over his eyelashes, leaving the appearance of two nicks in a mass of fatty tissue beneath his brows. Fern wondered if the BBC would dare come back if she asked them.

“... we have been neglecting the needs and aspirations of normals for too long.” Fern dragged her mind back to the conference. She shifted in her seat, as roomy as a small boat. She remained snuggled against the smooth high curve between the side and back, out of sight of all but her nearest neighbours.

“How did it come to this, mm? Why must we see things with our own eyes before we really understand it?” The speaker’s voice rose. He strode before Fern, his silver gown flapping, washing a warm breeze over her bare arms as he passed.

“We hear things but it takes a courageous BBC reporter to make them real. Many here will have seen footage of Professor Blake before and after the Authority’s Stabilising Intervention.” He stretched his hand towards Fern for a split second before scanning the tiers of sheepish or perplexed expressions. “It’s my belief that more elder statesmen would have put our thoughts right sooner. The situation has crept up on a young population with a short memory and no history. I remember when pregenids made up less than fifty percent of the population.” A communal gasp was followed by a torrent of outraged whispers.

The speaker strode towards the lens suspended above Fern’s seat. The image of his face loomed as tall as a cloudscraper behind him on the panoscreen that ran the width of the back wall.

“Please exercise your considerable brains – those who have been bred to have them. Do you imagine Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis has always been with us? You know how normals have babies. Once upon a time that was ‘normal’ in the archaic sense of the word. Is it so distasteful?” A forced silence greeted him as the audience held its communal breath in an attempt to hide its embarrassment.

He stood before Fern and crossed his arms. His eyes glittered a rich brown, deep in their sockets. His bald pate shone like unpolished brass in the solar tubes’ anaemic glow. She made a quick calculation.

“You’re right, young lady. I’m over eighty. You’re thinking I must be, for where are balding pregenids these days? In fact I’m ninety-five.” He surveyed the mass of faces rising like a cliff before him. Thousands of turquoise, violet, brown and black eyes looked back.

“I see one pair of hazel eyes in this room, right in front of me. They belong to our next speaker - a normal, Steven Blake’s daughter.” He looked at Fern in silence,

his eyes roving over her face and body. Eventually he stepped back and studied the crowd.

“Do you know, Professor Blake’s daughter has dull hair to complement those dull eyes! It’s ‘mousey’. Has anyone heard of mousey hair?” He peered round, craning his neck and lifting his considerable nose, as if sniffing for an answer in the farthest corners of the theatre. “No? No one heard of it? Let me enlighten you. It was once an entry in the Oxford English Dictionary. It said: ‘of hair – a dull light brown colour.’ But who would choose, actually *choose*, such a colour for their child’s hair?”

The speaker left the question in the air and walked towards the panoscreen, towards the image of his retreating back. A cascade of bewildered whispering washed over the seats as his listeners realised he had finished. Fern’s neighbours darted nervous glances at her before moving away towards the many platforms where drinks were being served.

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Fern cradled her café. She allowed the steam to feather her face. The room buzzed with the noise of discussion. Steam and cigarette smoke drifted towards the solar tubes creating a dull brown haze so far above it could almost be the sky of some dying planet.

She wanted to lean on the rail at the edge of the rec platform and look over the theatre but she was surrounded by earnest prebends, all bending at the knee in a way that normal humans would find difficult if not impossible to maintain. Such a posture initially appeared subservient, but now Fern was beginning to find it condescending.

“I understand that café is a new experience for you, my dear,” said a man with golden skin and tawny eyes. His hair, the colour of ripe corn, waved and rippled with the slight movement of his head. He looked young but looks could be deceiving.

“I’ve tried café at UEA once or twice,” said Fern. “You know that my father researched there until – well, until recently?”

“We’re sorry for what happened,” said Chesapelle quickly. She had escorted Fern to this platform, away from the group of Cornish normals here to plead the case for access to urban facilities.

“I don’t like café *or* cigarette smoke,” said Fern. “There are no guarantees that we carry the genes to protect us.”

“There’s a solution to that one,” laughed a girl. She flung out her hands and shook her head. Chestnut curls rippled across her shoulders and ample chest. “You only have to ...”

“It’s time we returned to our seats,” said Chesapelle, taking Fern firmly by the arm. She led her away. “I’m so sorry about that,” she whispered. Ashamed looks and contrite words followed them as they left the rec area.

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Fern had never felt so tiny and insignificant. Why did prebends favour such huge, dimly-lit places? Perhaps the lighting was due to research into the deterioration in health and colour of the eye and skin when exposed to daylight. Certainly most of them had brilliant, cataract-free eyes well into old-age, even beyond - until they were two hundred or more. The eyes looked down on her now as she tried to explain the simple needs of normals.

“This thing I allowed for my father’s sake.” Fern tapped the black spot where neck and collarbone met. “I didn’t want any more trouble.” Fern sensed rather than heard an uncomfortable shifting of buttocks on cherrywood seats. She was ashamed of bringing her father into this, but it was necessary. It would concentrate minds.

“My time is almost up. I’ll finish by giving my explanation of something numerous people have asked. How has Norfolk become the last bastion of the normals?” Fern sensed the communal wince as she spoke the word. Language – above all, ‘bad’ language - had power, especially from the mouth of a woman.

“My feeling for what it’s worth is that the people of Norfolk have always been down-to-earth and a little stubborn and set in their ways. The threats of global warming and the exodus of the last of the yowpies when it looked as if their homes might be flooded - or at least they might be adjacent to homes that would be flooded eventually - meant that only true, intractable Norfolk folk were left. Sea links to Holland, the last bastion of normals in Europe, ensured commerce of ideas and produce. Until one hundred years ago, a Pleasureferry ran from Harwich to the Hook of Holland. Further north, Great Yarmouth became a Prohibited Port. But we normals had free access to Holland in spite of Great Yarmouth’s designated status. No one policed it. Holland would soon be submerged, as would Norfolk – that was the thinking. Why bother with them?”

Fern noted the attentiveness of her audience. Many leant forward in their seats. Some had pulled a desk in front of them to take notes. This history was news to them.

“My father showed you that normals could be ‘normal’ ... maybe a little intractable too, *and* intelligent.” A further communal wince and buttock shift encouraged Fern on to the finishing post. They really didn’t want to think about her father. Many had seen the interviews, before and after.

“All we ask is to be left alone. I don’t *need* this thing.” Fern waved her index finger at the black spot. “You say, ‘What does it matter if you’re not doing wrong?’ I say, Why be required to have one *if* I’m *not* doing wrong? I don’t want to be challenged to explain and identify myself when I’m doing nothing more than walking by the river.” A murmur of disapproval washed through the air.

“I know – ‘wear your identity with pride’. And yes, I know what you’re saying to one another: ‘If she’d just carry papers or wear a wrist band or earring, she wouldn’t need that thing. But there are thousands of people, prebends as well as normals, who don’t like them, but go along with them for a quiet life.

“We normals are particularly stubborn though, aren’t we? We want to be allowed to carry on as we always have. There are the Norfolk normals, but there are others too, around the country. Some are here today. Not so different from you lot. Maybe a bit less ... ‘refined’.” A relieved snicker caught fire and spread across the

cliff of faces. Fern's written notes told her to close now, but her earlier daydream as she sat curled up in the empty boat-seat, made her add a final thought.

"My father was a Nobel-prize winner. What could tell you better than that what a great scientist he was? He collaborated with prebends. He was happy to do so. We hold no innate prejudice. We simply ask that you do the same." Papers rustled as the note-takers gathered their papers together. Fern decided at the last moment to hint at something else – was it a warning or merely an observation?

"Some of you will have seen my father as he is now on your telescreens. He's changed further since then and not for the better. I wonder whether I should invite the BBC to come again? Ladies and gentlemen, you wouldn't know him now."

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Fern drove towards Horning. No one had stopped her. Surely no one would now? They must have decided it was best to let her go. She passed the ecoturbines where they hummed and spun beside the road, at this relatively high point for North Norfolk. She took a deep breath and her eyes filled with tears of pride. These were practically a side line of her father's. For a split second, a wave of fear engulfed her. She would never be as important or fascinating to the public as her father. Had she risked anything at the conference? No one cared enough about history to protect the researcher. Her historical research was nothing compared to her father's productive scientific research. She beside him was as a mouse beside a tiger. And she had no reputation to protect her.

She looked up at the hazy blue sky. What did she expect to see? A satellite hovering above her? She scratched the black spot on her neck, willing it to oblivion. She turned off at the last moment to drive along Lower Street, in sight of the River Bure.

She passed the Swan Inn, recently back in business, and stopped before a wide building constructed of the traditional Norfolk red brick, crumbling but repaired, for squatters lived here now, keeping their house habitable but nothing more. Her father had told her that hundreds of years ago, another kind of squatter lived here, building out onto the river bed where the Bure took a sharp turn at a cliff face. Yowpies bought them up and for much of the twenty first century they had been thriving homes and shops. Then they became derelict as sea levels rose, but even before the new cooling, Norfolk folk had reclaimed the abandoned buildings.

Fern stepped from her auto and walked across the series of Georgian-style bay windows looking over the small St Benet's green. A sign 'Dinosaur Discs' showed faintly above the last bay, next to the old butcher's shop. What did that sign mean? There were plenty of butchers' shops still, but what could Dinosaur Discs mean? Perhaps that would be another piece of ancient history for her to investigate.

She could do as she wished, after all. Her research would be unfettered. The satellite had tracked her chip from Dartford to the River Bure, close now to its junction with the River Ant. No one had stopped her in all that distance. It was in their interests to leave such a high profile normal alone, as she had originally thought.

She walked through the gap in the crumbling stone wall, forcing her way past a hawthorn bush then across the green until she was looking over the river to land that had never been tamed, even in the distant past. A sharp breeze washed and gusted past the reeds and trees on the far bank catching her hair and blowing it in all directions – her lank, mousy hair. She smiled. Thank her God that she would never worry about the colour of her children’s hair, or their sex, or their height or eye colour. Those poor bloody prebends!

A hand touched her shoulder. “Miss Blake?” The pressure became firmer. As consciousness receded she saw the gun pointing at her head. The hand adjusted its aim as a clamp closed over her skull.

“That’s it. Now! Other side. Quick!” Something punched her right in the middle of her head where no fist could touch. She heard them; she felt them. She staggered, nearly falling backwards. Her crossed eyes straightened themselves and she sank onto a plastoak seat. Whoever they were, they had gone. She looked to her right, to the bend in the river. The Swan Inn was opening, surely early? Or had time passed? Someone was putting seats out where a space had been cleared between encroaching nettles and blackberries.

Her eyes crossed. She straightened them with a will. Something had happened. She remembered the gun; something inside her head. It didn’t hurt now though, not at all. Her eyes rolled then closed with the effort of trying to remember. She forced her lids open and sat up straighter. She began to feel a little better. After all, she was still alive. It hadn’t been much, No, it was alright. She smiled to herself. Her recovery would make her father proud.

Some Canada geese flew above her, honking loudly. They landed on the water, sending out a wash on which a few coots and ducks dipped and rose, keeping high and upright like bobbing corks.

She remembered the last time she was on this stretch of the river. She saw herself standing on the prow of one of the ancient wherries, gigantic black sail at full stretch. They’d left Irstead and adjacent settlements with their cargo. They’d joined the River Bure at its junction with the Ant. They always travelled the short distance upriver to Horning for more produce, sometimes further, to Hoveton too, then ready-about and off to Great Yarmouth where the Bure met the sea, and thence to Holland.

Fern laughed. They were great days. Such adventures! Maybe that was all in the past, but she was glad it had happened, even if it would never happen again. And she was completely recovered from the incident just now. No harm done. Amazing!

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“It was one of those laser gun thingies, I told you.”

“It might have been, but I don’t care, Edith, I’m sorry. We’ll never know for sure and I’m not spending the rest of my life fighting, fighting, fighting.”

“No, duck, OK.” Edith put Fern’s drink beside her hand where it rested limp on the table. “It’s just that I can’t do nothing on my own. You’re the only one as can

do anything. Your Daddy's in his bed and there's no one else as the BBC'd bother with."

Fern sighed contentedly. "The world isn't such a bad place, Edith. All that fuss feels like a dream." She looked at the river through half-closed eyes. No one had been past on the river recently, only swans and ducks and geese, but that was as it should be.

"They leave us alone, Edith." Fern rested her head against the chair back. She laid her hand on her stomach and felt the comforting firmness of her flesh. She was real and permanent somehow in this seat, watching the river go by, no one bothering her. She scratched at the chip in her neck. A pleasant tingling told her that it was her friend.

"All that business is like a bad dream, Edith," she said. "I think I'll have a little rest." The flesh closed over her eyes, leaving two nicks in the mass of fatty tissue beneath her brows.