

the **Seventh
Sense.**



Nick Warren

The Seventh Sense.
By Nick Warren.

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This book is dedicated to Anita.

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Number Four.

Graham looked up at the camera in the corner.

“Is that recording or is it just for security?”

Summers looked up from the file.

“How is everything?”

“Peachy.”

Summers folded his thick arms.

“Really, Mr Summers, everything is ok.”

“You’ve towed the line at curfews. Anything worrying you?”

“No.”

“Having any trouble with the others?”

Graham shrugged. “I keep my head down. They don’t know me.”

“What about a job?”

“I went to the interview. They seemed pleased enough.”

“You understand the conditions of your licence regarding employment?”

“Yes.”

“Right then.” Summers made notes on a form. “You have a scheduled appointment at the resource unit on the 18th.” Summers looked at his watch. “Tomorrow in fact.”

“I got the letter.”

“This is mandatory. You must attend or phone me personally with a very good reason why you cannot.”

“I know.”

“And the depot injections. You’ve had what? Just the one so far?”

“Yes.”

“Okey dokey, then. We’ll see you tomorrow and Friday then every Wednesday at 4 PM, no excuses.”

“Absolutely.”

Graham left the building and walked across the plaza. He lit up and sat on an empty bench. He dragged on the cigarette deeply. A woman with a baby in a pushchair and a girl of about three sat at the other end. He got up and walked on. The town was winding down, some shops already shuttered. He walked through a group of pigeons making them scatter. He called at a newsagent and bought a paper and more cigarettes.

He was well within the time limit when he entered the halfway house.

The supervisor called to him as he was walking past the office. He wanted to cadge a cig. Graham gave one over and went to his room. He was on the third and top floor. His room was little bigger than the bedroom he had enjoyed at his mother’s. He relaxed on the bed and finished the cigarette.

There wasn’t much in the newspaper. He lingered over the problems page, laughing at some of the letters. The cartoons were as shit as ever. His stars said he would meet somebody significant and some pop star was shagging a premiership footballer. All right with the world. He dropped it on the floor and closed his eyes.

You won’t do it again, will you? You won’t, will you?

No.

Can I go now?

Not yet. Be good and we’ll see.

Graham woke with a start. He looked around the room a little panicky before he remembered where he was. He laughed and rolled off the bed. He took his map from the only drawer in a small bedside table. He ran a finger over the yellow line. His exclusion zone.

He showered and went down for breakfast. The supervisor was at the kitchen table. Graham filled a bowl with cereal and drenched it in milk. Some sod had taken the ham he had left in the fridge. He thought about complaining but decided against it. He wanted to be invisible.

“Don’t forget this afternoon.”

“I won’t,” Graham said.

“Who you seeing?”

“Dr Vaughn.”

“I’ve heard of him.”

Graham nodded and kept on eating.

He spent the morning in his room reading a novel. A thriller that wasn’t very thrilling.

After lunch he went to the resource unit. The clinical psychologist talked at length about the side effects of the injections. Graham hadn’t experienced any. He noticed a photograph on the doctor’s desk. It was turned at an angle that made it impossible for anyone to see, including the doctor.

Dr Vaughn asked questions and Graham answered them, some truthfully, others not but he kept his voice at the same pitch regardless and didn’t break eye contact.

When they were done he walked to another appointment. An obligatory course. Other men were there. He didn’t speak with any of them. He listened to the facilitator and agreed with everything that was said.

After, he went to see his mother. She had moved houses since he’d been away. They had egg and chips for tea.

No.

You’ve got to.

I don’t want to.

He got the job. His boss was a quietly spoken man. He went out of his way to be supportive. The work was ok. Simple packing on a machine that did some of the work on its own. The rest was easy. He spent three weeks there before he got any money. The boss had pulled a few strings and got him the payment early. People usually had to work a month in hand.

At the beginning of the fifth week a woman started at the factory. She worked the other side of the room. He had to turn his head to see her. A week later she was moved to a machine opposite. She always wore a baseball cap and baggy tops. She was slim. Very slim. The others wore full make up but she did not.

That smells awful.

Have you ever tried one?

My daddy smokes and it stinks.

Look at the tip.

What’s a tip?

The end of the fag. See how hot it is.

He ran from them. He felt something fall from his jacket pocket but he didn't stop. He ran across the road and down a ginnel. There was a group of teenagers lounging near the end. One of them stuck his foot out but Graham did not stumble. He landed on the boy's shin. The boy screamed outrage. Graham went by the fish and chip shop and across the park. When he looked back there was no one to see. He did not rest until he got back. He sat on a low wall around the corner from the hostel until his breathing went back to normal.

He did not report the incident.

She wasn't at work for two days. He decided not to ask why although he wanted to.

You're my fourth. Did you hear me?

Yes.

Don't know what a fourth is, I expect. It means you're number four. And I want you to remember me.

The needle went into his muscle. It throbbed. The nurse wrote it up and gave him his appointment card back with a new date. She said she would see him in three weeks.

He went directly to work. She was there. As he walked in she looked at him and smiled. He returned it. He watched her from the back. Very straight, the way she sat. He got glimpses of her hands as she worked. They were small with long fingers. Her nails were short and free from varnish.

He was outside the factory gates when she spoke.

"Hi."

"Hi, he said.

They met the following Saturday. He bought her a coffee and a chocolate muffin. She had lip gloss on but nothing on her face or eyes. He watched her eat and drink. She moved slowly. He asked her about her interests. She liked walks in the park, beaches and small dogs especially King Charles Spaniels. She wasn't close to her parents and lived alone. She was ten years his junior but seemed younger still.

He told her he looked after his elderly mum with the help of his sister so didn't get out in the evenings much. That would change though when he secured her a place in a nursing home. This would be in a few months.

They met a few days later and thereafter every day. At the weekends they would ride the bus out of town and walk down country lanes and through woodlands. She started to hold his hand. She asked just once if she could meet his mother. She understood he would find it too difficult and painful.

He was attacked yards from the hostel. His nose was broken and he was badly bruised but he managed to get away. The supervisor took him to hospital.

His probation officer decided he was going to move him and made him resign.

"It was easier before the Human Rights Act. You wouldn't have been able to come back to the area under the old rules." Graham didn't say anything. "You can volunteer to move out of the area altogether. That would be the sensible thing."

Graham said he would think about it.

It was a week before he could go back to the factory. He waited across the street. She looked hurt for less than a second before noticing his nose. It was bent to the right and still swollen. She forgave him quickly.

It hurts.

Let me see. I said, let me see. Move your hand or I'll move it for you.

*I want to go home, it hurts. Don't touch it, please.
Hush, I know it hurts. Shut your eyes and try to think of something nice.*

He was placed on a course that took up most of his day. He looked forward to the weekends more now.

They were at a pub when she kissed him. It was clumsy. She told him she hadn't kissed anyone for many years. She wasn't normally comfortable around men. He gently asked questions. She did not reveal much. She said she would tell him about her home life if he would go back to her flat.

It was small and neat. She asked him to sit. She made tea and they sat on the couch. She put her head on his shoulder and cried.

"Was it your, dad?"

"No, someone else."

"I can help you," he said.

"Drink your tea."

She took him to the bedroom. He wanted to undress her but she said no. He did not push it. She asked him to lie down. She sat with her hand over his while she talked. He drifted. He was tired. He tried to concentrate on her words. She spoke soothingly and said he could sleep. She would be here when he awoke and she would do whatever he wanted.

He came to. He tried to wipe his eyes. His hands were bound. He tried to sit up but his feet were tied with what looked like mountaineer's rope. She wasn't there. He tried to shout through the tape. His words were strangled and sounded ridiculous. He could hear activity elsewhere in the flat. He bucked and strained to no avail. He looked around trying to twist to see although he did not know what he was looking for.

She came in wearing a thick towelling robe. Her face was made up. The subtle pink lipstick had been replaced by blood red making her mouth look like an angry gash. Her eyes were ringed black. She had long dark lashes.

He tried to speak again. She cupped a hand behind her ear and then shrugged.

She opened the robe and let it fall. The underwear was night black. Her breasts were heavy. Her hips, so well hidden under outsize clothes, were wide. He looked away and tried to break free again.

"Don't you like me anymore?"

He struggled now, putting everything into it. Sweat formed on his forehead.

It hurts.

She put her arms beneath her breasts and lifted them. He tried to speak, tasting mucus. Tears ran down his hot face.

She dropped her arms. She pulled the bra down exposing the upper part of her right breast. He saw the scar and how it was shaped.

He watched her raise the can from below the footboard. She threw it liberally over his clothes and the bed. She got another can and threw this over his head soaking his hair. He closed his eyes and thrashed from side to side.

He tried to twist away when she wiped his eyes. He risked a look. His eyes were fine. Fine enough to see her walk to the door. He saw the rags in the bottle. He saw her light them and raise the bottle high.

"Hush," she said. "I know it hurts. Shut your eyes and try to think of something nice."

Connie.

My mother's sister did not like being called Aunt or Auntie so to me she was always Connie. My mother visited her tiny home three or four times a year. Father would only attend on Connie's birthday and sit in near silence, his long body spider like in one of Connie's compact chairs.

Connie was younger than my mother who was the first of four. Despite this she looked very much older. Her hair which was thick and always untidy had a smattering of grey. She was stocky and short whereas my mother and the other sisters were slim and tall.

I think I first noticed the difference the time Connie came to stay with us at the wedding of my older brother Carl. She was ushered in and sat in a dark corner. During the ceremony she caught my eye and waved. I returned it and this was seen by father who glowered at me and then her in turn. I could never meet my father's eye when he was displeased but Connie smiled and stared back until he looked away, disgust all over his face.

She didn't stay for the wedding breakfast and when I asked mother why she told me to make myself useful looking after my younger cousins.

I was growing and learning as all boys do and day to day life made me forget my aunt for long periods at a time. Only when a visit was announced would I ponder my strange relative.

It was a mild summer evening and mother and I made our way to Connie's small house. It was secluded, the nearest town twenty miles south. Connie answered straightaway. Her hair was in its usual tangle and she wore a shapeless, colourful dress. I followed her into the living room fascinated by the clumsy way she moved and her noisy progress. Her breathing was loud and her voice quite painful if I got too close. She dropped her full weight into a tired chair and told me to sit and tell her all that had occurred since we'd last met.

I told her about my studies and of the family. She pulled a face when I mentioned father and seemed unaware of mother's displeasure. I fought amusement and continued.

What delight I made in her with all the trifling detail of my ordinary life! She chuckled and ruffled my hair. She even kissed my cheek, something mother had never done. It left a feverish spot and a great deal of pleasure.

The time to go came speedily and I was sorry to leave. Connie pressed something in my hand as she stood on tip toe to embrace me. We walked down the narrow path and I turned to wave but Connie had already closed the door.

After we had dined I went to my room and took Connie's gift from the pocket I had deftly hidden it. It was a photograph. An art my father disliked intensely. A younger Connie beamed out. She was slimmer but still plump and her hair was black. Behind her rose a brooding building. My mother opened my door and had the image from my hand with amazing speed. I did not protest but I begged her not to tell father. She closed my door and put a finger to her lips.

"Connie is different but still one of the family. Don't accept anything from her again. Do you understand?"

I indicated that I did and she left.

As before my interest in Connie abated as the days passed. My life was busy and there was always something to do for my father. He trusted me with small errands and

eventually allowed me to accompany my brothers on family business. I was very proud because I wasn't yet fourteen.

On one evening task we found ourselves approaching a small village. Carl told me to wait by a copse. I sat against a birch and sulkily threw pebbles into a beck that was swollen with spring rain. I grew bored quickly and began to wander through the trees. The wind brought the sound of bells and I froze. This noise had never pleased me; always leaving twisting knots in my belly.

I walked almost in a trance knowing that I was disobeying my brother and through him my father. The village was quiet and there was no sign of my party. I went along a wide street taking in the small houses and wondering how people could live in such enclosed spaces.

The bells were mournful in the turbulent air. I followed the sounds until I came to a church. It was dizzy in its height. As strong and eternal as the god it served. I looked around checking, I suppose, for my brothers.

Satisfied I was alone I went closer. I stopped, breath catching in my chest. It was here a young Connie had posed. I recognized this section of the building and the trees to the right were only a little taller.

Carl was calling, his voice struggling to be heard over the bells. I took one more look and then headed back. He wasn't angry, the business had gone well and our father would be pleased.

I thought on Connie's gift and its meaning. I decided not to ask mother. Connie was not a subject to be brought up. She was only mentioned when our visits were due and at rare family occasions.

But this time I did not forget.

My parents went out every evening. I was alone in the house, my brothers all engaged elsewhere. I wandered into the library and ran a finger over the books. There was nothing here I had not read three times. I looked at the portraits and tried to imagine my own among them.

The garden was cool. I lay on the grass and watched the stars. Could it be done? Could I get to Connie's and back before my parents returned?

I was there within the hour. I approached the door and paused. I thought of the photograph. Surely it was nothing more than a foolish keepsake, a way to gain my acceptance. The lights burned and I looked in the window. Connie was at her table. She was forking food into her mouth. I gaped at the spectacle. Her jaws worked like an engine. I could hear her groaning with satisfaction. Her mouth was red with wine and morsels dropped from it to land on her clothes or spatter on the table.

I lost courage and fled.

Weeks went by and talk turned to my birthday. It was a turning point in my life, my father said, his usual taciturnity put aside. He was in such humour I asked him if Connie was to be invited. I regretted it instantly. His eyes turned dark and he grunted assent before leaving the room.

The same night I heard him arguing with mother. Something should be done, he boomed. My mother was weeping quietly. She wouldn't agree, she said. I went to my room and thought of Connie for a long time before I slept.

The following evening I went again, determined to speak with her and to understand why my father held such strong objections.

The house was an oasis of light on a chilling eve. I was perhaps half way down the path when I heard the man's voice. I went to the window. Connie was at her table and she was not alone. He was dressed in clothes that swallowed Connie's light making his head appear to float like some spectre. There were others, both seated and stood in the furthest reaches of the room. The man was most animated, his arms making wild stabs that might, I thought, take poor Connie's head off.

She listened well. Her head swayed and bobbed with every gesture. Her eyes widened and I stifled laughter. After a half hour the man rose and I saw he was as tall and slim as my father. They could be related with the white face and spindly limbs. Perhaps they were. The thought thrilled me. Was this man from a branch of the family I was not aware of?

Connie clasped his hand and stood as tall as she could to kiss his cheek. Momentary distaste flared in his eyes but disappeared smoothly when she looked at him again. I sensed tension in the room. The others drew back as if taking collective breath.

I hid when I saw they were leaving. They trooped away in single file, the tall man last. He stopped and turned to see Connie waving. I was minded of Carl's wedding and the way she used that graceless motion to signal her presence and to communicate an emotion I did not understand.

I watched her close the door and decided tonight was not the time to speak with her.

My birthday was almost upon us and the preparations were frantic with the house being cleaned and decorated. Carl and his wife were in charge of the dining arrangements. Mother wrote the invitations and father took me to choose clothes. The care he took was maddening, every detail gone over until the tailor was almost in tears.

It was my time to become a man as expected in our old family. Father told me of his youth and said that the first time was the hardest. After that I would join my brothers and cousins and have my own voice among them.

My anxiety grew along with excitement. The activity in the house matched any bee hive. Shouts rang along the halls mixed with songs and crashes and heavy feet.

The night before my birthday the house was empty. It was customary for the initiate to spend the last night of childhood alone. I was to contemplate the changes and put aside childish things. I tried, I really did, but Connie was all I thought of.

I paced the library and asked the portraits why I was so different to the others. I was as incongruous as Connie but no one else seemed to see it. Except her. She singled me out and understandably so for I was the only one who made the effort to see her. It was not because of my age. My brothers had tired of her when much younger than I, loudly declaiming their opposition.

I left the house, aware that I was breaking an ancient tradition but little caring.

I travelled quickly, pushing myself to the limit. On arrival I was wearied and hungry. I knocked and waited with little patience. I could hear her awkward progress. She opened the door and stared past my shoulder.

"I am alone."

She let me in and bade me to sit. I allowed my breathing to calm.

"Why?"

She took a long time to answer and looked more thoughtful than ever I had seen. None of the vacancy I knew my father took for stupidity showed on her face.

"We are family, Matthew."

I understood her words but not the meaning.

"Throwbacks, we are. You are as different to your parents as I was to mine."

“But I am not!”

She folded her hands and I noticed how small and well formed they were. I had never seen them before, not truthfully. They were the same hands as my mother’s and her mother before.

“Matthew, I love you and I love your mother. That is all you need to know. Go home and ready yourself. Tomorrow is the most important day of your life.”

She would not listen to my protests and would not qualify the answer she had given. She told me to go with authority and there was steel in her tone. Her voice had the same power as mother’s and I marvelled that I had never heard it before. How could they see her as the outsider?

I went home drained. The journey took so long in my weakened state that the sky was reddening on the horizon and I forced myself to hurry. The house was still and empty and I fell into my usual deep sleep.

Mother gave last minute instructions, her dress rustling as she glided around the house. Father and Carl bellowed and dictated and all but me rushed to finish the tiny details.

I was in my room trying to control a sickness beginning in my throat and ending low in the bowels. Father knocked and entered with a smile on his face that did not look at home. He inspected my clothes with the scrutiny of a notary.

The doorbell rang and rang and cousins and uncles, nieces and great aunts marched in. I heard familiar voices mixed with those I had not yet met. The clamour rose for almost an hour and then ceased. Father’s boots echoed on the stairs and I could imagine his dourness and the respect he held for our traditions pulling his face into a mask.

He opened my door and signalled that I was to follow. The passage was lined with relations who nodded and bowed as I passed. The little girls curtsied, all pretty in bright dresses and polished shoes. My mother waited at the foot of the stairs and followed me and father into the great hall. My relatives smiled and scrutinized me. Great emphasis was placed on beauty and I heard murmurs of approval.

Grandfather was at the centre of the room. He embraced me and said the timeworn words and I answered in turn. My studies had paid off well and I sensed pride in my father. My fears were passing and I grew more confident, the words slipping well from my tongue. I bowed and grandfather anointed me in our custom. I knew what was required of me now.

I turned to a door that was half way along the hall. The earliest to arrive had monopolized this area and guarded their places jealously. I could hear Carl speaking softly through the heavy door.

Mother gave me an encouraging smile and I was stunned to see tears on my father’s white face.

Small among the others Connie watched with a deeply sad face. Her tears were warm and looked perfectly at place. She tried to smile and failed. I was not surprised when she left inducing hostile looks and comments.

Carl opened the door and pushed a young girl before him. She was naked and tried to cover her body with her hands. Her whimpers ceased when she saw my many relatives. She threw herself at the feet of one of my aunts and wrapped her arms about her legs. My aunt gently disentangled herself and Carl dragged the girl to me. Her cries were becoming louder. I looked at my parents again. The girl’s weeping began to anger me. I took hold of her and lifted her to her feet. She was my equal in height. Her babbling was impossible to decipher. Her neck was smooth and beautiful. I

listened as my father had instructed me. Yes, I understood. It was musical in a way, the steady thump of life. I unsheathed my fangs and bit deep.

It poured from her neck and her noise either ceased or became imperceptible. I drank and drank. My senses swelled beyond normal. I could not see or hear in the usual fashion but some higher sense birthed in me. I felt the thoughts of my relatives brush against me, their eagerness and excitement engendered by the spilling of blood. I could read the memories of their own initiations and the faces of countless victims played down over millennia. This day I was the newest of my kind and no longer dependent on the regurgitated products that all our children must sup.

The girl was almost dead and I prayed that Carl had brought more. I wanted to fill myself with an ocean of this ecstasy. My mind scanned the room and I felt my elders welcome me. I flitted from one to the other the happiest I had ever been. And then I touched Connie.

She was in the entrance hall, the stolen keys still cold in her hand. The man and his dark companions filed in with blades and guns and worse.

I dropped the girl's corpse. My father was weeping openly and mother came to embrace her son. She saw what I saw as she touched my cheek with her lips. Our flesh was alive with the knowledge of what Connie had done. The screams started then.

The men exploded among us and began to slash and shoot. Twenty of us were dead before anyone began to fight back. I charged at one attacker who had buried a wicked sword in Carl's neck. He raised a blinding thing and I shrank back screaming for shadows and my mother.

Connie's man shouted oaths and curses and hacked at any within his reach. Even the old and the children were slaughtered. The floor became red with the blood we had taken from their kind.

The battle was one sided despite our numbers and greater strength. Their talismans burned our flesh and rendered our powers useless. I tried to reach mother who was cowering against the wall her arms crossed with wounds and her skin dissolving in a talisman's glare.

I tore out the throat of one and hurled his body at the tall man who sidestepped and ordered me captured. More of them fought to create a path toward me. I stumbled and landed inches from Carl, his eyes glass.

Father roared defiance and killed several. He was the strongest of us all but when they turned their awful weapons on him he crumpled as helpless as my first victim. He looked at me and before they took his head I realized he had seen into me and discerned that I had witnessed the moment Connie had struck her bargain with this priest of God. The photograph was of this murderer's church. How long had she waited before selling us to these shamans?

They left me to the end and I was pinned by the weight of four men. They did not know that my shame held me more securely than they could ever hope to.

The priest surveyed his carnage. The air was full of the stench of burning flesh and corrupt blood. He waited to be sure that all were dead before standing over me. Connie came in then and watched me from behind his elbow.

I spat at this Holy Father and cursed him to eternity within his god's hell.

Connie came to within kissing distance and I asked her why had she done this? Was this the love she had spoken of?

"It is," she said. "I hoped you were like me, Matthew. I would have done anything to make it so." She brushed my lips with her own leaving the same burning sensation as before.

The priest took a book from his coat and began to chant some spell. He threw scalding liquid at me and stepped back as a weeping Connie placed a sharpened stick against my chest.

Strong.

Maria Laws pleaded wept and made promises but Chris Taylor did it anyway. When it was over she put her face against the tree and drew her legs up to her chin while he smoked half a cigarette. He knew she would not try to get away, knew she would not make a sound. He killed her with his boots and a piece of stone that had once been part of a nearby wall.

He was arrested four days later after stealing cigarettes from a supermarket. He had always known the habit would prove to be his downfall.

The place where Maria had died became much visited long after the Scene of Crime Officers had left and journalists had consigned the case to history. Mourners came—some from Maria's family, others respectful strangers who laid flowers and said prayers. Naturally (or unnaturally) the ghoulish came and went. One carved, *Maria, Maria*, on the smooth beech. He had meant to end with, *Look-But-You'll-Never-See-Her*, but his wrists had begun to ache.

The carving faded over time but remained legible. A photographer came and took many pictures. The clearest was reproduced in number eight of a series of Famous Murders magazines.

David Parkes liked this particular issue. It became worn under his fingers. He read it over and talked about it with his one friend, Kevin. Alone, David often opened to page four where Maria looked out. Her black hair made her look very pale. Wan, David thought. He said the word aloud and repeated it in an ever softer voice until it got away from him and he felt it float up into the atmosphere.

The photograph of the scene was in perfect focus. He could smell the grass and knew what the bark would feel like. He did not know that a single tear had slipped from Maria's eye and entered into a tiny Y shaped imperfection on the surface of the ancient tree. Or that something of the salt and water and sundry chemicals manufactured in Maria's body remained.

April Howard bit her lip. The pain was bad but not the worst. A half second hesitation was all it had taken. She concentrated on the view. Green punctuated by the bright yellow of rapeseed. David felt better and they travelled in silence. He hated radio. It interfered with his thoughts. Nothing should interfere with his thoughts.

"Ten years."

She glanced his way.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes," April said.

"Thought you were mad with me for a moment, there?"

"No."

He opened his window all the way. The heat was oppressive; her back was stuck to the seat. He rarely complained of heat or cold.

"Good, 'cos I don't want one of your fucking sulks ruining today."

"I won't."

"I know you won't, April." He ended her name with emphasis. Hill! It rang in his old car.

He pulled over and pissed, turning around to show her. He wiggled it and she laughed on the outside.

They passed a sign for Milgate Bridge.

"Next left and then it's about three miles."

"Good," she said.

They had to travel on foot the last quarter mile of the public right of way where Maria Laws had walked for the final time. David was in front, occasionally looking back and complaining about her inability to keep up. She was blowing when they got there and leaned against a slim and young tree.

David approached with the solemnity of a pilgrim. He circled the beech tree and breathed at the air, his chest pushing at the fabric of his tee shirt. Maria's epitaph was in need of restoration. He did not see his girlfriend jump at the sight of the pen knife. He deepened the characters exposing living tree. That was much better.

When he turned April straightened like a soldier caught idling on guard duty. He looked at her breasts squeezed into a too small crop top. She hated it, he knew, but he liked it very much. He liked all the clothes she had bought since they had got together. She smiled when he smiled. She put her arms around his neck when he encircled her waist. She held the scream when he bit her neck. She pulled it deep inside and rode it, mastered it, and stored it away with all the others.

"Lay down."

She started to but he wagged a finger and pointed to the tree.

"Not there, please."

"Don't spoil today, sweetie."

He pressed under her ribs with his large hands. She bit the inside of her mouth and nodded.

The tree looked miles high. She felt an old root at the base of her neck. His thrusts were shoving her closer to the trunk. The root was iron hard. He neared the end. He grasped at her hair and she felt some give. She closed her eyes and saw an afterimage of the heavens and the dark outline of Maria's tree. He stabbed harder and pushed her face to the side. His teeth played along her neck and teased at the earlier bite. She was ready but it did not come. He finished with his usual sounds and withdrew. She waited while he examined her. He wet a finger and entered her anus. When he was finished she put her underwear back on.

"Just think, sweetie. Just lay back and think."

She thought of the flat and what she was going to make for supper. If he went out she would bathe. If not she would sit with him and wait for her bedtime. She knew he had bought new films so perhaps she could read. He liked her to do that. Read while he watched the screen. It was cosy, he said.

He took photographs with his digital camera. She posed where he set her adjusting her clothes where necessary. It was going well until she caught her arm and bled on her top and skirt. He did not want there to be blood on her clothes. He knew she had done it on purpose. When he shoved her she put out the bleeding arm and smeared the bark touching the Y shape where a decade earlier Maria had left her tear.

They drove back in silence but David had lots to say back at the flat.

He left her in the bedroom and went out to meet Kevin. She managed to get to the bathroom and washed. A bath was a country too far. There was no need to cover up with cosmetics. She wouldn't be going anywhere for a month, he'd said.

Helen Howard looked through the window and waved to her son. He was bouncing down the path with his latest girlfriend. Was she Kay or Fay? She couldn't remember so greeted her at the door as *dear*. Pete jumped over the back of the settee and landed perfectly on his arse. Helen made tea and offered the shy looking girl biscuits. She nibbled at a custard cream. Pete shoved two in his mouth and ducked Helen's swipe.

"What does a nice girl like you see in this one?"

The girlfriend smiled and shook her head.

“My money!”

“She’ll be disappointed then.”

Pete laughed and put the television on. Helen took the girl to the kitchen where they sat at the counter.

“I’m sorry love; I can’t remember your name.”

“Jenny.”

She was going to kill him. That made this girl number five in less than two months.

Helen insisted they stay to eat. Jenny warmed to the older woman, her reticence gone. When evening came and they were leaving she gave Helen a hug. Helen squeezed her hand and waved them off. Pete revved the engine of his Saab and sounded the horn for fifty yards.

She cleared up remembering Jenny’s offer to help with approval. A nice girl. What a pity he’d be bored of her in no time.

Later she looked in at April’s room. One corner was covered in a mountain range of soft toys. She did not want to go in but found herself on the edge of the bed. Photographs covered one wall. April had taken most of them with her dad’s Olympus in a four year period. She had treasured the camera. It was, she said, dad’s eye on earth. Helen decided she’d stay just a little while longer before going to bed.

David arrived home at two in the morning. April was waiting. She asked him if he wanted anything and he said no. He went to bed. She was to remain in the living area for the night.

She lay on the couch and held a hand to her ribs. Her arm was itching. She unwound the bandage and examined the cut. It was ragged but not deep. The edges were already knitting together. She re covered it and tried to relax. Sleep was unlikely but she had nothing to get up for.

She thought about Maria. She had read her story in David’s magazine and looked at his favourite picture. He did not seem to notice she had an arm around her shoulders. At that moment in her life someone had stood with her and cared enough to put his arm around her. April went to sleep as she thought this.

She awoke hearing David in the bathroom. She got up and rushed to the kitchen. She made coffee and stretched to get another bag of sugar from the cupboard. She had put three spoonfuls in David’s drink when she remembered the pain in her ribs. She lifted her nightclothes. The bruises were livid but only hurt if she poked at them. She twisted and raised her arms but the pain was almost gone. She looked at her arm again. The cut had closed. She rubbed at the scab and it crumbled revealing new skin.

David opened the door and she covered the arm. He scowled and took the coffee. He wasn’t hungry and wanted painkillers. She got aspirin and water. He was on the couch pinching the skin between his eyes.

“Ring work and tell them I’m ill.”

“What shall I say?”

“That I’m fucking ill!”

She told the girl at the supermarket he had diarrhoea.

“Nice,” he said. “Why didn’t you tell them I had syphilis and make a proper job of it?”

His slap stung but there wasn’t much weight behind it. He went back to bed.

She waited until he was asleep before running a bath. She stood naked before the mirror. Her hair was longer than she liked. She ran a hand through it and tried to remember how she had worn it the night she’d met David.

The bath was pleasant enough but she had nothing to scent it. David brought soap from work. Plain white bars that smelled of nothing. He provided everything only asking that she be grateful in return.

She dressed in the bedroom. She was good at being quiet and he did not stir. She pulled a jumper over her head and tied her hair back.

Maria Laws was on the bedside table, the magazine open at page four. She crept closer. The arm looked strong and as thick as David's. The hand was curled around the shoulder. Such a protective gesture.

She took the magazine and ran her fingers over the girl's cheek. David was wrong about the eyes. He saw them as sexual. He had talked at length about this stranger's demanding appetites as if he knew her. He could never know her. No more than he knew April herself.

She felt a small thrill. She had blasphemed and liked it. David was snoring quietly. She leaned toward him, not too close. She mouthed the word bastard and stuck her tongue out. He did not roar awake and the ceiling failed to fall in.

She was at the door when she turned around and gave him the middle finger. He snorted and one nostril filled with mucus. She slapped a hand over her mouth and closed the door.

Helen was at the shops opposite to where April lived with David. They were all small affairs and her grocery bill was a third more expensive than it needed to be. She walked slowly between shops. She glanced up at David's window. A week before she had seen her. She'd sensed that April had noticed her and darted from sight. She sat by the cafe window and watched.

David got up at four and got a bottle of coke from the fridge. He ignored April. She sat on the one armchair and glanced at him every few minutes.

"Was the sofa comfortable enough for you?"

"Yes."

"Was the sofa comfortable enough for you?"

April bit her bottom lip and pulled her feet up.

"Was the sofa comfortable enough for you?"

"David--"

He stood and dropped the bottle on the floor. It bounced and rolled under the bookcase.

"Was...the...sofa...comfortable...enough...for...you, you dumb cunt?"

"No."

"And why is that Lady April?"

"David, please--"

He ran at her, jumped and turned sideways landing on her with all his weight. His head struck her nose and his elbow hit her in the right breast. He had knocked all the breath from her body. She hugged him and pressed her lips to his cheek. She stopped herself from trying to breathe. It would come in a few seconds if she let it happen naturally.

"You want a kiss?" David put his hand on her stomach and pushed himself off her, giving her an extra shove as he sprang up. Her eyes were full and her insides fought for air. He took her by the hair and dragged her off the chair.

She rolled up and put her hands at the back of her head.

"Come on then, princess, let's kiss."

He tried to take her hand but she resisted. He concentrated on one finger, worming under it and pulling it back. She yelled and he tried to twist the finger but it slipped from his grasp. He got up, panting.

“My head’s banging again now.”

He left her to go in the bedroom. She stayed down until her heart stopped hammering. She sat up and put her hands over her chest when he came back in. He had a fresh shirt on.

“Be back late. Don’t wait up.”

He slammed the door and she waited to see what he would do. When she heard the outer door shut she went to the window. He was heading for the town centre. She watched for several minutes but he did not return.

She went to the bathroom and took her jumper off. Her breathing was normal but her stomach was contracting. The bruises were gone. She poked at her ribs testing them and pressing harder. She had the memory of pain in one but the rest were fine. She removed the bandage. There was nothing wrong with her arm. No cut, no scar. Nothing.

Helen saw the bastard sauntering down the road without a care. She caught her breath. April was at the window. She started to call her name and then hushed herself. She guzzled what was left of her coffee without tasting it. She gathered her courage and left the cafe.

April ignored the doorbell. She was naked before her full length mirror. She looked for old scars and found none. She felt for the spot just out of sight on her lower back where she had had a dodgy mole removed two years ago. It wasn’t there. She tried again splaying her fingers and playing them along her skin. She shook her head. She felt her nose where she knew David had head butted her. There was no pain.

She spent another minute searching with eyes and fingers.

The doorbell was still ringing followed by urgent knocking.

April went to the bedroom and carefully inserted a finger into her vagina. She went in further. There was no pain. She debated examining her back passage but decided against it. She knew everywhere was healed or healing. Maybe David had really done her some damage this time and she was in a daze or a coma.

“I knew it.” She saw a tiny mark on her chest. A pimple sized red thing that was longer than it was wide. “Not perfect after all.”

Helen had managed to get home without too many tears. She took a call from Pete saying he was staying at Jenny’s for the night. She decided on an early night. A very early one.

David and Kevin were outside the flat. David was listening at the door. Kevin grinned and rubbed his hands together. David’s offer had turned into a nag and he had agreed to it while they were in the pub.

David unlocked the door and smiled widely. April was sat on the floor on a cushion, one of her shitty books in her hand.

“Can I have a word, my love?”

April looked over his shoulder at Kevin.

“In here,” said David, heading for the bedroom.

“Want a coffee?” she said, more to Kevin than David. Kevin glanced at her and shook his head.

David opened the bedroom door and tapped on it. She put her book back in the bookcase. She hesitated. Kevin was bigger than David but soft in the gut and slow upstairs.

“Now, my love,” said David, his voice rising.

She went with him and he gave her a little push toward the bed.

“I won’t do it.”

“Yes you will.”

David turned his back to her and swaggered as far as it was possible to swagger in the small room. He spun and threw his right fist. She gasped as it connected with her cheekbone but she did not stagger. Her arm shot out instinctively and she felt David’s frame give in to the impact of her open hand. It caught him in the chest and he struck the bedside table, the rear of his skull hit the wall and he fell onto his side.

He locked eyes with her and she knew she was in for the beating of her life.

She stammered his name and backed up until she was in the corner. He got up and spat thickly on the carpet. No matter. The bitch was going to lick it up before he cracked her head.

She cowered as he came forward. He couldn’t control a wince at the pain in his chest. His anger robbed him of logic and he knew she had hit him with a mallet or something.

The first three punches cost him as his chest muscles screamed out. He hit her a few more times and then switched. He kicked at her shins and knees. He heard Kevin shout he was to stop. Maybe the fucking retard would be eating those words later if he had the energy for him.

April felt the first punch as an unpleasant jolting sensation. The other two landed on the side of her nose and jaw.

I should be on the floor, she thought, but knew she could stand this and more. Perhaps he had deadened her nerves as he had numbed her emotions these past months. The escalation of violence had been building and had blossomed into the daily and commonplace.

The kick to the shin stung but the others bounced off her thigh. She felt the muscles resist the blows rippling under the impact before springing back into shape.

She allowed it to go on and made herself stand upright and face on. His lips twisted as they formed curses. She staggered at a particularly powerful blow that clipped her jaw and landed on her clavicle. She girded herself, slightly bending her knees and the next barrage of punches barely moved her. Kevin appeared in the doorway. He hovered momentarily and then grabbed his friend round the waist and pulled him away.

David resisted but Kevin’s bodyweight won and this gave April a moment to assess the damage.

Her face stung and she felt some pain in her neck. Her legs were rock steady as was her heartbeat.

David broke free. Kevin backed away expecting his friend to turn on him.

David looked at April, his eyes going up and down.

She rushed him and bowled him over. A quick hand on Kevin and he was on his back. She ran out into the street bare feet slapping the concrete.

Pete Howard locked his car and trotted to the front door. He fumbled his keys and dropped them. He scooped them from the path and stood up sharply.

“Jesus!”

April was stood inches from him. He gathered her in his arms and held onto her as if she might blow away in the wind.

“Where have you been?”

April could not speak nor see clearly. Her brother, the house, the world was one big blur.

“You’re wearing a nightie!”

“Sharp as ever.”

“Cheeky cow!”

He opened the door with shaking hands. They went through to the kitchen switching lights on. April looked around. The house looked exactly the same and unfamiliar at the same time.

Pete made hot drinks. “I’ll get Mum,” he said.

“Not yet,”

“She’ll kill me.”

April stroked his arm. “Soon. Let me catch my breath.”

Pete ran fingers through his hair. “You look really well. I know that sounds strange.”

“I feel great. Physically.”

April surreptitiously tested her body, flexing muscles that felt impossibly fresh. She had run at least seven miles and though she had been out of breath when she had arrived home her breathing and heart rate had calmed almost instantly.

“Let me finish this,” she lifted her coffee. “And we’ll get Mum and have a proper talk.”

“Mum’s here.”

They looked round to see Helen framed in the kitchen doorway. April hesitated for less than half a second.

“Oh, Mum.”

Kevin had always been a little scared of David but that small fear was growing every minute. David had washed and bathed the wound on his head and put salve on his skinned knuckles. He hadn’t spoken one word except to tell Kevin to sit the fuck down and wait. Kevin had done exactly that not even using the bog to empty his throbbing bladder.

David eventually sat down on the sofa and rubbed at his stubble. Kevin wasn’t the brightest star in the sky but he knew the way David was tapping his fingers and feet was a bad sign.

“You fucked up royally, tonight my friend.” His voice was low and toneless. He gestured impatiently when Kevin stuttered an apology.

“Doesn’t matter, mate.”

Kevin brightened.

“It’s that bitch. She has that effect on people.”

Kevin nodded wisely.

“But we won’t let her get away with it, will we?”

“No.”

“And this time you will do exactly what I say. Do we understand one another?”

Kevin nodded again.

Pete had fallen asleep on the couch an hour past. Mother and daughter were holding hands. April had run down the last fourteen months leaving some things out she was ashamed her mother had already guessed. She told her about the beech tree at Milgate

Bridge, shuddering with the memory. She even told the truth about her departure to a degree, leaving the unbelievable parts out.

“You’re home now,” Helen said as if that was an end to it.

April awoke in her own bed stretching her legs under the sweet smelling sheets. She had fallen asleep almost as soon as her mum tucked her in. Helen had remained in the room for an hour before leaving.

She sat up and looked around. She drank in the mid morning light cascading through the open curtains. She looked at the photographs on the wall. She was fine until she saw the one of her dad. She wiped her eyes on her covers when it was over.

After a cool shower she searched her wardrobe and found a loose fitting blouse not really suitable for day wear and a pair of three quarter length shorts that had been tight across her butt but now were quite baggy.

Helen was up. Miraculously since she had slept less than two hours. She beamed and kissed her daughter then took the girl’s face in both hands.

“Don’t do that again.”

April nodded.

“Whatever the situation you could have answered the door when he wasn’t there. We would have rescued you. Pete was out of his mind at times.”

“He’s one of the reasons I didn’t-” she trailed off.

“I know but we would have dealt with it as a family.”

April nodded again. Now wasn’t the time to explain what David was and the danger she felt they were all in.

She was ravenous. She ate a bowl of cereal and three slices of toast. She asked for more and in the end Helen fried bacon and eggs with a few sausages she had left over.

“I’ll go out for supplies later. Don’t know where my head has been lately.”

“Go later with Pete, Mum, or take a taxi.”

“Don’t worry about me, love.”

They spent what was left of the morning in the back garden which was well screened with high fencing and mature Hawthorne.

April noticed some paving slabs leaning against the shed. She waited until Helen had nipped inside to make a drink and went over and gripped one with both hands. She raised it easily. She put it against another slab. She squeezed the two together and lifted them. Two felt no different to one.

April looked at her hands for a long time.

David called in sick and sat in the flat looking around vacantly. He smoked two cigarettes. He ate a lazily prepared omelette and then dressed in trousers and an open necked shirt. A shirt April had given him early in the relationship that he’d never worn.

He took the bus to town and walked the last two miles to April’s house.

The pillock’s car wasn’t in the drive. He watched the house for a while and then approached, swinging his arms and whistling. He rapped and the movement hurt his chest.

After a moment Helen opened the door on the chain.

“Get back up my garden path, now.” She gestured with her hand.

“I want to talk to my girlfriend.”

“If I were you I’d disappear.”

David smiled. “Or what?”

“I’ll call the police.”

“And tell them what? That I’m standing in your garden, politely asking to speak to my girlfriend of more than a year?”

“I’ve been hearing all about you, you nasty little sod! Bugger off!” She closed the door. He heard the lock click into place.

“Interesting woman,” he said.

A week went by and April took her first trip outside. She had little choice. Her chest had erupted with some localized rash. It itched all the time. Pete drove her. He waited while she saw the G.P.

Doctor Hayes prescribed some cream and a dose of antibiotics in case of infection. Then he swivelled to face her and asked how she was. How she really was.

April guessed her mother had spoken to the doctor about the situation. She hadn’t failed to notice Helen was taking an anti depressant.

She didn’t feel like talking about it. The doctor, who had treated the family from before Pete and April were born accepted this with a smile and an offer of an open appointment.

Pete was bright and chatty in the car and she responded in kind. The truth was she didn’t feel like a victim as she had imagined she would. She was nervous about seeing David and more nervous, even frightened, at what she knew he might do but it didn’t diminish how well she felt. Her mind seemed as strong as her body excepting the pain-in-the-arse rash.

She thought about the fight and the paving slabs. Slabs so heavy that even Pete carried them one at a time.

“What do you think?”

“Pardon?”

“Earth to April, come in April!”

“I was miles away, sorry.”

Pete patted her knee and she took his hand only letting go when he needed to change gear.

“I said, would you like to come out with me and Jenny, on Tuesday.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Tuesday is a quiet night. We can have a meal out of town of you like.”

“It might be nice to get out.”

David trusted Kevin to watch her ‘fucking brother’ and see where he went. Kevin followed him to a hamlet the other side of the district. Kevin was a good driver if nothing else and he kept up without tailgating the Saab.

A few minutes later and he watched Pete and a woman leave together. She was a looker. A bit heavy but that was fine. He rang David and listened while his friend told him what to do.

She dressed in a mid length dress with a high neckline. The cream had reduced the irritation but the rash had deepened in colour. It was purple in patches over pink and red.

April was happy to see she had put weight on. Difficult not to with Mum’s force feeding routine. She got on the bathroom scales. Eight Stone and four pounds. She wished she had thought to get weighed when she had escaped, the better to gauge her progress. Maybe I was six and a half, she mused. No more.

Escaped. That was the word. She felt a flash of anger at him. Who the hell was he? An underachieving nobody obsessed with serial killers. He didn't even have the guts to do what they did!

She had flushed, her neck red. She sat on the bath and made herself calm down aware that her anger was an inevitable part of the journey. She decided to splash her neck with cold water.

She looked in the mirror. Her shoulders looked different. Heavier. She lifted her arms over her head and gasped. The muscles were definitely more developed. Or was this what she had looked like before?

She heard the door open and Pete's voice. She ran to the bedroom and took a cardigan from a drawer. She wrapped it around her shoulders as she went downstairs.

David waited until Kevin called before pulling his box of tricks from beneath the bed. He took out his hunting knife and the brass knuckles that had cost him a small fortune. He tried them and took a few practice swings. He slipped the knife into a home made leather sheath and secreted that in the pocket of his jacket. The knuckles went in his front pocket leaving an ugly bulge.

They got to the Indian restaurant by a quarter to eight. April and Jenny sipped vodka and coke while Pete settled for nothing and coke. When they were seated a smiling waiter who looked about ten years old handed them menus and departed smoothly.

April felt a tear trickle down her cheek. Jenny noticed first and touched her hand. "Sorry,"

Pete drank to cover the lump building in his throat.

Jenny began telling them about her day at work. She was a newly qualified nurse and was working in Accident and Emergency. She told them about the old lady who had been making a cup of tea, slipped and needed three stitches. The woman was more concerned that she had broken her mother's bone china cup. She told them about the drunken idiot who had thrown up on her while she dressed his head wound. She finished with the story of a fifty year old man who had come in with a bottle stuck up his rectum. Apparently he was about to have a bath when he fell on the bottle which he had left on his bathroom floor for some unfathomable reason and forgotten all about.

It took April half a minute before she got it and by then Pete was holding his ribs, his tears not stymied whatsoever.

David and Kevin watched the Saab pull away. They waited for ten minutes and then Kevin went to the house and knocked. He had a toolbox with him. Helen opened the door a crack, the chain on.

"Is Pete in?" Kevin said.

"He's not, love. He won't be back until late."

"Oh," he tried to look harmless and stupid. "I'm supposed to be lending him my tools for a job tomorrow."

"Shall I give him a ring?"

"Can I leave them with you?"

Helen unchained the door and said yes, he could leave them in the hall.

He shoved her hard and looked back to see David walking from the shadows. Helen had started to shout so he clamped a hand over her mouth and picked her up by the arm. She lashed out, her hand bouncing off his shoulder. David closed and bolted the door.

“In here,” he said. He went into the living room and shut the blinds. He recalled sitting here for several boring evenings listening to this old cow and looking through endless albums. The bitch had looked at him and he knew she was trying to give the impression she was reading his mind and warning him not to do anything that might upset her precious daughter. She would regret her attitude.

He looked at his dumbarse friend trying to show how tough he was hanging onto the old bitch and shaking her every time she struggled. He’d deal with him at leisure when this was over.

The meal had been a success and they left in high spirits. The vodka had loosened both women up and April had a mad urge to see David again. The original David who was cute and intense and fit looking. She laughed and Jenny asked her to share the joke.

She changed the subject instead. They left the restaurant and headed for a nearby pub that Pete swore was the best boozier in town. This probably meant wall to wall football and chewing gum on the carpet.

It was surprisingly pleasant and about half full. They ordered and April downed it in one and went to bar herself before remembering she didn’t have any money. She turned to find her brother with a ten pound note in his hand. She hugged him.

A shaven headed man who was sat with two friends said something about having two women and sharing.

April rounded on him. “Keep your fucking comments to yourself!”

The man held his hands up.

“Whoa!” Pete took her by the arm and led her away. He made her sit down and went back for her drink. The man looked Pete over and decided against it.

“No offence, mate,” he said.

“None taken,” Pete said.

Kevin didn’t like taping the old woman’s mouth but he did it anyway after securing her hands and ankles. David was pacing, psyching himself for something Kevin could guess at. His doubts had trebled in the last ten minutes. He didn’t want a stretch in prison. He didn’t like having more than two or three people to think about at once.

David went to the kitchen and searched the fridge. He threw a can of lager at his friend who tried to catch it. It bounced off his hand and struck Helen. He apologized to the woman and reddened when his friend scowled at him while shaking his head.

Pete decided he should get his big sister home right about now. She was slurring her words and giggling almost non stop. Jenny kept catching his eye. He drained his glass, really sick at the thought it was his fifth half pint of coke. He rose and Jenny helped April to her feet. They almost got to the door when April turned to the shaven headed man.

“Prick!”

Pete grabbed her wrist and pulled her out the door. She felt a wave of sickness as fresh air washed over her. She swayed and Pete said they should sit at one of the outdoor tables while he got the car.

April rested her arms on the table and lowered her head. Jenny stroked her back.

“Have you had a nice time?”

“Fuck, yes,” April said. “The fucking best time.”

Jenny looked toward the Indian restaurant. She could see Pete hurrying to the car park. He disappeared around the side of the building.

A couple walked by. They were young. Perhaps early twenties but more likely late teens. He was tall and broad, she dainty and short even tottering on heels.

April looked up and breathed deeply.

“You!” she shouted.

Jenny looked up and saw the man glance back. April got up and walked toward them.

“Are you deaf?”

“What?” The young man dropped his companion’s hand. The girl backed away from him slightly.

“Why do you think you can hit her?”

“What? Who are you?” He looked at the girl. Jenny saw an unmistakable shiver.

“Give you a hard on does it?”

Jenny told April to sit down and said something about having drunk too much.

April came around the table. There was no trace of uncoordinated movement. She bared her teeth in a half smile.

The man looked uncertain and then recovered. He turned to his girlfriend.

“What have you been saying this time?”

The girl looked small and trapped.

April breathed deeply again.

The girl stammered something Jenny couldn’t hear. She stepped in front of April and found herself looking at the pub, her words strangled with surprise. April had deftly stepped around her so fast she’d not been able to track her.

“I can smell it all over you!” April spat.

The man decided it was time to leave and he might have saved himself had he done so. Instead of walking away he smiled. He was going to tell the nosey slag to shaft herself with something wide and covered in glass when she ran at him. Not that he saw her run.

David was looking angrier and Kevin was glad when he left the room.

He wandered around the house not too concerned about leaving his DNA. The house was going to burn. He went into April’s room. He’d had her here for the first time. Crap sex but a pleasant enough prelude to what he had known would come.

He flipped through her books and opened drawers. He was gentle with her possessions. He sprayed perfume. Quite nice. He felt a tinge of regret for disallowing scented products. Couldn’t recall why he had now he came to think about it.

He pulled the photograph of her dad from the wall. He would shove this in her later.

Jenny and the young girl were crying and pleading for April to stop. The man’s face had pretty much disappeared under the blows. April was spattered in his blood. She got up and stood astride him. A low growl emanated from her throat. She took hold of the man by his jacket and lifted him. Once he was upright she hefted him in her arms and raised him over her head. She threw him over the road. He bounced twice before striking railings that bordered a cemetery.

Pete saw his sister throw something as he left the restaurant car park. He accelerated and pulled up sharply in front of the pub. April pushed Jenny to the car. She looked ashen and wouldn’t answer Pete. He couldn’t make out what was piled against the railings.

April looked at the girl who looked back in return. April put a finger to her lips. The girl was trembling. She looked at her boyfriend and back at April. She nodded and took off her shoes before running across the road and vanishing.

Pete pulled up at Jenny's. They left April in the car and Pete had to catch up with his girlfriend as she ran down the path. April watched him take her arm. Jenny was gesturing and Pete looked shocked. April chewed her bottom lip and flexed her hands. The skin on her knuckles had split and bled. Now they were whole with no sign of injury. She felt very good apart from her inflamed chest.

She looked up when she heard a bang. Pete was looking at Jenny's closed door. He waited for thirty seconds before half running back to his car. He set off without speaking to his sister.

"I'm sorry."

"Jenny's scared."

"Of course."

"She thinks she's going to get in trouble."

"She didn't do anything and the girl won't shop us."

"Shop us?"

It was one of David's phrases.

"She won't and no one will blame us. There's no CCTV down there. I looked."

"On a dark street at eleven at night?"

"I did it anyway. Dealt with him, I mean. You can't get in trouble for it."

"April you've been through a lot but this is way out of kilter."

"You would say that. Have you ever been on the wrong side of a beating for nothing?"

"April."

"Stop the car!"

"Why?"

"Stop the fucking car!"

"April!"

She opened the rear door. He braked.

"Don't be so dramatic!"

She got out and ran down a side street. He tried to follow but she had already scaled a fence and run through a garden out of his sight. He stopped, confused and tried looking over the fences which were well over six feet high.

She intended to run until her muscles gave way but after an hour she realized this was futile. She felt hungry even after the mammoth meal. She sat beneath a streetlight and kicked her shoes off. She placed her feet flat on the pavement enjoying the cold. Her chest was driving her mad. She rubbed it knowing her nails would only make it worse. The rubbing was a compromise.

The man she had attacked was a stranger but she had known he was violent. Known what he was. She shook her head and started to walk in the direction of home.

Pete went halfway home before turning around and driving back towards the restaurant. He didn't dare pass by it so skirted the area and drove into town. He tried to think of where she might be. Mum would go crazy if he didn't bring her home. He recalled Jenny's sickened expression and the way she had described the attack. It didn't make sense.

David had Kevin make coffee and raid the cupboards and fridge for food. They devoured everything. Kevin stuffed his mouth with biscuits spluttering crumbs down his front. He really was a disgusting pig.

The old bitch just glared. She was scared, surely but she didn't appear so. April looked like her but she must take after her dad in personality. A spineless fucker from what April had told him. A decent man, whatever that meant. He got up and started pacing. Kevin stopped eating. David began poking around, moving ornaments and taking photographs from the wall. He put them back carefully.

"Your daughter," he said. The old woman looked him up and down and looked away slowly, deliberately letting him know he was shit. He was nothing.

He knelt in front of her and began describing what he was going to do.

Helen couldn't help it. A tear slid down her cheek.

April started running again. She jogged to begin with and then sped up. Her feet barely touched the ground. She wondered how fast she was going. Faster than a speeding bullet? Perhaps not, but faster than she had ever run before. Perhaps faster than anyone ever had.

She decided to try something as she passed a building site. She paused to look over the hoarding. She jumped and got hold of the top of it, raised herself and saw there was room if she wanted to try. The hoarding was probably three foot higher than she. That would make it maybe seven and a half or eight.

She dropped and jogged back. She ran at the hoarding and launched herself. She cleared it with inches to spare. Her landing wasn't graceful but it was painless.

The site was vast and strange. She walked around it and looked up at the gigantic metal frame. The skeleton of some monster building. She began to climb enjoying the feel of the metal against her hands. She got to the top and sat. She was probably three times the height of a two storey house. She didn't feel afraid. She didn't feel much except hunger and that maddening itch.

The town was spread before her, a series of lights in a low, wide arc. She followed the progress of cars on the busier streets and the motorway just visible to her left. She wondered what would happen if she let herself fall. Would she break bones? Would it matter? No, they would mend in minutes, she knew although this made little sense.

She climbed down and found a small gap to squeeze through. She was too hungry to waste any more energy.

David announced he needed to piss and Helen listened to his heavy footfall on her stairs. She made noises beneath the tape to get the other's attention. He looked at her, his mouth slack. She lifted her taped hands as far as she could, pointing them at her mouth.

Kevin shook his head and she slumped in the chair. For the first time she began to feel afraid.

April was a few streets from home when Pete drew alongside. He got out and she walked to him slipping her arms around his middle. He kissed her head.

"We going home?"

"We going home," she said.

She got in and he drove the small distance.

He parked and she put her hand on his arm.

"One step at a time, sis."

"I know."

"You should go back to the doctor."

"I will but I won't be confessing."

Pete took her hand. "Did you know the guy?"

How to explain? "I knew what he was."

Pete weighed up a response and decided not to voice it.

"Come on."

They were at the door when she grabbed him around the neck from behind. She dragged him around the side of the house ignoring his muffled words. She squeezed gently until he fell unconscious. She laid him on the narrow strip of grass which ran the length of both back and front gardens. She listened and smelled at the air.

Pete looked asleep. She put him in the recovery position she remembered from a St John's ambulance course. A course the old April had attended back when she thought the world loved her as much as she loved it. She brushed hair from his face.

The blinds at the back were drawn. Her fingers fitted nicely between the bricks. She began to climb.

Kevin was in the hall having taken up position as soon as they heard the car. He held an adjustable spanner and was moving it from hand to hand. David was out of sight in the lounge. They would wait until the two of them came in and closed the door before pouncing. Kevin the brother and David would take care of his girlfriend. A whack from his hammer and being dragged in front of her mother should take the fight out of her.

Her fingers burned under the immense pressure but they didn't let her down. She concentrated everything on keeping them pressed against the wall. She rose slowly and almost slipped once but managed to hang on and gained greater purchase on the tiny ledges between the house bricks. She got to her window. The curtains were open and the light on. She grabbed at the guttering and put one hand on the soffit. Her feet rested on the window frame. She listened intently, her head swivelling like a cobra.

David was losing patience but he didn't move. He could hear Kevin breathing heavily and murmuring. David's heart was steady, his body cool and relaxed. It struck him how peaceful violence made him feel.

April braced herself on the guttering, swung her legs backwards and broke through the window. It gave with the impact of her feet and filled the bedroom with shards of glass. She landed on the carpet crouched and tense. Her face was bleeding, a large piece of glass in her cheek. She felt needle pains on her arms and neck. Blood was soaking into her dress.

David swore at the noise and told Kevin to stay at the door. He ran upstairs to be confronted with a bloodied thing at April's bedroom door. He had time to register the snarling vision was his former girlfriend before she was on him. He felt a terrific blow to the back of his head as it hit the floor and teeth ripping at his face before he blacked out.

Kevin was in a quandary. He heard a loud thump and what sounded like a large dog growling and snapping. A shadow appeared on the wall and it wasn't his friend. Kevin tried to open the door and then remembered David had taken the old woman's keys. He went into the room shouting at Helen who was on the floor struggling against the tape.

He saw them through the kitchen door and grabbed them off the counter. He ran back to the hall and glanced up the stairs. A red thing stood at the top. He cried out

and thrust at the lock. He managed to get the key in, twisted it and then was outside and running. He didn't see April watching him from the door.

She closed it and went into the room. Her tears fell as soon as she saw Helen. She lifted her from the floor and sat her on the edge of the sofa. Helen gasped for breath when April pulled the tape from her mouth.

"Where is he?"

April couldn't speak. She helped to free Helen's legs.

"Where is he?" Helen stumbled into the hall.

"He's upstairs," April followed her. Her legs wobbled. She felt a sting on her cheek and pulled the glass from her face. She let it drop to the floor.

Helen screamed.

Pete was leaning against the front door. His eyes went from mother to sister. April went to her knees, her body shaking with deep sobs.

David was led to the interview room. It was cold and he knew the police had done this on purpose. His solicitor was already there. The sergeant was on the cusp of retirement. His companion was female. She hadn't taken her eyes from David. He looked back unabashed.

The interview went back and forth. He was asked if he knew where his friend was. He did not. What if the police located Kevin? He shrugged and refused to say anything more. He denied tricking his way in. He had been invited by April. She wanted to talk about their relationship. No there had never been any violence. He had been the one who was attacked, probably by her brother although he couldn't remember. He had, as they knew, been found unconscious and bleeding and had spent three days in hospital. He had scars. What injuries had April, her mother and giant of a brother sustained?

The solicitor went to work. They had no evidence of anything other than the FACT that her client had been severely injured. Did they have proof that David had assaulted anyone? What about the damage in the bedroom. Was there anything to implicate David in this? Had they considered the idea that the knife and brass knuckles had been planted on him?

David laughed and leaned forward.

"Go on; send your little pile of papers to the CPS. I can hear them laughing already!"

Within an hour David was home examining his face. He traced the long scar from below his right eye to his jaw line wincing at the pain but pressing harder all the same.

Kevin would be hiding from him not the police. He usually went to the coast when he was in trouble and would stay there for months if he came back at all. Fucking retard!

David took a double dose of the painkillers the hospital had given him and laid down with his favourite read. He looked at Maria Laws and wished he had known her.

Pete hadn't been home for days. He was at Jenny's. Helen thought this was for the best for now. She busied herself in the kitchen. April had eaten four meals and it was only one in the afternoon. The girl was sick, no doubt about it but she wouldn't go to the doctor. Helen would get him to make a house call. She spooned shepherd's pie on the plate filling it except for a sliver she reserved for string beans. She put the plate on a tray with a mug of tea and took it upstairs.

April sat up trying not to show pain on her face. She attacked the food immediately without a thank you. Helen sat in the corner on a pouf. The food was half gone when April smiled at her.

“So hungry.”

“Catching up.”

“Yes,” said April.

“Shall I open the curtains?”

“No,” said April a little too quickly. “Prefer it dark, that’s all”

Helen nodded. “Do your eyes hurt, love?”

April drank half the tea. “Just like it this way.”

Helen waited until she finished and took the tray.

“The police called this morning.”

“They’re not doing anything.”

“No, as we thought.”

“Aren’t they supposed to come out and tell us in person?”

“I don’t know.”

“Too ashamed. That pig that came knew we were telling him the truth.”

“April!”

“I didn’t call *him* a pig because *he’s* a copper, mum.”

Helen leaned in. “Your skin is flaking. Go to the doctor. Please, April.”

“I will but not today.”

“Tomorrow? Shall I ring for an appointment? They will see you at short notice.”

April laid back and pulled the quilt over her head.

She peeked when Helen closed the door. She sat up. Her back was hurting. She felt at her neck. It was lumpy. Large hard nodules were forming along her spine. She opened her night gown and pressed at the thing on her chest. She had counted the little bumps over and over. Twelve of them. Hard stones under the skin. The itching had gone but had been replaced by a deep pain inside. She hitched trying to be quiet as the tears dropped.

She got out of bed and went to the bathroom, locking it. She pulled the night gown over her head. One wall was covered in mirror tiles. She turned and could see the lumps on her back. Her upper body was heavier. Her legs were bowing under the extra weight. Her chest was purpling and blotchy. She poked at it. The flaking was new. It made her face and body look powdery. She sat on the edge of the bath and jumped back up. She put her hands on her buttocks and felt something hard. It was her coccyx somehow enlarged.

A whispering sound reached her, a tickling feeling deep inside her ears. She turned around looking in all directions. She went to the door and listened. Again, a whisper that was and wasn’t audible. An *almost* sound. She looked at herself in the tiles her fear turning to terror.

David felt a tug as the last of his stitches was taken out. His hand had strayed near the nurse’s breast and he was sure she gave the stitch an unnecessary twist in return. He thanked her and accepted a leaflet on aftercare of wounds. He dropped it in the corridor and watched it catch the air and sail along the floor, coming to rest where he hoped someone would slip on it.

He walked through the main reception looking around, a smile on his lips. It was a cold day. He buttoned his coat and went to the bus stop. A woman with a child of around four smiled at him. He asked the child her name. *Iona*, how pretty. The woman was twenty-two and single. Iona’s father wasn’t in the picture. She lived alone

in Higham, a village near his flat. They exchanged numbers. She got off a few steps before him. He waved and blew the child a kiss. They would be a nice distraction after his unfinished business was completed.

April rang Pete on his mobile. He answered after three rings.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"There's nothing to be sorry for. I know why you did it. It's just..."

"I frighten you?"

There was silence.

"Yes. Probably."

"Will you come home?"

"I don't know."

"Just for a visit. An hour, please baby brother."

Pete held the phone away for a few seconds.

"Let me have a word with Jenny when she gets back from work."

"And then you'll come?"

"Yes."

David had it all worked out. He would do it tomorrow night. He put a large torch in the boot of his car along with tape and a rope he'd got from a camping equipment store. Back in the flat he took his prize possession from its hiding place in the toilet cistern. The Enfield revolver had belonged to his father. David maintained it as he had been taught. It was his secret. His one thing April and all the others had no knowledge of. He reverently checked it, stroking the cold metal gently. He loaded it and placed it in the compartment he had sewn in his leather jacket.

It was going to be a wonder filled night.

Helen checked the door and windows and then went to bed. She looked in on April who was sleeping. She washed and got into her night clothes. It was ten thirty she noted but felt much later. She looked out on a quiet street. The wind was whipping leaves across the road, spinning them in miniature whirlwinds and dropping them as suddenly as if a switch had been thrown.

She got into bed and began reading a magazine.

April heard her mother open and close the bedroom door. She heard everything. Every creak as the house settled. The chatter of the neighbours and the sigh her mother had let out before going into her bedroom. She waited another ten minutes and got up limping to the door. She put her dressing gown on and slippers her feet were now straining against. She went downstairs to the kitchen and took a loaf of bread and cheese to the counter. She ate it and washed it down with a pint of milk. She rummaged in the fridge and unwrapped a half pound of sliced turkey, eating it quickly. She was looking for something else when Pete's car pulled onto the drive. She watched the light from its headlights move across the lounge wall and realized she was sat in the dark. She stifled a sob. This was another change she couldn't understand. She could see in the weak light almost as well as she could in daytime.

She snapped the kitchen light on and went into the lounge.

Pete came in and locked the door. She heard the thump of a bag on the floor and the rustle of his jacket as he hung it up.

"Jesus!"

He had seen her in the gloom.

“Don’t put the light on. My head hurts.”

He came over and put his arms around her. She stiffened but he didn’t seem to notice the changes to her neck and back.

He flopped down on the settee.

“Mum says you’re not well.”

“I’m ok.”

“But you won’t see the doctor?”

She shrugged.

“I’ll take you in the morning. No arguments.”

She smiled for the first time in a fortnight.

“Jenny has asked after you.”

April wasn’t sure how to respond.

“She wants to see you again.”

“When I’m feeling better. Bet she thinks I’m a lunatic.”

“We all think that.”

“Sod off.”

“Make me a drink. Coffee, three sugars.”

“What did your last slave die of?”

“Exhaustion.”

She told him to wait while she went to the kitchen. From where he was he couldn’t see through. She made coffee.

“Good God!”

She turned. He was in the doorway. She started to cry and spilled some of the coffee.

He tried to take hold of her arms but she skirted by him and went back into the lounge.

Into the shadows where I belong.

Pete followed her. She could hear his heartbeat quicken. His voice shook. “We’re going to the hospital now!”

“No.”

“April!”

“I said no!”

Pete knelt by her. She tried to curl her legs up but they wouldn’t go. She couldn’t raise them. She looked down at her swollen hands and felt the thing on her chest pulse.

“I don’t know what’s wrong. Cancer probably.”

Pete wet his lips. “What about Jenny? She could take a look.”

April looked at him, a little hope on her face.

“I’ll ring her now.”

“It’s late. Do it in the morning.”

Pete didn’t answer. He didn’t know if she had that much time.

David parked well away from the house. He wouldn’t trick his way in this time. The house wasn’t alarmed and the windows were shit. Old wooden frames. Her dad’s insurance had been as weak as he was and he knew the struggles for money April and her family had gone through before the giant had made good with his great business and big fucking car!

He couldn’t believe the Saab was there. Shit on it! Then again...

Dealing with the brother might be fun as long as there wasn't a delay getting out. He had planned his route from the estate. The back roads might take a little longer but they had all night.

April sat while her brother made arrangements to pick Jenny up. He was right. They couldn't wait any longer. He gave her a kiss before leaving.

She caught the scent as soon as Pete opened the door. She leaped up, her forward motion strong, and landed half way into the hall. Pete was backing up. She smelled the metal but didn't recognize it for what it was. David looked surprised when he saw her and then took on that old look of power and I-can-keep-this-up-all-night attitude that had been the norm for four fifths of their time together.

Pete was saying something placatory, the panic in his voice clear and moving. David motioned for him to back into the lounge, his hand on the front door. He wouldn't get the chance to close it.

April ran at him, one hand finding his wrist and twisting the weapon from his hand. It went off and she screamed as the noise tore at her ear. For milliseconds she thought he had shot her but then she knew it was only the noise slamming into her ear and destroying its delicate mechanisms. She hauled him inside. He kicked at her, his heavy boot bouncing from her shin which was now armoured and numb to pain. She slammed his head into the wall. He was down but still conscious. Her ear was bleeding but already healing. April was beyond the words her brother was yelling. He had the gun. April growled and turned on him. He backed up and lowered the weapon.

Brother and sister looked up at the sound of their mother calling. She was halfway down the steps, her face contorting with fear.

April took hold of David by his arm and ran through the door. His body danced like a doll, his feet striking the doorframe.

Pete followed and saw her scoop the man into her arms like a bridegroom holding his bride. She looked back once before disappearing into the darkness.

Helen took the phone from her son's hand. He was shaking, barely making sense. Helen had witnessed why. Her daughter had looked inhuman. A bent thing with impossible strength.

She ordered Pete to leave the phone alone and to put the gun away. She went back upstairs and got dressed. She caught her reflection in her dresser mirror and swayed once before mentally gripping herself. She prayed briefly using the quick desperate tones she had often uttered to a deity she didn't believe in and yet called on often. She dressed in her gardening clothes. Tough denim and a man's shirt. She pulled a heavy sweater on that went to her knees and a small jacket that wouldn't restrict her movements.

Pete was in the kitchen drinking water.

"There's bottled water in the fridge. Bring it all and get your sister something to wear. She's got a holdall in the bottom of her wardrobe."

Pete sat at the counter.

"Go on and give me that gun! Where is it?"

Pete stared at her as if she was speaking Latin.

She shoved him from his stool and pushed him towards the hall door. She saw the gun on the drainer. She picked it up, amazed at how heavy it was. She had no idea if she would be able to use it.

David's head was snapping back and forth. He felt lightness and then a thump and instant, bright pain in his ankle. They were in a field but that was all he could tell. April had carried him practically unconscious before dropping him while she scanned the darkness. He yelled when April grasped his hand and dragged him along the ground. If she would stop he could think. He swore at her and tried to break her grip. He tried to speak but his mouth was too dry and the pain in his ankle was unbearable. She stopped and he came to rest at her feet. He could make her out as a grey smudge. Her breathing was wrong. Like an engine booming with precision. And she smelled strange. Or something in this field did. Was she sniffing the air? The seconds helped him to clear his head. He remembered the house and her face flying toward him. He had no idea how she had done it and what fuckery she had used to beat him three times but it ended now. He reached slowly down to his ankle and slipped the small knife from its neat little sheath.

April could smell it. The scent of the outrage. The whispering returned growing ever stronger just as she was. The *others* were there awaiting her arrival. She looked at the man at her feet. The top of his head showed the beginning of a bald spot. She wanted to laugh but the others swamped her thoughts and she struggled to remember who and what the thing was that grovelled in the earth. She tasted the air around it. *One of them.*

A...

One of them...

She gnashed her teeth together. The thing moved quickly and she felt the blade slice into her stomach.

Helen had little choice but to trust Pete to drive. She had never learned. She was racking her brain for the location. She couldn't remember it although she had to.

David thrust the knife with all his remaining strength. It slipped into her easily. He felt her tense and knew she would not be able to scream. Hit the right spot and the belly muscles contract making breathing difficult to impossible. He withdrew and waited for her to fall. His mind filled with the possibilities of the next few hours. He shoved himself away.

"Now then, what shall we do?" He couldn't manage a sing song voice, his mouth dryer than a ninety year old nun's fadge, but he at least got the words out. Plenty of time for talk once he'd had a little rest. He'd get the moisture he needed from her once he got those, whatever the fuck she was wearing, off. She wasn't moving. He got to his feet controlling the scream he wanted to give when he put weight on his ankle.

"April?"

"David. That really was a very naughty thing to do."

Helen directed her son to the A1 and watched the signs. She would know the place if she saw it. Pete was driving well now. His knuckles weren't white anymore. She put her foot on the gun she had placed in the foot well, its barrel pointing away from her and Pete.

David realized he was in trouble and briefly wondered why he hadn't processed the changes in his girlfriend. She had beaten him three times already and he had never even thought once how she had managed it. It didn't happen like this. Women didn't beat him at anything. He tried to escape, dropping the knife and hobbling away. She

took a piece out of his scalp dragging him backwards. His nose filled with mucus and he gagged.

“Are you crying, David? Silly baby.”

“Fuck off!”

She pushed him over. He *was* crying.

“Did you know you’re going bald?”

He began to crawl away. She stepped on him with one misshapen foot and held him there. “We’ve got all night.” she said and the voice was not her own.

“There!”

“Jesus, mother!”

“The next junction. Follow the sign for Milgate Bridge.”

“Is that the place?”

“I’m sure of it. Look for a farm.”

Pete swore under his breath. “That doesn’t help.”

“I’ll know it when I see it and stop swearing.”

The rest of the journey was easier. David didn’t struggle anymore and April walked with him in her arms. He felt the muscles working in them twisting and flexing more like a machine than flesh. He could hear birds singing although there wasn’t any light yet.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Can we stop and talk?”

She ignored him.

“I can make everything right. I can.”

She jumped up and they sailed over a wall. He grunted as they landed.

“Where are we going?”

“You know,” she said.

The others were calling. She could hear them beyond the outrage, restless and clamouring for her arrival.

The sun was coming up. The sky was changing as they tore through the countryside. Milgate Bridge was less than three miles away. She briefly questioned if she should turn around and phone the police but then she remembered the phone call and the official tone of the policeman who hadn’t even had the courage to face her.

“What are we looking for?”

“A tree.”

“Oh, bloody hell, mum!”

“It’s massive and on a rounded hill. April said they could see it from the road.”

Pete sighed.

“She said it was unusually big, a great old tree.”

“Right.”

As the light hit it, David groaned.

“April-”

“Speak again and I’ll break your jaw.”

He couldn’t see the tree anymore. She had adjusted his position and pressed him closer to her body. He could see something protruding from her chest. It quivered. He tasted vomit. He looked up at her, the light getting stronger. She was waxen, the skin sloughing off. Her eyes had sunk in, her tongue lolled, a sharp thing that slapped at

her chin as she moved forward. He began to struggle, a little of his former self asserting.

Pete saw it before Helen. It disappeared as the road dipped and then came into plain view. Pete sped up. He braked when he saw a sty, coming to a halt a few yards beyond it. Helen got out and turned back for the gun.

“Should I take it?”

She hesitated. “No, I’ll keep it. I’ll point it at him and you get your sister.”

“Mum, there’s something wrong with her, you know it.”

“So?”

Pete lifted his hands.

“I don’t know.”

“We’ll worry about that when we’ve got her safely home.”

They climbed over the sty.

David fought for his life. He knew she was going to kill him. She had dropped him and he had kicked at her legs like an upended beetle. She just stepped back. Her face had changed even more so. Her bottom jaw stuck out further. Her hair looked thinner.

“Fucking bitch, fucking whore!”

David shouted over and over. He got to his knees and began crawling away.

April watched him and then looked over at the tree. She watched it move lazily. The sun glinted on its branches and few remaining leaves.

David was five yards away. He was mumbling, covered in mud and sweat. She strode over and took one arm. He cried out as she dragged him toward the outrage.

Helen saw movement. She stopped to see. Pete came up behind, his eyes on the ground trying to avoid sheep shit and pieces of ancient wall. He looked up and saw his sister dragging what looked like a ragged sack.

Helen put a hand by his face to stop him calling out. They hurried on.

David heard whispering. He tried to look but was thwarted by the angle. He couldn’t resist her any longer. He had ceased trying.

He saw two people breasting the hill. He focussed his eyes on them as difficult as it was while being dragged over rugged ground.

He didn’t have the energy to swear out loud. It was her fucking mother and the giant. What was this? A family execution? The thought stalled when he saw what Helen carried.

April left him a few yards from the base of the beech tree. She moved closer, hearing the others. The voices rose as a choir. She growled and the voices responded. A thousand thousand of them reaching out from the other place. She held her hand before it. It sucked at the world. She dared to move a little closer. The Y shaped mark whistled, an ever widening conduit. She longed to see beyond it.

“April. Listen sweetheart.”

April turned to Helen who raised a hand to her mouth. Pete towered at her side.

April looked down at her hands. The fingers were curled almost into fists. They throbbed and she could see the bones and muscles work beneath the thinning skin. Her arms were thicker and longer. She felt a pop in her lower back and she moved forward, her legs bending to compensate. She tried to speak. This was her mother

wasn't it? Her queen? No, mother only. She looked back to the tree. The Y shaped mark was no longer visible. A whirling and vibrating disturbance covered it. She glimpsed at the others. Row after row of them waiting impatiently, a tidal wave frozen in time.

David was looking at it too. His eyes were wide. She was not enjoying his fear. She took a step towards her mother.

"Come on, love, come to me. We'll go home."

The disturbance widened further. The others were still restrained. She heard them asking her to open the world to them.

Helen came forward, handing the gun to Pete who took it without looking at it. She tried to close the gap but April moved closer to the tree.

Helen saw the disturbance, her brain refusing to acknowledge it, just as it had rationalized the changes in her daughter. She reached out and April didn't move. She moved closer still and reached out. April lifted her hand and allowed her mother to touch it. It resembled a club now. Useless as a hand but perfect for something else?

David could hear the whispering and see something indistinct on the tree. He forced his eyes from it and watched the old woman and April. The giant was moving towards them.

He watched and waited before rolling over as he had done when playing as a child on his dad's lawn while his parent's laughed and said he was better than any steam roller.

He sat up and calculated the distance. The women were watching the tree, Helen's arm across April's lumpy back.

He stood and ran the pain in his ankle beyond any pain he had experienced. He favoured it as best he could. He ran into Pete who went down easily. He clawed for the gun as Pete dropped it. The metal was dark against the sodden ground. He took it and immediately aimed it toward the women. He fired.

April dropped to the ground. Helen saw the blood before her brain allowed the sound of the Enfield's report to register.

David fired again but missed. He got to his feet and aimed at Pete who looked half asleep with blood pouring from a wound on his forehead. David almost dropped the gun when Helen wailed her daughter's name.

April was on her feet. She walked straight for him. He raised the Enfield.

She tore at her night clothes. One breast had gone, the other looked normal. The skin on her chest split and the thing sticking out from her chest freed itself. It was wide and had several appendages which snaked in all directions. April fell forward but caught herself on her club hands. She came at him on all fours. Her head spilt revealing a knob of gristle and bone. The new body emerged from the old, the skin and what remained of April Howard falling away. It moved gorilla like, a four footed glistening arrangement of muscles and cable veins.

David let the gun fall. He closed his eyes.

The thing reached out the chest limb and entwined its coils around his arms and legs. It lifted him and turned back to the tree.

Helen was on her knees, her eyes on the nightmare form.

The disturbance was now at least four feet wide.

The others called.

She had to open it fully and then they would come and rid the world of violence. Rid it of all drones except the most prized.

The thing that had been April Howard howled. It looked into the place of the others, alive with order and the rule of one for all. They would come and purify the Earth. They would stop the outrages and the endless pain.

“April.”

The thing turned. Helen was still on her knees. Her face was smeared and swollen. She raised her arms wide.

The thing looked back at the others poised in their dimension an impossible distance away. Row after row of quadrupeds with a single limb ending in multiple digits.

It howled and stood David in front of the disturbance. He tried to wriggle out of the thing’s grasp. He was murmuring, his eyes ranging over the thing April had become. He noticed the eyes were still hers.

It raised him and threw him at the growing portal.

He tried to cling on, his hands searching for purchase. He heard the voices of the others. They were angry and frustrated. He had time to register they were not angry at April before he was sucked into the gap. It closed over as God’s hand had closed Adam’s side after taking his rib.

The April thing fell on its front. Helen did not hesitate. She stroked the armoured flesh. It heaved and she heard crackling under the skin.

“My God!”

Helen tried to smile at her son. He was rubbing his head and staring at the creature. He sat next to his mother. They waited and watched until the thing stopped breathing.

After a time Pete gently pulled his mother to her feet. She kept her eyes on the mound of bone and muscle.

Pete led her away. She looked back and saw fluid seep down its knotty side. Pete tried to propel her forward but she wriggled away from him.

She ran back, stumbling once and losing a shoe. She sat by it and listened. There was more cracking as if the thing was being cooked. The fluid came from a tiny wound. Helen poked at it. She got one index finger in. It was fatty and wet on the inside. She managed to get her other index finger in and worked at the wound, widening it little by little until she could get more fingers in. She pulled and lifted herself off her haunches using her weight to lever more at the hole. She felt something give and fell on her butt.

Pete was watching. He bent to the hole and saw movement.

“Come away, there’s something moving,” he wasn’t aware he said this in a whisper.

Helen attacked the hole again, tugging and using all her weight and strength. The hole gave again and a large chunk of what looked like brown bone covered in a network of thick veins came free. She threw it aside. The hole was two foot across now and belched more fluid that soaked into Helen’s jeans.

She carefully put her arms in deep. She made a little noise, a weak scream and pulled back. Her fingers had touched something rounded. She moved further in almost to her shoulders. Warm fluid splattered her face. She spat some out.

“Get hold of me and pull!”

“What?”

“My waist. Come on!”

Pete took his mother around her middle and pulled. Once, twice and they fell backwards, Helen’s head colliding with his teeth.

Helen got up immediately and pulled at what looked like a skin sack emerging from the hole. It tore easily and April’s blond head made dark landed in Helen’s lap. She vomited clots of yellow onto Helen’s jeans. Her eyes opened wide.

Helen wiped at her daughter’s face, smooth skinned and flawless.

“My baby,” she said.

The Hand Driver King.

There's more than one heart in the human body. I'm not talking about sentiment, the heart you find on a Valentine's Day card, not the type young girls scrawl on the pages of school books or in little diaries protected with flimsy gold coloured locks. I mean the heart of old beliefs. The heart as the centre of being. What we knew before science told us the brain was we and we the brain. Would you be surprised to find there are hearts in each of your fingers and more than that? In your toes! That's right.

I sit here with mine covered in woollen socks, my feet on my sofa, warmed by my gas fire and the heavy meal I wolfed not an hour ago. I move them, make circles in the air. I may massage them later while I watch my television and eat my fill of evening treats.

It won't make any difference. No more than if I shout at the sky when it rains because I don't want to get wet. They'll still be cold.

I'm forty-nine. No, don't be kind. I know what I look like. Got my mirror haven't I? Set over the fire, you see. If you took a tour around my house you'd find a lot of my conveniences are near heat. My bed backed up as near as can be to the radiator. My kettle by the combi boiler. Shit, even the telephone has a baby fan heater for a friend out in the hall. My fingers and toes have hearts and they remember cold like no brain ever could.

I was a tramp. Vagrant some say. The Americans would have it hobo. Tenderfoots and know all liberals, homeless! I was a tramp because I tramped. I walked across pavement and road and long canal paths, across every park in this town. I earned the title.

Before that I was a husband. I was a father. I was a drinker. I expect you know where my priority lay, although in my defence it wasn't always that way. Whose life story is a straight line? The details don't really matter. My wife found a man who could and did drink socially, the fuck. He liked my boy and I hope my boy liked him back.

I got another four walls and sort of lived until my drunk life and my real one converged. Couldn't say for certain but I think it was July 1990 I was thrown out by a landlord whose name I forget. Within weeks I was in Lindholme doing four months for persistent shoplifting. I left prison with my clothes and pretty much stayed that way for the rest of my stint on the streets.

It turned out my town had a number of invisibles. Maybe two dozen regulars in the centre with a few nomads dropping in. People disappeared now and then. Most came back, having paid their dues to Her Majesty.

I got to know all the best places. Where to get food, don't pull a face. I won't share all the details. I begged, occasionally threatened and I always, always, got by. A pattern of prison and streets continued throughout the year. I kept going because when drink is master you do what it tells you.

Christmas 1991 was mild and the New Year brought opportunities. The town filled with lunchtime revellers and I did well for myself, dancing in the pubs where I could get in. I knew I had to chance it in the day because even the greenest night time bouncer would mark my card as soon as he got a whiff of me.

People took the piss but I took their money. Get forty part time drinkers throwing change at you and it soon adds up. I got a half bottle of Wild Turkey and settled at the rear of the library where it's nicely sheltered.

I'd had one sip when the bottle vanished. I stared at my empty hand and heard glass splinter and the sound of liquid spilling on cold tarmac.

I looked up at a growling darkness. The copper was tall and skinny. He had a pinched face, deep grooves on each cheek and eyes that were ringed so vividly with purple I thought for a second he was wearing mascara.

“Up!”

I did as he ordered and easily because I was sober. I’d had nothing but a sip all day and thanks to this pig the whiskey I’d worked so hard for was swilling down the drain at my feet.

“You stink!”

I thought the same of him but said nothing. He was a bare inch from my face. He was much taller than me but less wide and by this time I was a lot thinner than I’d ever been.

He took a look around. The library was closed and the area was deserted. No pubs here to tempt the crowds.

I’d seen police before, of course. Most were ok if you were quiet and they didn’t see you on the tap but there was something different here. His eyes snapped back to me.

He just stared. We must have been there two, three minutes. I wasn’t standing up to him, no way. Plainly, I didn’t dare look away. I felt that something bad would happen if I did. One move and he would open his mouth and swallow me. My legs were shaking worse than my morning hands ever did.

It was building in him, a venom coursing through his system that had to come out. He hated me. I saw that clearer than the shiny buttons on his coat. Sweat was standing on my back. I couldn’t help it. I looked at my feet and closed my eyes.

I winced at a smash louder than my ruined Wild Turkey had made. The shadow lifted and I felt painful light on my face. The copper had turned and taken several steps from me. I looked past him and saw Sid, one of my friends. He’d wanged a milk bottle and it had shattered in the road. Older than me was Sid but a little slow upstairs. He was half hidden in the arcade between Woolworth’s and McDonald’s. The copper glanced at me and then ran toward a retreating Sid.

I knelt by my bottle, grieving, and almost forgetting what had just occurred. I knew Sid had helped me and knew that it would slip from my mind the next time drink touched my lips. This is what drink is for.

A shift in the air told me I was not alone. I got up, fear sticking in my belly, but it wasn’t the copper returning. An old - *ancient* man stood a little way off. He was as dirty as me, as bearded and similarly dressed. I don’t have to describe it do I? He took a pack of Regal from his coat and sent them flying over at me with a nifty flick of his wrist. They landed in my hand, that’s how accurate his throw was. I opened them wondering if it was a joke, but twenty, clean sticks lined up like soldiers was what he’d thrown. My suspicion flared but when I looked up he was already walking away.

The next day was cold. The coldest I had known. 1992 was here and it had teeth. For the first week I huddled where I could, stole what I had to and was surprised to find I hadn’t forgotten Sid and the old man.

Everyone knew about the new pig. He’d arrived like the weather and was even less welcome. PC Bate. A new name to add to our list of natural enemies.

Sid found me sitting on a stall in the open market. Monday was the only day the traders didn’t stand so it was empty. I was munching a corned beef pastie. I halved it and watched it disappear in Sid’s gob.

“Still in one piece, I see.”

Sid nodded. He hadn’t forgotten either. “Watch that one.”

“Been warned a hundred times,” I said.

“I hear he’s been transferred from somewhere down south. Had some sort of trouble and they moved him on to cover it up.”

He didn’t say what *it* was and I didn’t ask.

We talked more but I was already full of Diamond White and Sid was supping from a flask so the level of conversation got foggy. After that day I didn’t see him for a while. The town wasn’t so big you could get lost but I was a bit of a ranger. Couldn’t stop walking some days and this was when I got an inkling about those little hearts. I moved to warm myself and as the days passed it became harder and harder.

It was February when I saw Bate again. He was by the news booth opposite the town hall. He was leaning in a patrol car window, laughing with two of his own. His expression changed and I saw him scan around. I took a step back but too late. There must have been a hundred plus people on the street but he’d found me as if his brain was a tramp radar. He straightened and shook his head. I felt the threat in that small movement. He’s going to hurt me! I knew it sure as you know your name.

I hurried away.

Some days later Sid squatted at my side. His breath was warm on my cheek. I was on the canal path, a favourite place. Mothers took their kids for walks here. Little faces red from the chill, all bundled up nearly as well as I was. I liked to watch them and I never said a word. Never asked the women for anything and ensured that I didn’t stare though that’s what I wanted to do. They’re the best of people, kids and if you want to see love watch a mum with her child. Dads have it too but with women you see it better. They know what the world is and don’t mind it knowing that they’re scared of it at times. The fear won’t stop them throwing their bodies into a cage full of ravenous lions to save their kids. A man would fight too but I think for slightly different reasons. The man would want to save the child but he’d want to beat the lions too. The woman wouldn’t care about being on top. She wouldn’t care at all.

“The king wants to meet you.”

Was a while before I heard the sentence though he only said it once.

“What?”

“We’d better go.”

Think I might have argued but I’m not sure. In any event I went with him. He stamped his feet as we went over the motorway bridge. I’d stopped doing that since my first cold week. Stamping only makes the little hearts hurt.

We circled back toward the town centre and I was a little peeved. The route seemed ridiculous but Sid told me it was the only way to get *there*. He took a narrow side street that I’d always taken for a dead end. We had to avoid cracking our skulls on fire escapes and keep from slipping on frosted refuse. The street bent sharp right and came out on a small park with benches and evergreen trees. We went right through it and came to a gentleman’s lavatory. The ladies’ was barred with a stout gate. The toilets were reached by steps that changed direction twice making it a good twenty feet underground. It was warm here. Really warm.

On the right side were solid looking sinks clean as new pennies. Left, the urinals and stalls. By the steps an open door showed the attendant’s office, store for his cleaning gear and dining area. A man sat on an old desk chair reading *The Sun*. He didn’t look up. I heard murmurs and for a second thought I’d come to a queer’s haunt but then Sid walked down the stalls saying hellos. I looked in the nearest and saw a man I thought was either a Jack or a Mack. I’d seen him around. He wore a turtle green coat with red tracksuit bottoms. Turned out all the stalls were occupied by people I knew or at least had a nodding acquaintance with.

Sid said, “He’ll be here soon.”

He went to the office and without asking brought out two stools. We sat and I watched the attendant. He was fat and in his fifties. He was almost bald but didn't keep what was left tidy. It was wispy, almost baby like and light. He had a kind of uniform I suppose. Blue shirt and black trousers. On his belt was a set of keys. He kept reading and re reading his paper.

I had some White left and shared it with Sid. He gave me a roll up in return.

Everyone stopped talking. A few left their thrones and leaned in the cubicle doorways.

The old man from the library stepped into view and glanced in at the attendant who lowered his paper. "Give us five minutes, Geoff." The old man's voice was deep and pleasant. Geoff left his seat and picked up a pack of Pall Mall's. He finally noticed me and departed.

The old man took the desk chair and folded his hands in his lap.

"Go on," said Sid.

I became aware that everyone was looking at me. I didn't like it. I got up and it must have showed in my face because Sid put a quick hand on my arm. I wasn't averse to fighting and tensed but when I looked at Sid there wasn't a trace of threat in his eyes. Looking around everyone else was calm too.

"What does he want with me?"

No one answered so I went toward the steps intending to leave. The closer I got to the old man the less I wanted to go back where it was cold. I pocketed the White and stood by the open door.

He gestured and I saw a chair was shoved under Geoff's desk. I got it out and sat.

"You're the king?"

"Some call me that."

I grinned, "King of what?"

He took out cigarettes and offered me one. I took it and lit it. His face was wreathed in smoke. "Later. You're a friend of Sid."

"Known him a few months."

"You helped him the first day you met him."

"Did I?"

"Yes, at the canal. He was looking in the water, thinking, until you came by and spoke to him."

I shook my head. I was on the edge of drunkenness but lucid all the same. "Don't recall that."

"You said, 'good morning,' and that was enough. He thought about it the rest of that morning and all afternoon and night. He was still thinking about it when he realized he was no longer at the water's edge, thinking. Thinking is sometimes a bad idea."

He got up and showed me out. I shook my head dizzy from the smoke, I thought. The office was small with no ventilation I could see.

The old man pointed and I saw it for the first time. A box of metal and plastic. I couldn't make out the writing on it but a picture showed a stick man with his hands beneath a drawing of the box. Lines like wavy laser beams were shooting from it. These things are everywhere now but it was the first electric hand dryer I had seen. The first, surely, in our town.

He put one hand below it and pushed a large button. Air blasted out and I could feel it rebounding off him onto my face.

"My full title," he said, "is the Hand Dryer King."

I took my first turn that day, luxuriating in the warm stream. The king told me to call him Arnold but never King Arnold.

Sid and I finished the White before I left to bed down for the night. The lavatory was only open in the day and I was told I would always be welcome after the sun rose. It was a private place. I wasn't to tell anyone about it unless Arnold gave me the go ahead.

Sid said that Arnold had persuaded Geoff to get his boss to order the dryer. Arnold said it would be good for us to have a place to warm our hands. Instant heat. I wondered why Geoff deferred to him. What did the King have over him? Why didn't the attendant call the police? They'd have roused us with pleasure.

I carried on, sometimes hazy other times sharp.

We heard a group of church people were doing what they termed *outreach*. Far as I could make out this meant taking up walking space where the shoppers went about their business and singing about the Lord like they knew him personally. Most of them were young and soft as shit. The older ones stopped them handing over cash but if you separated one from the herd they'd more often than not cough up. I'd got maybe three quid off two of them when PC Bate clamped a hand on my shoulder. He gave the two boys a look like they'd just eaten a raw puppy and puked it up on his shoes.

The coins were in his hand and thrust back at the Christians. They scurried away back to the safety of their group.

"It's time you and I finished our talk. We were interrupted last time weren't we, turd?"

He shoved me in the direction of the market back entrance, a narrow unlit alley used as a short cut. I couldn't have told you this was a Monday, the non market day, until I saw the wrought iron gate that protected the permanent trader's stalls from people like me.

He shoved me to the gate and I put my back to it.

"You stink!"

"You said that before." In all honesty I wasn't trying to be funny or brazen. The words popped out before I could catch them.

He took a look over his shoulder and punched my stomach. Breathing wasn't an option for a time that might have been seconds but felt like a week. My arms were clamped over my middle and my ears were full of noise. He pulled my hair making me look up.

"I'm going to have fun with you, turd. You and your pals."

He left then, a silhouette against the square of light, all I could see of the world.

I stayed there until my breathing was right and then went to the canal. It was quiet except for dog walkers and I relaxed as best I could. I had never seen a beat bobby here and reasoned I was safe.

Violence was part of life. This life. I'd seen my share. I'd dished it out on rare occasions but this was different. Bate was different. I wouldn't say I pondered this for long but given my condition I gave it my best. In the end the temperature and the growl in my belly (hunger not pain) overrode the Bate question and I made up my mind to see the king again. He'd said I was welcome and if nothing else I could get a warm.

I found the toilets easily and was vaguely disappointed to find only Geoff and Jack or Mack. This time Geoff did look my way for a moment before kicking his door shut. Jack/Mack gave up mouthful of mother's ruin and we sat companionably enough until I dozed.

I woke needing a piss so badly it burned. Contrary to popular belief peeing oneself isn't something all tramps do. It isn't in the rules or anything. When I finished I

washed my hands. Futile I know given that I hadn't bathed since prison but it gave me an excuse to totter over to the hand dryer. I pressed the button and jumped in my skin when Geoff opened his door with a crash. The bugger must have been listening.

"Don't push it so fucking hard, you stupid bleeder!"

His humility didn't extend to all customers it seemed. The king must have something very juicy on him. Perhaps he was a fairy. A cottager. A bum hole engineer. The council wouldn't like their crapper's watchdog getting down and dirty with the local woofers.

"Geoff, this is one of mine, you know that."

The king was on the bottom step. He'd appeared like a badly dressed wraith. Geoff sucked air in so loudly I was startled. He seemed to shrink.

"I'm sorry."

"No need. Why don't you have a rest? You look tired."

Geoff nodded, his hair lifting as if weightless. Tired? I'd only seen him twice and both times he was on his arse reading! He quietly closed the door.

"What's his problem?" I said this loud enough for the attendant to hear.

"He has many problems," said the king. "Many and varied but I think he'll be fine in time."

I eyed the carrier in his hand. He handed it over with a smile. Sandwiches wrapped in cellophane and bottled lager. "It's all yours." He pointed at Jack/Mack in his ghastly turtle green coat. "He'll be out for hours and no one else will come this day."

I nodded and started the food. He wouldn't take any. He sat on the bottom step and watched me eat and drink.

It was nice, feeling so warm and full and the lager was a treat. The king watched me but it didn't matter. There was nothing threatening about him. He puzzled me. His generosity was unusual even though acts of kindness and humanity are not absent in this strata of society even if most people find that hard to believe.

It struck me I had never seen him drink. Granted this was only the third time I'd encountered him but even so the one thing we all had in common was our appetite for the sauce.

I took another leak and decided I'd tell him what Bate had said. Everyone needed warning. Bate wasn't just keen, he was certifiable.

Arnold had gone when I'd finished. I washed my hands and used the dryer. It almost silenced the hearts throbbing in my fingers.

The next day was terrible. Sid was dead. He was found in the canal, snagged by an abandoned bicycle. It had held him and stopped him floating free. His eyes were missing, probably eaten by fish. A guy called Ernie brought the news to the Gents. It was full at the time. I went to the canal but there was nothing to see. They'd cleared him away. Poor Sid. He'd gone back and finished thinking.

The king wasn't seen for a week or maybe two.

I was using the Gents like a day centre, only venturing out for supplies. Ernie was becoming a mate. He'd had a soft spot for Sid and from what he said most of the boys thought I was a hero for trying to help him. Ernie drank anything and never seemed pissed. I think his body was too far gone to respond anymore. He'd have a spell in the hospital now and then. His kidneys were shot and if you listened long enough Ernie would give you a run down on all his illnesses. He had a score of them.

One evening after Geoff had closed up I saw Ernie sitting on a wall near the footie ground. It was about six and very frosty. My breath was white as Santa's beard. He was shaking but not from cold. I put an arm across his shoulder and burped accidentally in his face.

“He’s done him.”

I asked him to say again.

“The embankment. He’s down the embankment.”

Ernie shook me off and loped away.

“Well, fuck off then!” I went off to bed down and forgot about Ernie until the next day.

I got a coffee from the market café and sat in the shopping precinct. I watched the world go by until a young couple sat on the bench behind me. I liked to listen to other people talk. Still do and I don’t think it’s because I’m nosey.

“...fallen down it they said at first...”

“...head caved in...”

“...embankment...”

“...one less to stink the town up...”

“...horrible at times. You really are...”

I turned and asked a question. I think I asked but I might have shouted because they got up and left. The young man swore.

I half ran to the Gents. The king was sat with Geoff, the others were muted. Ernie was on the floor, half conscious.

“The police cannot come here.” Arnold was speaking to me.

“What’s going on?”

He crooked a finger and I went in the office. Geoff gave up his seat for me and left, closing the door.

“One of us is killed.” A strange phrase. “Mark.”

I knew Mark. He was one of the younger ones, a pale ghost of a man. Very quiet and although he looked vulnerable was tough as a church door.

“Killed how?” Blood throbbed through me. If I hadn’t been sat I would have fallen. The king’s grey eyes were wide and sad. They were odd on that ravaged face. As if taken from a younger man and transplanted where they would never look at home.

“Murdered.” Flat the way he said it.

The police practically took up residence in the centre of town. They stopped tramps and higher castes at random, asking their questions and one or two managed to sound interested, even caring. We knew better. Mark was dregs to them. I learned from one copper that Mark’s surname was Finch, like the bird. His father was a doctor, apparently. No protection that. We had a vicar in our ranks and the lord hadn’t made him immune from drink. Why would he? Wasn’t His son made from bread and wine? Hadn’t the Pharisees pegged Him for a drunkard?

They didn’t give a fuck but that changed when Ernie died a month later. This was nastier. Ernie was naked. He’d been burned with something large and metal, it was said. Burned before death. Tied up, mutilated and beaten. Some of his fingers were missing. He was in the alley I had mistaken for a dead end. God above, it was his dead end! This scared us more than the murder. It felt like whoever was killing us was getting close to our one sanctuary.

April came but it was still cold. The region was covered in low, smothering clouds. The two murders (three I said. I was having suspicions about Sid by then too) were no longer in the papers but were very much in our minds and conversations.

I was in the street where Ernie had died when I saw Bate. He was in uniform and leaning in the corner, his arms folded.

He shook his head, signalling that I wasn’t to run.

“Right there.” He pointed with a twig finger. “You’re standing in his guts.”

I involuntarily looked down. I saw the steam from Ernie's butchered corpse for half a second. My Diamond White rose and I staggered from the reality of the vision.

Bate spat thickly. "You come down this way often don't you, turd?" He stepped from the corner. "You and your turd friends."

I wanted to deny it but didn't. There was no point.

"What's that way? You can tell me."

"Nothing."

He gave me his version of a smile. "Nothing? No point in me taking a look then, is there? No point in the tramp killer going down to that little park or the public shitter looking for playmates?"

I backed up, feeling the cold metal of a fire escape against my head.

He matched me, step for step and then brought his face close to mine just like our first encounter. "No point in me investigating your little club house if it doesn't exist."

His radio barked and he looked furious his speech had been interrupted. I had no idea what was said. Even sober I could never understand that god-awful cracklespeak. Police must have different hearing to the rest of the human race. He left as abrupt as thunder in a clear sky.

The Gents was empty and Geoff wasn't answering the door. I drank quicker than ever; craving oblivion, but it would not come.

Later that afternoon we had something of a crisis talk. There must have been twenty of us crammed in there, smelling Geoff's bleach and our own bodies. Jack/Mack said we should go to the police and rat on Bate. That brought snorts of derision and Jack/Mack shut himself in a stall.

"Where is he?" someone said.

Arnold hadn't been seen for days. It struck me that all these men relied on the king in ways I couldn't understand. They were like children home alone watching through the window for a tardy parent.

Jack/Mack left then, shoving past, cursing in a low, growling manner. Someone called after him. His name *was* Jack. I stewed a while wondering why these grown men were hiding like rabbits, then shame washed over me. I was the same. I wasn't here for the warmth or to deal with that insane fucker out there. I was waiting for someone else to solve our problem. Waiting for a saviour that would never come. Arnold was just an old man. Kinder than most and without doubt had a hold over our host that kept him from throwing our arses out, but still one of us. A nobody.

My hands were shaking. I was going to get a drink somehow. And I was going to stop Jack from going to the police. I knew that was where he was going. I left the others arguing.

Arnold was in the park.

"You're wanted." I said.

"Wanted but not needed." He pulled out a bottle, I can't remember what it was but it was full. "Stay here and drink it."

I took hold but he didn't let go. I struggled inside. I had to stop Jack. He was going to bring more trouble on us. The bottle's weight was comforting. I knew what it would feel like sliding down. I could go to the canal and keep it for myself. It would see me through the day and night. Arnold's face was passive but something else was there too. Something mostly hidden. When I let go, leaving the bottle in his hand, I saw, at least I think I saw, relief and even gratitude. I stepped onto the grass and around him.

The police station was near the library and I felt fear when I passed the place I'd first seen Bate. I took the corner and Jack was thirty yards in front. Had he been sober I

wouldn't have caught up. I called out and he turned about, grimaced when his eyes focused on me and then pressed on. I gained on him and reached out, my fingers slipping on the greasy material of his coat at first and then taking hold. He pushed me but without strength. His face alarmed me. I had seen death in my time on the streets and fancied I could spot it hovering near its victims. That's what I saw in Jack. He was a man at the end of his powers. That somehow made me more determined to keep him safe from Bate.

"Fuck off!"

"Come back with me!" I shouted as if we were battered by a storm. "Arnold's at the Gents. He's got a bottle. I bet he'd give it over if we went there right now."

Jack swayed and put his hands on my shoulders. I planted my feet in case he tried to shove me again. He put his head on me and I think he might have wept. I patted his back like I was nursing a baby.

The station had automatic doors. Like the hand dryer they were more than likely the first in town. I saw them open in the corner of my eye. Bate watched us. He must have been stood on the sensor because the doors kept closing and opening like a mechanical heart. He didn't move or gesture or shout but I could see he was challenging me to let Jack into *his* world.

Jack allowed me to lead him away and we were back at the Gents within a half hour. Arnold wasn't there but Geoff ushered us into his office. Arnold's bottle was on the desk.

I'm biased but I swear the town didn't give a fig about the deaths. I thought I heard one man say he was cheering the killer on and more than once I saw people look at me with satisfaction. They knew, I believed, that I was going to be swept away by their doer of dirty work. The idea that the killer was appointed by them wouldn't go away and creeping paranoia was added to my list of problems.

I watched for Bate everywhere. I glimpsed him every hour but on closer inspection it always turned out to be a shadow or just a tall man who happened to be wearing black. It's true that if you watch a kettle you'll never see it boil.

April came and went and winter finally gave way to something that masqueraded as spring. My drinking increased and I visited the Gents less and less. Alcohol in its many suits took hold again dulling my pain and imagination. Arnold slipped away and even Sid, Mark and Ernie started to become as remote as my time as a husband and father.

Things went well for me if you consider self destruction was the goal. The canal was still my best place. The happy thought I clung to. I sat and watched the children swap sweaters and mufflers for blouses and shirts.

I was beaten up on May twelfth. It may have saved my life. They were kids really, probably no more than fourteen the pair of them. They came out of the street in which Bate had revealed himself to me. I wasn't even going that way. I was heading over to catch my Christian friends who I'd been told were evangelizing hell for leather that day.

I don't know if the boys were out for that kind of fun or if I was a random opportunity. Whatever, they took advantage and kicked shit out of me. If I tried to defend myself I can't remember it. One took a piss on me. That's the last thing I knew until coming to with a thunderous headache. I was angry for a while before I realized the wet I took for spilled booze was blood. My face was covered in it from a gash in my forehead.

They'd dragged me into the alley and covered me with content from the bins. My legs were stiff but moving and I crawled as far as the park. I rested until my head

stopped spinning. There was no one about and anyone other than one of mine would undoubtedly ignore me anyway so I gathered what little energy I had and pushed on. I was climbing to my feet when I heard his voice.

“Hello turd.”

The warm blood on my face froze. He was yards behind me. His hands were red. His uniform was gone and I saw what black hair he had.

“Nice place. I see why you turds come here. Hope what I left won’t spoil it for you.”

“What did you do?” My words came out in stutters. I realized how hurt I actually was.

Bate walked away. He walked slowly as if he was above this situation, as if nothing on earth could stop him.

I called out. Christ, I was hurting. No one answered. I got down the first dozen steps without faltering and then screamed. My ribs were bust without doubt. I took tiny breaths and eased down onto my backside. This was better. I rested a while and used the time to call again. I heard only an echo of my own making.

At last I managed to get to the last few steps. I put a hand to the wall and the other to my side; sure my heart would belch through my ribcage.

I looked down the stalls and groaned. The far wall was splashed crimson and something small and tied with string was in the corner. It was covered in some kind of cloth coloured by a spreading stain.

“It’s a challenge and defilement.”

Arnold and Geoff were in the office doorway. They stared at the package.

“Why didn’t you answer?” Whatever anger I felt was lost as I slipped unconscious.

I was laid flat. My body was held rigidly although I felt comfortable. Arnold was there sometimes and I felt his cool hands all over my naked body. The pain was there at times but mostly not. I think I cried out once and saw a concerned Geoff pass Arnold water which was gently put to my mouth. Bate was often in the room. I saw him dance around me, a knife gleaming in arcs that passed close to my eyes. He held out a bloody hand that cradled something alive but not. It dripped onto my chest and I looked down to see my ribs splayed out and the thing squirming in Bates’ white hand was my heart.

I was upright. Sweat stung my eyes and I grimaced with pain. My torso was bandaged. My clothes were folded on a chair. Geoff looked surprised. His paper slipped off his lap. He was out of the room before I could speak. I swung my legs off the desk. They shook when I put my weight on them but held. I was half dressed when Arnold came in. He put a bottle of water by me.

“You were out for five days. There’s nothing broken but you’re badly bruised. You need food and rest above all else.”

“I saw Bate.” My voice was barely audible. Arnold passed me the water which I downed in one go.

“You’re safe here.”

“Nobody’s safe. He had blood on his hands.”

“Dog’s blood.” He put a hand up to forestall my questions. “He left a dog’s heart out there and the blood on the wall was from the same animal.” Arnold handed me my shirt and helped me put it on. My muscles complained.

“How do you know that?” I felt strange, as if I was missing something.

“I know a little about hearts and blood.”

“Jesus, he’s a freak!”

“Blood can both sanctify and desecrate.”

I snapped, “What are you talking about? This isn’t a fucking church!”

Geoff came back and hovered until Arnold smiled at him. He closed the door and sat, kicking his fallen paper under the chair.

The feeling persisted. I put both jumpers on but left the topcoat.

Arnold said, "You're right Bate is a freak. A rare talent."

I said, "This goes against the grain but we should tell the police."

"No, that will not do."

I was past caring, my decision already made. I swung my coat across my shoulders.

Geoff barred the way. He would have been big enough to stop me had I been in good health let alone the pitiful state I was in. "Let me out, Geoff. This has gone on long enough."

He shook his head and a weariness hit me I can scarcely describe. I felt like all the blood had drained from me and my skeleton replaced with glass. I let Arnold lead me back to the desk and lay me down. Geoff had tears in his eyes and I saw for the first time that he had no fear of the king at all and the hold I'd imagined over him was one of love. His fear was that the king would leave him.

Arnold put a hand on my brow. "You'll leave here soon enough."

I must have slept because it was evening time. I got up without dizziness and the weakness had all but gone. No one was about and I wondered briefly if I had been locked in. Surely I had been these last days. Had they left me at night? I shook my head. I checked the stalls but they were as empty as I'd expected. At the top of the steps the gate was unlocked and still fastened against the wall in its daytime position. The sky was clear and dotted with more stars than I had ever seen. The strange feeling from earlier persisted and it came to me that what I felt was sobriety. I was out of the fog and my body was not signalling its accustomed craving. I spread my hands and they were without tremor. I inhaled the spring odours. I felt...good!

The park was deserted and I cautiously left it for the alley. I tried to feel unnerved but it wouldn't come. The darkness was that of pleasant sleep. I couldn't imagine Bate hiding in this darkness. It would repel him.

I wandered deserted streets. I didn't own a watch so I went to take a look at the town hall clock. It was nine. Where was everyone? Where the leisure drinkers? But then I remembered there were no pubs here and ventured further.

Stillness reigned. Everywhere I looked the same emptiness and peace. I was in the town's pub district. The buildings were shuttered. Perhaps the town hall clock had stopped. It was three in the morning not nine at night. Even as I thought this I knew it wasn't so.

Bate has murdered the town. Stole into every public and private house and killed every breathing thing.

My laugh was shocking in the barrenness. I crossed the pedestrian centre with only my reflection for company. I stopped by a bookshop window and examined myself. Dirty, unkempt, not a man you'd like to spend a time with but human all the same. I was human and I saw myself for the first time in a year. My eyes were clear and I recognized the man I had once been.

How long I stood there is hard to say. I moved only after I heard the sound. The sound a virus might make when it insinuates into a healthy body. I cocked my head to pinpoint it and walked quietly over to the place where Bate had hit me. I flattened myself against the wall mindful that the shutters were alarmed and peeked like a child playing hide and seek. The light only penetrated a few feet but it was enough to see what looked like a large animal feeding. It rent its meal while making small squeaks and moans. I could hear flesh being torn and devoured. I moved no more than an inch but my coat scraped against the wall and the thing stopped feeding. There was silence

for an age and then quick movement. An arm landed inches from me. The hand was twisted into a claw that had defended its owner in a primeval way. This man had died fighting. The arm was still clothed in a turtle green sleeve.

I backed away and the thing came forward. I stopped and it stopped. When I moved it moved with me as if choreographed. I would not turn my back. I kept going and saw its legs come into the light. Its hands emerged dripping with fluids. Bate stepped out and screamed. His mouth was wide and red. The noise was higher than any human vocal cords should make and I thought every pane of glass would shatter.

His eyes caught light from a dozen street lamps and broke it into spears. His jaw clamped shut and silence returned like a tide of filthy water. The peace I had felt was everywhere in town only because Bate was concentrated here. His hatred and madness smothered him in an atmosphere so concentrated it polluted only where he walked or laid his eyes upon.

“I defiled it, turd! It’ll be gone for ever!” His pleasure was evident but I didn’t understand what he meant. Defiled? What had Arnold said?

“I’m going to eat you!”

He came at me and I ran with aching ribs. I felt his presence, his psychic stink! I was undernourished and in poor shape. There was no way I could outdistance him but he did not gain on me. The gap widened. I glanced back as I reached the alley. He appeared to roll toward me, carried by dark clouds beneath his feet. His eyes were pitiless, his smile an unnatural breadth.

I saw the Gents ahead; lights were still burning and the gate open. I jumped several steps at a time. I reached the bottom and fell six feet into an area as wide as a swimming pool. I groped for something—anything solid I could hang on to. The floor was rough. I got up and heard the thump of feet. Bate was within striking distance but was preoccupied with our surroundings.

He finally looked at me. “What have you turds been doing down here? Digging escape tunnels?”

He slipped his coat off and slung it in one corner. I looked up trying to make sense of what could not be. I could see the steps leading outside and Geoff’s office door. The pit sides and floor were crudely worked from earth.

Bate ripped his shirt off, buttons bouncing across the floor. His body was scarred from clavicle to navel. The wounds were deliberate. Carvings of faces and screaming mouths.

He noticed my interest. “I add to it every time. There’s almost no room left.” He turned and more were etched on his back. How had he done that? “Only room for two now. A space for your friend and another for you, turd. You are my last.”

He pulled a knife from his back pocket and lunged at me. I jumped back. He laughed and put the point over his heart. “I’ll shut my eyes for a count of three before I move. Three seconds for you to charge at me and stick this through my ticker. Are you quick enough, turd? Are you?”

He closed his eyes and I took two steps before he lunged again. I twisted and fell, hitting the back of my skull. He knelt on my chest, the pressure enormous. I could see the details of his insane drawings. The faces were alive with his dark art.

“Keep your eyes open or I’ll slit the lids off, understand?”

He pressed the knife into my neck muscles and drove it in a quarter inch.

I saw them rise, indistinct to begin with and then becoming solid. They were unknown to me but I saw recognition in Bate. He withdrew his knife and that hurt more than it had going in. They gathered around us in a loose circle. Then I saw Sid. He was by Ernie and Ernie by Mark. Their clothes bore the blood of their deaths. It

was fresh and overpowering to the senses. Ernie looked barely human, his features grossly distorted. He had died badly.

Bate got up and I dragged in air. He was transfixed, his face as wondering as a child on Christmas morning. Not one of the figures looked at him. They looked at me.

“Take it from him.”

The king was stood at the edge of the pit. Geoff was with him, tears coursed down his round face.

“Act now! It must be done quickly. The sanctity of this place has been compromised.”

Bate was spinning around in pleasure. He slashed at the figures, the knife stirring them like mist. They were intent on me, ignoring Bates’ ravings and half formed questions. He asked them what was it like-what was it like-what was it like!

The king had the same expression I’d seen the day I stopped Jack falling into this madman’s hands. Had I done that just so Bate could slay him this day? I felt a bolt of resentment. Was I a pawn between these two... whatever they were?

The ghosts began to fade. Bate was calming, becoming less interested in the visions and more in the living person in reach of his knife arm. Arnold was impassive. Geoff looked away, his weeping becoming body shaking sobs.

I studied Arnold’s eyes. Young eyes in a visage that was far too old. Did they betray the doubts I had seen before?

Bate became very quiet. The forms were almost gone, mere impressions in the air like watermarks on paper. He was bound in some way, waiting for his victims to vanish.

Still I waited, knowing that the time was almost gone, that Bate had almost finished his work.

“What then?” I shouted.” What happens then, Hand Dryer King?”

He did not answer; his gaze steady as clockwork.

It seemed there was no answer or perhaps it wasn’t for me to know. All I needed to know was that I could end it here. I could snatch whatever victory and reward Bate was waiting to claim.

Mark, Sid and Ernie were the last to disappear. Sid held out longest and I thought I saw him wink before he was gone.

Bate was free. He raised the knife and I snatched it from him and plunged it into the space where his heart should be.

His fury was colder than the worst winter. His face twisted into something both more and less than human. I saw *into* him then. He was blacker than the space between galaxies. All the misery he had wrought had destroyed whatever decency had been his lot. He was death camps and madness. Torture and cruelty. All the senseless tears of innocents were reflected in his dark eyes. He screamed his high scream and I felt it strike me like lightning. I fell back and slid along a tiled floor. The smell of bleach caught in my throat and the pit was gone.

Geoff hurried over and took my arm. He heaved me to my feet. The tears were drying on his broad face.

I felt even greater resentment. Arnold shook his head and I felt that he too only played a role designed.

I needed air and started to go up the steps.

“Not yet,” he said. “You must wash your hands. Nothing of him can leave this place.”

I looked at them and saw what he meant. I hesitated. My anger burned. Arnold continued to watch me. What if I refused this one thing? Would he stop me? Would he strike me down as I knew he had Bate?

The water ran red until my hands were raw and clean. I put my hands beneath the hand dryer and the king pushed the button for the final time. He put a hand on my shoulder briefly. His eyes were younger still, the eyes of a boy.

“What did we do?”

“What needed to be done.”

I left to cool night air.

I changed. My dependence on alcohol didn't return. I straightened out. These years later I live in a house. I work for little money but it is enough for me. I never got back in touch with my boy. I may have stopped a killer getting whatever reward these damaged individuals seek but I don't think I earned any rights back where my son's concerned.

I've never shaken the feeling that I was used. By whom or what I cannot say. Eventually I went back to the Gents. It was still in use but when I knocked on the office door Geoff didn't answer. A much younger man stood in Geoff's shoes and he had no idea where his predecessor was.

The convenience was just that. There were no tramps sat like noblemen in a ruler's court. It didn't smell as good to me. That's funny I know. It smelled better with a group of tramps ensconced in it. We did reek there's no doubt but Geoff was a wizard with a mop and bucket.

I managed a pee. Didn't want the new attendant to think I was...well...up to something. The hand dryer was new, the type that comes on automatically and turns off every three seconds leaving you waving your damp hands about and cursing.

I looked at the floor determined to ignore the young pretender's unfriendly glowering. I squatted. There was a small scorch mark. I wiped at it with a finger but it wasn't moving. It couldn't have been blacker. I thought of Bates' eyes. The attendant looked like he was going to say something but when I smiled at him he put out a long leg and kicked the door shut.

There it is, take it or leave it. Or take the bits you like and leave the rest. I won't answer your questions about why did only tramps use the Gents or why was the town deserted so early at night. I can't say why a solid floor became a deep pit and then back again. You can confirm for yourself that four men died in my town, four tramps, and that for twenty years before other tramps were slaughtered in other small towns just about everywhere in this land. If you're really clever you may find a PC Bate was stationed here and that he vanished at the time the murders ceased. I wouldn't advise pushing that one though.

I wish I could say who the Hand Dryer King was. I wish I could say he was an old man, a little kinder than most, I knew for a time and then knew no more. I wish I could say I do not believe that he still walks this world, probably in small towns, dressed in whatever skin is needed and using human beings like chess pieces. I wish I could but it won't make any difference. No more than if I shout at the sky when it rains because I don't want to get wet.

The White Glaistig.

The e mail was short and hit the bullseye – *Answer your fucking voicemails!*

Reece got his phone from his coat. He called his answer service and listened to seven messages in all, one from his mother and the rest Mandy.

He rang the office and her secretary put him through.

“The Scarlet Pimpernel!”

“What can I do for you, Mandy?”

“Make my job easier for starters.”

Reece swapped ears and sat at his desk. “You know what it’s like.”

“We’ve got an offer. A proposal to be more accurate.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Garforth and Young want to talk to you about a three book deal.”

A joke, surely? Reece asked her if she was kidding and she said a definite no.

“You need to get down here for one on Tuesday afternoon.”

“They rejected me twice.”

“Well, they changed their minds. They’ve been taken over recently. Have you heard of Paul Riley?”

“The retail man?”

“That’s him. Billionaire about four times over. Owns the Carver House Group.”

Reece got up and began to circle the room. “He was on the news the other week. He captained a hostile takeover of some computer company.”

“It was one of the mid size search engines. He’s bought up so many companies lately people are beginning to think he’s looking for world domination. That’s not our problem. The point is I’ve been told he loved your book.”

“My underselling-destroy-my-career-before-it’s-started book?”

“That’s the one. He’s a fanatic on mythology and folklore apparently. Hard to credit in a guy like him, but that’s what my contact at G and Y tells me.”

The call ended with Reece bursting with excitement and Mandy warning him that nothing was set and to play it carefully. The editor in chief wanted to speak with him informally and she gave him the address of a restaurant a stones throw from her office. He’d never been taken to lunch before and viewed it as a sign from the great god of literature in the sky.

The train down to London was crowded but the journey was without delays. He took a taxi not wanting to risk getting lost but feeling a little sick at the cost. The restaurant was a grand place and he felt a little self conscious when he gave his name to a smiling lady dressed in a waistcoat that would have looked better on a man. She showed him to a table where two men rose to greet him. Riley was recognizable from countless appearances on television and in newspapers. He was tall and bone thin, his face set in an almost wince. The second man was broad and the first to offer his hand. They sat with false smiles and a waiter took Reece’s order for water.

The broad man was called Carter and said his profession was as legal advisor. He did all the talking telling Reece about Riley’s interest and admiration as if the man was not present. The deal was three books as Mandy had said but she hadn’t mentioned the hundred thousand pounds advance on the first book with the option to negotiate on the next two. Carter assured Reece that the first book would be marketed so aggressively that failure was unlikely and Reece should put it from his mind.

“This is a little too much to take in, Mr. Carter.”

“Sudden success can be overwhelming, Mr. Williams.”

They were on the main course when Reece remembered what Mandy had said.

“My agent told me that I would be meeting the editor in chief here today.”

“You’ll be dealing with Mr. Riley’s office directly, Reece.”

The surname had been dropped smoothly. Reece didn’t like it although formality was normally a dislike high on his list. He attacked his lamb with fervour and told himself not to be churlish. Riley was picking at a salad. He leaned over and froze in position for a moment before excusing himself. Carter carried on eating, slicing steak into small squares before chewing each piece longer than Reece thought was necessary. This lawyer, it seemed, was method cubed.

Riley returned a different man.

“Your book was fascinating, Reece. The details were a delight.”

“Thank-you. Folklore has always intrigued me.”

“The research must have taken an age.”

“If I added it up I’d probably not be able to sleep at night.”

Riley pushed his salad away. “The chapter on water spirits was especially challenging.”

Reece nodded but didn’t understand what was challenging about it. Riley sat back in his chair and Carter moved forward. “Mr. Riley owns a house in Scotland near Loch Linn. Have you heard of it?”

“I don’t believe so.”

Riley cut in. “It is quite remote. The village there is home to no more than a hundred people.”

The lamb was finished. A waiter swooped and cleared the table.

“A beautiful retreat,” said Carter.

Riley leaned forward and Carter took his turn at moving back. Reece couldn’t tell if it was staged or unconscious. They ordered dessert. Riley declined.

“There is a myth, legend, I don’t know which term is correct,” said Riley, “that I think may be unique to Loch Linn. A glaistig is supposed to haunt the area.”

“Not uncommon,” said Reece.

“No,” said Riley. “But this one is said to have qualities different to the rest of its kind.”

“Like what?”

“The ability to heal.”

“Interesting.”

“They are normally a malign creature, yes?”

Reece considered. “More often than not but there are tales of them acting kindly towards children and the elderly.”

Carter excused himself and Reece sensed this was part of some stage show.

Riley leaned close. “I think the loch would be a good place to research.”

“Mr. Riley, I have a book in progress.”

“My people have spoken to your agent in depth. It will become your second book. The glaistig will be your first and not for publication. I want you to write about it for me.”

Reece raised his eyebrows. This was unexpected. “I’ll need to book some time off work.”

Riley dismissed this with a flick of his hand.

“Leave your employers to me, Reece.”

Reece left the restaurant and walked to Mandy’s office. The secretary/receptionist greeted him like he was a visiting royal. Mandy came around her desk and kissed his

cheek. She wanted to know everything including what he ate. He told her about the offer.

“Do it!”

“That’s your advice? Don’t you think it’s strange?”

Mandy leaned over and put her hands under her chin. She was aware of her effect on Reece and played it for all it was worth.

Publishing is going through great changes, Reece. Everyone is turning to self publishing and ebooks, you know that.”

“Yes,” Reece said stringing the word out.

“Some publishers are pulling out all the stops when they find a jewel.”

“And I’m a jewel?”

“You are to me,” she said.

Reece spent the next three days preparing but the limo still caught him off guard. He stuffed his case with all his clothes bar his second best (one of two) suits and spent a minute trying to close it. He grabbed his ancient rucksack which had toiletries and his laptop in it with a half dozen notebooks and a selection of pens in what he called the ‘secret compartment’. The chauffeur was polite and took his case immediately to the boot. Reece almost opened the passenger door but stepped back when the chauffer opened the door to the back seat for him. He flushed and got in. The interior was huge and smelled of leather and faintly tobacco.

“Just a short drive, sir and we’ll be at the airstrip.”

Reece thanked him and looked at his flat window. He had a mini panic attack, imagining it burgled and ruined. Then again how much damage could be done in a bed-sit with a cubicle shower and ragged furniture that belonged to an indifferent and rarely seen landlord? He’d miss his books and photographs but that was about it.

He watched the town roll away to countryside glimpsing snatches of farmhouses and cattle. He poked around a bit. There was a drinks cabinet and a screen above him but he had no idea how to operate it and daren’t ask the driver.

They turned onto a slick, straight road and he saw a small plane in the distance. Then it was gone behind hedgerow. He took out his mobile and switched it off.

The chauffeur parked and opened the door before Reece had unclipped his seatbelt. Reece got out with a strained smile and looked around. The airstrip was unimpressive. He’d imagined billionaires lived in a sort of hazy fairytale where everything glittered and shimmered. This was concrete and grey. A miserable conglomeration of ugly square buildings.

The plane was fine though. A narrow but comfortable affair. He was seated and belted up awaiting take off when a stewardess appeared and asked him if she could get him anything. He asked for water.

She appeared before him every ten minutes for the first hour and then left him alone with a fruit kebab and more water. He tentatively bit at it while trying to see out of the window.

He took out a notebook and wrote ‘White Glaistig’. White because it was what? Good? Politically insensitive and unusable. He crossed out White. He sketched what he thought it might look like. A vampire woman’s head and body on goat legs. He got the legs wrong and scribbled them out. The vampire had cross eyes. He scribbled that out too.

The stewardess bent to his shoulder and he covered the notebook with his free hand. Only twenty minutes to landing. Hooray!

He was picked up by a smaller car and driven along empty roads surrounded by wild looking hills and patchy trees. The driver was polite but didn't make conversation. Reece didn't see a human being until arriving at the village after almost an hour. Getting out he decided 'village' was too generous. What had Riley said? Home to a hundred people. They lived like sardines if that was true. The tinned variety.

He could smell the loch but not see it. He noted moss growing on pretty much every man made surface. The roofs were particularly bad. If he breathed too deeply, the damp caught in his chest.

The driver, a balding skinny man hefted his case and led him to one of the terraced cottages. The paintwork was peeling and the window panes settled. He mentally groaned and then remembered the hundred grand waiting for him and pushed the thought away. The driver opened the door without knocking and shouted something too quick and garbled for Reece to make out.

A nice looking older woman trotted down the uncarpeted steps. She smiled at Reece who warmed immediately. He could smell cooking and something else pleasant overpowering the damp.

"Annie Creedle," she said as if one word.

"Reece Williams."

"The writer."

Reece shook her hand. "I'm trying to be,"

Annie led him into a small sitting room while the driver took his suitcase upstairs.

Annie asked him if he'd like tea and he said yes. She left him alone. He looked around the room. Spotless and simple. A plain carpet and yellow walls, two sofas, a coffee table and a bookcase crammed with novels. He looked them over. Most of them were detective fiction. Agatha Christie rubbed shoulders with Ian Rankin and Colin Dexter.

He looked out and saw little. There was a hill opposite with scrub and a few sheep nibbling on it. The clouds were low and he could see mist forming. He had travelled the Lake District years ago and this reminded him of Ullswater. Hilly and wet and beautiful.

Annie brought tea and said she had arranged a meal at the local inn. He was surprised there was one. He would have his meals at the house or inn or she would make something for him if he intended to spend time at the loch or anywhere else he wanted to do his 'researchings'.

She left him explaining the room was entirely at his disposal and if he gave her a knock when he was ready she would show him his room, unless of course he needed to use the facilities.

"No, thank you, I'm good, Mrs. Creedle."

"Annie," she said.

He drank the tea standing at the window. A boy walked by at the other side of the road. He waved so Reece waved back. There was a knock and the door opened. The driver said he was available to assist him night or day and was in the room next to his.

"Are you a local Mr...?"

"Haddon. No sir, I'm from Ayrshire originally. Been working for Mr. Riley personally for, say ten years."

"Right."

"Anything I can do for you now, sir."

"Stop calling me sir. The Queen hasn't knighted me yet and I'm a republican at heart anyway."

"Spirit of Cromwell, sir?"

Reece laughed. "Will you be at the pub?"

"Not unless you need me, sir."

"No not if you have other plans."

"I don't partake and I'm on a special diet. I will be eating in my room, sir."

He was intrigued but couldn't bring himself to ask what the special diet was for. His uncle's pancreas had packed in years ago and he recalled the strange looking bread, if that was what it was, the man carried around with him in a plastic sandwich box.

Haddon left and he finished the tea. He went into the tiny hallway and knocked on the only other door presuming this was where he'd find his new landlady. She opened the door and he saw beyond to a kitchen that was roomy enough for a table and chairs in the centre.

"What time is dinner?"

"You can go any time after seven thirty Mr. Williams, and I'll have your lunch ready in a half hour if that suits?"

"It suits, thank you. I'm going to have a wander around until then."

"Lovely. If you go left you'll see a path to the loch. Right and you'll see the rest of the village and pass the inn."

"I'll do the village now and the loch this afternoon I think. Do you know why I'm here Annie?"

"Annie nodded vigorously with some amusement. "The glaistig."

"Yes, can I ask you some questions about it later?"

"Certainly. It's our version of Nessie I suppose but not well known outside the area."

"You ever seen it?"

"Only in my imagination. My gramps used to tell us stories about it. Most of them made up in his head, I'm sure."

"That's just the stuff I'm after."

Reece left feeling optimistic. What a life. What a job! His dream.

He turned right and walked by the inn. A rectangular facade with a half timber portico. The sign read The Doonie. He remembered the term. Doonie were water spirits of some kind. Shape shifters, he thought, an obvious tie in to the glaistig legend.

He found another row of cottages at a right angle to Annie's and her immediate neighbours. The road was steep and sharp. He was out of breath when he breasted it. He looked back and saw the loch. Small but pretty. The water looked still and cool. He walked further and saw a farmhouse in the distance. To the right of it, perhaps a mile and a half away he saw more cottages. Maybe a dozen in a row with a slightly larger house standing alone yards beyond. The village seemed to be made up of scattered dwellings with no obvious centre. The inn was no doubt the hub. He walked toward the second group of houses until the path, such as it was, petered out. He looked into an ancient field. The dry stone walls were fragmentary and in some places had withered to nothing. He saw no harm in walking across it so he did. He was halfway when he heard a shout.

He turned and saw an old man waving both arms at him. He waved back and then realized the man was shouting at him not to him.

He walked back and as he got close enough to see the whites or rather yellows of the man's eyes he spoke up. "Sorry, am I on private land?"

The man said something like 'Pah!' and walked away in the direction of the farmhouse.

Reece watched him for a while trying to decide if he should catch him up and explain who he was and what he was doing. He went back towards Annie's instead.

He debated walking on and carrying onto the loch but thought his half an hour was probably up. He took out his phone and checked. Ten minutes. Not worth setting off. The phone rang sounding extremely loud. It startled him and he felt it try to slip from his hand. He caught it and saw the caller ID.

"Hi Mandy."

"How is it going? Managed to piss the locals off yet?"

"One of them. I think."

"Thought so. Any progress?"

"Give me a chance. I've only been here an hour or so."

"Well, make sure you get it right. Don't scupper this."

"Have faith. It's pretty straightforward. I'll interview everybody. Take photographs and find any other local sources, write them up and get on with it."

"That simple."

"I'll add my own flourish and expert insight."

"No comment."

Reece grinned. "Any other encouragements and professional advice to offer?"

"If you fail to screw this one up I'll make sure you get a real reward."

"You're all talk."

"No, I'm not."

They ended the call with Reece promising to ring the next day.

He realized Annie hadn't given him a key and knocked. She let him in saying it hadn't been locked.

"Can I get a key?"

She looked a little surprised. "I should think so. I'll get my Joe to loan you his."

"Your husband?"

"Oh no," she laughed. "My boy. He's at school right now."

She asked if he wanted to see his room. He followed her upstairs his shoes clattering on the boards. His room didn't have a lock, he noticed. It gave him a slightly uneasy feeling. It was a square room with a high ceiling. The cornicing was crude. The decor was cream emulsion over plaster. There wasn't any carpeting, just a rug halfway under the bed. An old dresser stretched along one wall with what he hoped was an ornamental jug and bowl on top of it. A wicker chair stood in one corner opposite a very large, heavy wardrobe. Walnut he thought which probably meant it was quite old.

To his relief she showed him a modern bathroom at the end of the passage. He noticed there were only three doors beside the bathroom and wondered where the boy would sleep. Annie had probably ousted him from one of the rooms. That meant this wasn't a proper Bed and Breakfast establishment. Come to think of it there wasn't any of the usual signage downstairs or outside.

"You don't normally have guests Annie?"

"No. This is more of a favour for Mr. Riley."

"Right."

"A lovely man."

Reece wondered if she thought everyone was lovely. She seemed to and he liked her for it.

"Have you met him?"

"Oh, certainly. He had your room when he came to stay."

This surprised him. Hadn't Carter said Riley owned a retreat here? Maybe he was mistaken. Funny to think of a billionaire lodging in a tiny house like this? Surely there were suitable hotels within driving distance. Wouldn't a guy like that need bodyguards and some sort of entourage? A thought struck him.

"Did Mr. Haddon accompany him?"

"He did."

Reece thought about the special diet and wondered what else was special about Haddon.

"I'd better check on your lunch. Five minutes."

Reece thanked her and went back to his room. He opened his case and laid out his clothes. He found hangers in the giant wardrobe and used the dresser for underwear. He plugged his laptop in and left it to charge. Something else he had forgotten to do.

He lay on the bed. It was soft and firm, a good mattress. He looked out watching clouds. The mist didn't look like it would develop after all.

His lunch was huge and left him feeling lazy. Annie had made a stew. He didn't ask what the meat was in case it was rabbit. He liked rabbits, especially living ones and he had enjoyed the meat so much he'd be forced to seek it out again and become a bunny murderer.

Annie followed up with a thick suet pudding with very hot custard and treacle. He had to leave half of it. Annie seemed delighted she had out faced him. He chatted with her for a while before going back to his room.

He turned his computer on and tapped on a new document he had titled White Glaistig the day before. He could always change it later. He described the village knowing this was no more than an organizational exercise. He made notes about Annie and the snippets she had told him after lunch. Thin material. She had informed him there was no internet access unfortunately and he would need to travel out of the village if he wanted that sort of thing.

He stretched out on the bed. In minutes he was asleep.

He woke and fished in his pocket for his phone. Three-thirty. That was good. He splashed his face and relieved himself before putting a jacket on and heading out with his digital camcorder in hand. It was colder although the mist had gone. He took the path to the loch. The ground rose around him as he walked. The hills funnelled down to the water. There was a natural harbour.

The loch was energized with a light breeze. He took some pictures with the camcorder stills function and then filmed in a wide arc. He heard steps and looked back to see a young couple with a Labrador. He spoke to them and they acknowledged him with open smiles.

He watched them walk toward the water. They took what looked to be a route that ran parallel to the loch. He wondered how far it went. He went to the water's edge. It was sandy, a miniature beach. He watched the water lap the sand for a while and then walked towards the path he had seen the couple take.

It was quiet except for bird song. No distant traffic, no anything. He thought about the glaistig. He had researched several using libraries and the internet for his first book. He had not had the resources for this kind of trip before and even now thought it unnecessary and wasteful. Still, if Riley was happy to pay he was happy to do it. The money would change his life.

He walked until he saw the young couple. They had stopped to let the dog do its business. He looked away when the dog arched its back. He noticed a very narrow path which would probably take him back to the water's edge. It was heavily overgrown but obviously kept semi open by fairly frequent use. He took it knocking

thin branches to the side as he went. He found himself in a wide clearing at the water's edge. There was no beach here just a drop of about four feet. There was an obelisk like structure to his right. He fingered the rough surface. It wasn't natural he was sure although he was no expert. It was weathered and cracked. He put his weight on it and found it implacable. He stooped to touch brown dust at its base.

He took photographs and filmed as he circled it. An interesting thing he could weave into his book and if there was any link to the glaistig all the better.

He went back the way he had come and continued on the path. There was no sign of the couple. The path didn't wind back to the loch. It began to climb in the direction of the village. He got to the top and looked back. A nice view he snapped a few times.

The path led to a country road with crumbling edges. He started down it and found himself at the farm he had seen earlier. The couple were talking to the old man he'd encountered. He was a different character now, all smiles and laughter. He talked with his hands. His smile faded when he saw Reece.

Reece waved and the couple waved back. The old man spat on the ground and walked away. The couple didn't seem surprised. They fell in step with Reece, their dog running circles around them.

"Did I offend him?"

"No," said the woman. "He doesn't like strangers and you're the writer. Yes?"

"I am. Reece Williams."

The woman introduced herself as Marie and the man as Connor.

"You here long?" said Connor.

"A couple of days. Maybe three."

"We don't get many visitors. In fact I think you're the first since Mr. Riley came a few months back and before that I can't recall."

"You're remote."

"Aye and we like it that way. Not many people leave the village and if they do they come back old and ill and ready to pledge themselves."

"Pledge themselves to what?"

"The village," Marie broke in.

They had the same easy way about themselves as Annie. Placid and something else. Confidence perhaps.

"I'll be eating at the pub tonight. Will you be there?"

"Pub?" Connor said. "You mean the inn?"

"Yes."

"We may pop in for a time."

They bade him goodbye and cut across the forbidden field. Reece allowed himself a smile. The old bugger had a problem with visitors only it would seem.

He went back to the house and found Haddon in his room.

"Can we take a drive to the nearest town? I want some background on the village."

"Yes, sir."

"Sir again."

"It's a habit, I'm sorry."

When they were in the car and speeding from the village Reece asked Haddon if he had served in the forces. The man paused before answering. A very slight pause but enough for Reece to see this was a question he wasn't keen on answering.

"I was."

"Army?"

"Catering Corps, sir."

"Where were you stationed?"

“Quite a few places, sir. The Falklands. Aldershot. Woolwich at one time.”

“Do you miss it?”

Haddon geared down as they took a steep hill.

“Not a jot.”

They did not speak for the rest of the journey.

Reece kept an eye on the time. They travelled for fifty minutes. The village was really isolated. In the past it must have been effectively a prison.

Haddon stopped outside the library and said he would find somewhere to park, walk back and wait outside. Reece got out and looked at the building. Quite grand for a library. Victorian he guessed.

He explained he was not a member of any library in Scotland to a sweet faced librarian of about sixty. The woman twinkled and showed him to a computer. He could look in the archives if he wished.

He brought up what little there was. No more than he had already researched back home. He found the same librarian and she showed him into the archives. He told her what he wanted. She had him sit at a scarred table. Minutes later she placed a slim file before him.

“Is that it?”

“I’m afraid so. Not much is it?”

He scanned the paperwork. The village had origins back in the early nineteenth century. No other reference before that. No church, no school, no anything. Young for a remote village. Very young.

He went back into the main area and found a photocopier. He copied the entire file and returned it to the archive leaving it on the desk.

The computer he’d used earlier was free. He widened his search a little. The nearest similar village in size if not population was on Loch Lomond. He scanned through the village web pages. 25,000 visitors per year. A golf course. Sailing and water sports. He thought of the loch with its wide, natural and empty bay. Where were the ferries? The pleasure cruises? Even a small loch should have some signs of human activity.

He looked deeper, cross referencing with known battle sites and Scottish families of note. Nothing.

He brought up a list of schools in the area. The nearest was forty miles or more away from the village. That wasn’t possible. A commute of that distance, surely not.

He printed more material and paid at the desk.

Haddon was outside.

“All done, sir?”

“Thought I might have a stroll around the town.”

Haddon frowned. “We’d better get back. Your dinner at the pub.”

Reece took his phone out and checked the time. “I can spare an hour.”

“Would Mr. Riley think that, or would he expect you to be at his business?”

Reece bristled but kept his tone level.

“You don’t have to worry about that.” He raised his sheaf of papers. “This is work. Discovering all I can about the loch and village is work,” he smiled.

“I’ll be here then, sir.”

“An hour no more. You can get a drink or whatever.”

Haddon straightened and Reece felt he’d insulted the man somehow.

“I’ll be here.”

Reece walked away. “Glad to hear you’ve dropped the ‘sir’ crap, Haddon.”

The town wasn't much to look at. A collection of shops, most of which were branches of retail businesses to be found in most towns and cities in the UK, dreary banks, a lone credit union and an indoor market.

He bought a coffee from a stand and sat on a bench in a pleasant enough pedestrian area. He watched people walking by. The old, the young. Parents with children, children alone and in groups.

The lack of a school was puzzling. A hundred people? If a quarter of them were children that might not be enough to warrant a school. Maybe they did get bussed out. Hadn't Annie said her son was at school? He'd ask her later.

He sipped the scalding coffee and thought about getting a snack. He turned to look back at the stand and saw Haddon on the corner. He looked pissed off. Pissed off he'd been seen or pissed off that Reece was disobeying him?

Reece waved and beckoned the man over. Haddon walked away.

Reece spent an hour and a half wandering round. When he got back to the library. Haddon had already brought the car and was parked on double yellow lines with the engine running. Reece got in with a smile. Haddon set off without waiting for Reece to strap his seatbelt on. Reece spoke once to say he had found little at the library. Haddon only grunted in return.

It began raining five minutes into the journey. When they arrived at Annie's it was pouring down and made worse by a biting wind.

Haddon went straight to his room. Reece opened the kitchen door to find Annie scrubbing the kitchen floor. She was on her knees. She got up and brushed stray hair from her face.

"Just letting you know I'm back."

"Thank you Mr. Williams. Have you had a productive day?"

"Yes, thank you. I was meaning to ask."

"Yes?"

"Your son Joe, where does he go to school?"

She turned to the sink and began running water.

"To the village school."

"I haven't come across it."

Annie took a very large bar of green soap and began cleaning her hands. Red chapped hands.

"It's nearby."

"I didn't see it. I'll go further my next walk."

"Yes."

He watched her for a moment before saying a cheery goodbye. He'd managed to upset another local plus his driver, although only God knew how. A good day's work.

His room was warm and welcome. He put his papers on the bed. He looked out of the window watching the rain lash the road. Time for a little writing. His laptop was on the bed. It was closed. He opened it.

"Curiouser and curiouser."

He checked the Recent Items. White Glaistig.doc. A list of jpgs he could remember looking at yesterday. All looked right but he hadn't closed the machine, he was sure. Ninety-nine percent sure anyway which wasn't sure at all.

"Getting paranoid," he mumbled.

He took the papers and went through them sorting them into background and points of interest piles. A third pile was for the largely useless although he never discarded anything. No good researcher should.

The rain was slowing. Some sun was reaching the window.

He started typing up notes and then stopped. He got a notebook and pen and worked longhand. He described his walk and the odd encounter with the angry old man. He left nothing out he could recall. A stream of thoughts scribbled with no editing.

He shut the laptop down and put it on the small table by the window.

He took his robe to the bathroom. The bath wasn't wide enough and hurt his backside. He washed his hair over the sink and then shaved, taking his time. He wiped the small mirror over the sink and grinned foolishly. He brushed his teeth and thought about the absurd money he was making for this trip. He could do this standing on his head.

He felt a stab of nervousness as he approached the inn. The Slaughtered Lamb from An American Werewolf in London came to mind.

There were no half witted looking bumpkins. The inn was long and wide with clean tables and a well stocked bar. A few punters sat around chatting quietly. No one looked at him except in passing. Connor was behind the bar.

"Told you I might pop in" he said.

"Reece shook the proffered hand.

"Are you the boss here?"

"She's the boss." Connor gestured and Reece turned to see Marie emerge from a modern looking swing door, out of place with the rest of the building. She gave him a wide and lovely smile. She looked great and he wondered how he had missed that in their first encounter.

"Hope you're hungry," she said.

"As a horse."

She took a menu from the bar and passed it to him.

"Take a seat when you're ready." She walked over to an elderly couple sat by a huge open fire and bent to speak with them. Reece dragged his eyes off her bum and turned back to Connor. None of the bitters or lagers were known to him. He pointed at one because it had a picture of a stag on it he liked.

"I'll try a pint of that."

"Good choice," said Connor. He pulled it expertly and left it to settle.

"How's your book going?"

"Early days."

"You've created quite a stir. We don't get many visitors."

"I've been made to feel welcome. Mostly."

Connor barked laughter, loud and catching. Reece joined in.

"Old man King is a sweet soul most of the time."

"I'm sure he is," Reece said though he didn't believe it. "King what?"

"It's Erwin King. He's a farmer. Was I should say. His sons manage it for him now."

"I'll stay off his land."

"Aye, he's wicked with a shotgun." Connor topped the beer up.

Reece made small talk for a while and then took a table at the other side of the fire. He watched it for a while and took a sip of his bitter. Strong and full. Good stuff, whatever it was.

The elderly man and woman were deep in conversation. He looked around. The walls were covered in framed photographs. Some of them quite old, others more recent. He peered at one. It was a ruined church. He got up to take a proper look. It was labelled 1911-St Columba.

“Ready to order?”

He looked around and saw Marie, a vision in even the plainest of outfits.

“Whoops, I haven’t even looked yet.”

“Shall I give you a few minutes?”

He scanned the menu. “No, I’ll have the steak and kidney steamed pudding.”

“Appetizer?”

“Erm...no I don’t think so. I’ll save some room for a sweet.”

She scribbled it down.

“This photograph.”

She looked over. “Which one?”

He tapped it with a fingernail. “Where is this?”

“About two miles west. You can walk it along the main loch path or drive up through the top hills and find the road to it. It’s in a state, the road I mean.”

“Church too.”

“Yes it burned a hundred years ago, it’s said.”

“A hundred and one,” he pointed.

“I’ll get your meal started.”

“You’re the chef?”

“I’m the everything round here.” He watched her go through the swing doors.

“Asking after the old church are you?”

Reece turned to the old man. “Yes.”

“Still old place. Haunted.”

The woman shushed him. “Daft talk.”

“I didn’t mean literally, woman.”

Reece took his seat. “Quiet is it?”

“No reason for anyone to go there.”

“Why didn’t it get rebuilt?”

“No reason. We didn’t have any interest in the place. The villagers at the time I mean.”

“I see,” Reece said.

“You the writer?”

“I am.” He knew how film stars felt now, ha ha.

“Be here long?”

“A few days at the most.”

“Riley’s whelp.”

“Pardon?”

The couple got up. The old man took a hat from a stand by the door. He gave Connor a wave before leaving.

“Something I said?”

He drank more of the beer, gulping it now he’d got the taste. He watched Connor behind the bar. He served another couple who took their drinks to the other side of the room.

Connor caught his eye. “Do me a favour, English? Put another log on the fire.”

Reece looked and saw a basket of thick logs, some with bark still on them. He took one and placed it on the fire, not wanting to drop it on looking like a wimp. Sparks shot across the hearth.

“Don’t set fire to the place, now.”

Reece shook his head. He liked this man and his gorgeous wife.

Speaking of his wife, she came out of the swing door with a steaming plate. She set it before him and produced a knife and fork like a conjuror.

“Looks great.”

“All the boys tell me so.” She turned on her toes, missing his slight blush.

He ate all the pudding and most of the vegetables. Connor offered him another pint which he accepted. He was slightly disappointed when a young girl collected his plate and took his order for a slice of apple and blackberry pie. Cold with pouring cream.

His phone rang.

“Mandy. I thought I was ringing you tomorrow?”

“We both know that wouldn’t happen. Can you talk?”

“Yes, I’m just waiting for my dessert.”

“What are we having?”

“Apple and blackberry pie with cream, if I can manage it.”

“Yum. How is everything?”

“Fine, I think. My driver took me to the nearest town but I couldn’t dig much up on the village and nothing at all on the subject.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it all out.”

“I’m thinking it will be mainly interviews with locals.”

“Whatever works.”

“I’m going to talk to the owners of the pub later and have another chat with my landlady. She remembers her granddad telling her stories. Might be a bit thin this book.”

“You’ve only got to impress one reader.”

“Have you heard anything from him? And more importantly has the money come through yet?”

The waitress was walking towards him with a slice of pie that looked big enough to feed a family of four.

“No on both counts. Have you heard anything?”

“Not yet but I get the feeling Haddon is more of a spy than a driver.”

“Is that his name, your driver?”

“Haddon?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t I say?”

“Having a conversation with you is like a long journey of discovery.”

“I’m sure.” The waitress put the dish down. He smiled his thanks. “He’s a bit strange. Calls me sir all the time but got really pissy with me earlier.”

“Calls *you* sir? There is something wrong with him.”

“Can I get on with my pie now?”

“Certainly. Call me if you want me.”

He thought of saying something suggestive but decided against it.

The pie was fine and he ate every piece of it. He went and sat at the bar and ordered another pint.

“Can I set up an interview with you and Marie, please?”

“Us? About the stories? We don’t know much but I can put you onto a man that does.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Erwin King is the real expert.”

“How did I know you were going to say that?”

He stayed another two hours and drank two more pints and a double Balblair 1975. He didn’t think King would speak to him and said so. Marie went in the back. She came out with a grin saying she had phoned the old man and got him to agree to talk tomorrow at three. King had apparently warned the ‘scribe should not be late’. When

asked how she had swung this Marie had shrugged and said the farmer couldn't resist her charms. Reece found himself wishing Connor wasn't there.

He walked back in cold air with the unmistakable smell of the loch permeating it. This place really did remind him of the Lake District, a pall of damp everywhere. He briefly considered borrowing a torch and strolling back to the loch but then recalled the narrow ledge near the (man made?) obelisk or whatever it was, and decided against it.

Annie's door was unlocked and the woman herself was in the hall with a boy of about eleven. The boy he had waved to earlier. She was helping him out of a coat two sizes too big for him.

"Hello," said Reece. "Are you Joe?"

"Yes sir."

Not the sir thing again.

"Call me Reece for that is my name." He laughed too loudly. The boy looked at his mother.

"Can I get you anything before we go to bed?"

"Can I make myself a tea later? Before I turn in?"

"Oh, yes, help yourself. Anytime you wish."

"While I've got you, can we arrange to talk about the glaiastig stories?"

"I expect so," she said. "Not that I know much."

Reece looked the boy over. A skinny lad. Gawky. "You probably know plenty. Just tell me the stories your grandfather told you."

"Right. Any time in the morning is fine with me. When would you like breakfast?"

Ten, he thought, but said eight.

"A full Scottish?"

As far as he knew this was the same as a full English with pancakes. "Sounds lovely."

"See you at eight," she led the boy upstairs. Reece winked when Joe looked back. The boy almost smiled.

He sat in the sitting room for a while and noticed there was no television. No phone anywhere either. Joe's coat bothered him. Probably a hand-me-down or perhaps even his father's who seemed absent. Dead or departed in a different way.

In the end he didn't bother to make tea. He went to bed with his head buzzing and thinking about Joe's coat.

He felt good when he awoke but tired. He got to the kitchen by a quarter past eight. Despite this the breakfast was perfect. There was no sign of Joe. After they were done he got the notebook from his room and persuaded Annie to talk.

"Can you tell me what you were told as a girl?"

"It's all nonsense really. There's supposed to be a sunken island in the loch where the glaiastig lives. She surfaces every now and then and haunts the pathways."

"Just that, haunts?"

Annie nodded and looked at the unwashed crockery piled in the sink.

"How does it haunt the area? There must be stories of sightings?"

"I really don't know. Will Mr. Riley be angry?"

He wasn't sure what to say to this turn in the conversation. A thought occurred.

"Does Mr. Riley own this house, Annie?"

She got up quickly. "You don't mind if I get on with this while you ask your questions?"

His pen was frozen over the pad. He put it down.

“Annie has Riley made you have me as a guest?”

“He’s been very kind.”

Reece decided to leave it there.

“I’ll tell Mr. Riley how cooperative and helpful you’ve been.”

“Will you?” She turned to him. He was dismayed to see tears standing in her eyes.

“Absolutely.”

He watched her for a while and then went back to his room. He rang Mandy’s personal number.

“Hello.”

“It’s Reece.”

“I know.”

“Yes. Can you do me a favour?”

“Maybe.”

“Try and find out if Riley owns property here?”

“Scotland?”

“No here. The loch area.”

“Is there a problem? I don’t want you shit stirring. You’re there to write the old man a fairy story, nothing else.”

“Mandy, will you do it, please?”

There was a pause. He heard papers rustling. “Yes,” she said.

He walked the other side of the village and saw similar houses to Annie’s in neat rows. All made with a gritty, hard stone. He walked by a little park not much bigger than a generous garden. He heard children on the wind. He tried to follow the sound but lost it. He went back to the spot where he had heard them. He waited but didn’t hear anything else.

He walked through the park. It was neat and well tended. He didn’t see a scrap of litter. There was a painted metal bandstand. He took photographs.

The building to the rear of the park was made up of two rectangles. There was a tiny bell tower. He walked the length of it. There were three doors with letters carved in stone above. Boys. Girls. Infants.

“Gotcha!”

There was no wall around the school. He went further and saw a small square of playground at the back. This was walled. He walked back and looked through the only window this side of the school, set to the right of the Girls entrance. The classroom was empty. There was an old blackboard and the teacher’s desk was high, more like a podium. The children’s desks were in rows and very old fashioned. They even had dried up inkwells. The walls were plastered in drawings. It all looked normal if a little quaint. Normal except for the lack of students. He found the same at the back of the building. Two more empty rooms.

He walked to the loch and decided to go further along the path than before. He passed the spot where he had seen the obelisk. The main path was pretty even and only overgrown in a few places. He was in a corridor of vicious looking greenery, a tangle that would cut a man to shreds. He emerged to a view of the loch. He paused to take pictures. He didn’t have much of a sense of direction but thought he was looking north. The loch was surrounded by steep hills. He thought about the island. He’d look into that. He took out the notebook and wrote a reminder.

The walk was pleasant and the air fresh. The water was a little choppy and he enjoyed watching it. Almost hypnotic.

So Riley was a bully. A bully backed up by billions. He felt his testicles shrivel at the thought of a man like that with power over people. It was like something from the dark ages. A feudal lord exercising his control however he saw fit.

A bird flew over the water. A large thing with monstrous wings. He tried to photograph it but the display showed a blurred dot. He really ought to learn how to use the thing properly

Was it any of his business? No, he was a hired hand the same as Haddon. But he didn't have to like it.

He walked on, breathing the air deeply and making comparisons to the sights and sounds of London where this had begun.

He started to make up sentences, ways to describe what he saw. He'd have to avoid words like 'majesty' and 'grandeur', like the plague.

He rested for a while as the path climbed. The bird was back. He saw a curved beak and marvelled at it. Not something he saw every day.

The air began to cool further and he zipped his jacket.

Then he came upon it, shattered and black, a ghost from the past. The church had been on a hill. He approached it, panting a little.

It had been high but small. The spire was mostly gone and a cross, perhaps from its peak was in the grass, overgrown and slimy with moss. He walked around the building, at one point stumbling over a low gravestone. There were several of them almost unseen among the grass.

The door was gone making the entrance look like a cavern. The cold struck him more than the darkness. He went in a little way and waited for his eyes to adjust. The roof of the nave was intact. The chancel was more ruinous with a large hole in the corner open to the sky illuminating the altar. He could make out a font a few steps away. He walked the length of the nave and up two shallow steps, the pulpit on his left.

The altar was stone and made from a single block of rough stone. It was covered in fungi. There was a space behind the pulpit separated from the chancel by a wall. He went behind the pulpit feeling with his feet and outstretched hand. The cold was more biting here.

"Shit to this."

He went to stand facing away from the altar and tried to imagine a congregation, singing and praying. How many had been baptized and married here? How many funerals marked by an intoning priest?

Something scurried from behind the altar, its movement shockingly fast. He lost it as soon as his mind processed it. He went to examine the spot where it had been.

A dead bird surrounded by discarded feathers lay half eaten on the cold floor. Spots of blood looked arranged around the head like a halo.

He left, shivering and walked back the way he had come. He stopped, puzzled. He examined the spire and the main body of the building slowly walking back and wishing he had a torch. Odd, he thought.

Reece worked on his notes breaking for a light lunch. He had thirty or more pages in the notebook, scribbled and random, the way he preferred to work. He had a quick bath and changed into an old jumper and jeans. He slipped the notebook into his back pocket and left in plenty of time. He walked slowly seeing no one. He reached Erwin King's farm with eleven minutes to spare. He pulled the old fashioned doorbell half expecting Lurch from the Addams family to open the door. A pretty woman wearing a smock, daubed in different colours of paint greeted him with a smile.

“Mr. Williams?”

“Yes, I’m a little early.”

She allowed him in. “In that case you’ll have to wait. Uncle Erwin won’t set his eyes on you until the appointed time.” She was almost laughing as she delivered this.

“It’s good of him to see me.”

Now she did laugh. She showed him to a study and invited him to sit. It was a smallish space with a high ceiling. The fireplace was too large for the room. He looked at the wall to the rear. Probably a partition but painted to match the other white walls which were roughly textured. Beneath the window was a large desk. He sat on a leather settee opposite where he assumed King usually sat in a fat armchair with worn patches on the armrests.

He looked at the bookcase which was on the opposite wall to the fire. It contained old looking tomes on animal husbandry and agriculture. There was a King James Bible on the top shelf right in the middle.

The door opened suddenly and King came in scowling. He looked Reece up and down and shook his head slightly.

Probably hoped I had my hands in his desk drawer.

“Will this take long?”

“Not at all, sir.” He hoped the ‘sir’ would go a little way to mollifying the old fart.

King took a bottle from a tray in an alcove next to the window.

“Lavagullin?”

“Yes, that would be nice?”

The old man tried not to show his surprise.

“A whisky man, eh?”

“Yes. My dad let me have my first sip at fourteen. Benromach.”

King handed Reece a glass with easily a triple measure in it.

“Your father was wise.”

Reece nodded gravely.

“Go on then ask me what you want to know.”

“Do you mind if I use this?” He took his phone from his top pocket. “I can record our conversation with it.”

King grunted.

“How old are the stories about the glaistig?”

“I don’t know.”

King looked at him through bushy eyebrows. His mouth was set.

“Ok. Did your parents tell you about it?”

“They did.”

“So we know it goes back to your parents’ time at least.”

“Much older than that, young man. I thought you were an expert on such things?”

“I’ve made a study of folklore and myths.”

“Well then,” King took a drink.

Reece matched him loving the burn on his lips and tongue.

“What did they tell you?”

“That it existed in the loch.”

“Any stories of sightings?”

“Certainly.”

Reece waited.

“What about healings? Does the glaistig heal?”

“Pah! What rot!”

“It’s just that I was told it did”

“By Riley, no doubt.”

Reece took another sip.

“Yes, to be truthful.”

“Strange man that.”

Look who’s talking, thought Reece but said, “Does he own your farm like he does the houses in the village?”

It was hard for the man to frown any deeper but he managed it. He spat a little as he answered. “He owns nothing. A few scraps of paper prove nothing!”

There was no rescuing this and Reece decided to drink up and leave as quickly as he could. After another question at least. The old man had confirmed his suspicion if nothing else.

“Why do people say your church was burned when it clearly wasn’t? It was just abandoned wasn’t it?”

King stood up. “Go somewhere else for your information and tell Riley and his thugs they can go to hell!”

“I might do just that, Mr. King.”

“I doubt it somehow. Get out!”

Reece put the whisky glass on the carpet. King pulled the door open.

“Mr. King-”

The old man dug his fingers into his chest. His face went from ruddy to purple in a second.

“Jesus! Sit down; I’ll get your niece.” He went into the hall and shouted. He heard a door open and the rumble of quick feet on wooden floors. The woman glanced at him before bending to her uncle who was sinking to the floor.

“I’ll ring for an ambulance.”

“She turned on him. “I’ll do it myself. Just go!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Get out before I call my brother-in-law!”

He opened the outside door and looked back. She shot him a vicious look and slipped her hands behind the old man’s neck.

He walked quickly, his face hot and his legs shaking. He was almost at Annie’s when he realized he had left his phone behind.

Reece watched the clouds from the bed, his hands clamped behind his head. He wanted his phone and he wanted to go home. This place was weird.

Thugs! That was what the old man had said.

He swung his legs off the bed and looked through the window. Joe was walking towards the loch path. He grabbed his coat and ran downstairs. The boy was out of sight already. He jogged for a while until he saw the boy’s dark hair. He power walked until he was sure they were out of sight of the houses. He called out. The boy looked back and froze.

“Give me a minute.”

Reece was out of breath when he reached the boy who was wearing his outsize coat.

“Where you going?”

Joe looked at his feet.

“Is everything all right?”

“Why are you here?”

Reece bent a little. “Can we stop a minute? Can’t believe how unfit I am. Too much time at my desk.”

The boy did not answer.

“I’m writing a book for a man called Paul Riley.”

“I know that,” the boy’s voice was sounding like it was on its way to breaking.

“What are you really doing? Mum’s upset.”

“I’m sorry to hear it but what do you think I’m doing? You must have some idea.”

The boy backed up a little. “You’re different to the others.” Reece decided to let the boy talk. “They were really nasty.”

“You can tell me Joe, really. I don’t actually work directly for Riley. I’m just freelancing.”

“What does that mean?”

“Doing the one job and it really is what I said. Just a book.”

He heard scuffing and turned to see Haddon walking towards them. The boy ran off before Reece could say anything more. He walked towards the driver.

“Good evening, sir. Having a stroll?”

“Something like that. You?”

“The same. Shall we walk together?”

“I’m on my way back actually.”

Haddon slipped his hands into his coat pockets. “Is that right? Could have sworn I saw you leave the house not five minutes ago.”

Reece stepped around him. Haddon put out a quick hand and Reece flinched. Haddon laughed. “Steady there, sir. Don’t jump out of your skin.”

He wanted to punch the driver in his smug face but as skinny as the man was Reece knew he’d be the loser by twelve rounds.

“I’ve got your phone is all.”

Reece flushed and wanted to hide it. “Thanks. How did you get it?”

Haddon tapped a finger to his nose and walked on.

“Bastard,” Reece said quietly.

He looked through his phone knowing it had been examined; his messages read and probably chuckled over. He rang Mandy. She didn’t answer so he left a message to call him as soon as she got it.

“Fuck this!” Reece followed Haddon who was already striding out of site as the path deviated to the right.

The boy was at the obelisk. He had an old jam jar. He opened it and put his fingers in the oil. He drew it over the stone exactly as he had been taught.

Haddon watched him from the thick bushes. The dugout was a professional job and he knew he wouldn’t be seen. His sharp eyes followed the boy’s hands. His fingers moved over the markings that were almost invisible when dry. The oil did not drip but stood perfectly on the surface.

Haddon touched the woman on the shoulder. He couldn’t see much of her except for her hair and tip of her nose. She put a hand to his crotch and squeezed.

This was his big chance. *Their* opportunity. The softly softly shit wouldn’t work. Riley should have let them get on with it instead of butting in and trying to befriend this village of inbred wankers.

Reece went past the path to the obelisk at first and then doubled back. He could spare the time for a quick look. If the boy and Haddon had walked on he could still catch up to them.

He found the boy staring at the water. He failed to see the oil and the patterns on the obelisk.

Joe jumped when he saw him

“You can’t stay here, I’ll get in bother.”

“Who with? Your mum?”

Joe tried to stand eye to eye with him but barely reached his shoulders. Reece got the impression he was copying behaviours he had seen in others.

“Ok, Joe. I’ll go if you answer my questions. Deal?”

The boy had not expected this. He nodded.

“What happened in the village when Riley and his people came here?”

“They said they were here to make a...I don’t know, a film?”

“Documentary?”

“That’s it. Nobody would have anything to do with them at first and then we all had to go to a meeting at King Farm.”

“Even the children?”

“Everyone. We went into the big barn and Riley was sat there with his men. One of them held up papers and said he owned all the houses now.”

“Right, go on.”

Joe looked back at the water.

“My dad said it was nonsense.”

Dad?

“Then the man said Mr. King had sold them all.”

“The houses?”

“Yes. Everyone started shouting. My dad went to the front and then a man went up to him and hit him.” He was starting to babble. Reece put a hand on his shoulder.

“Dad hit his head on the floor.”

“Ok, son, take it easy.”

“Mr. King said it was all lies and then turned round and looked at Frank.”

Reece put it together.

“Frank is Erwin’s son and he had sold the properties.”

“Um, that’s right because Mr. King had vouchsafed them to him already. Ahead of time.”

“And he sold them.”

“Frank left, but I can’t remember anything after that I was trying to help my dad.”

“What happened to him Joe? Your dad?”

“We have to go now or we’ll be in trouble.”

“Who with?”

Joe had clearly had enough. He took off.

“Where are the other children, Joe?”

Reece had a long look around before following. He didn’t try to catch up.

The evening was drawing on. He went by the farm. There were lights on and cars parked at the front of the house.

He called Mandy and this time she answered.

“Hiya,” she said. “Good timing. I’ve just got in.”

“I want out.”

“Reece.”

“No, Mandy there’s something screwed up here. Riley has got people on a knife edge. He’s up to something.”

“He’s an extremely wealthy businessman. He’s always up to something.”

“He’s managed to buy the whole village and these are not regular people. They’re different.”

“What, one eyed and toothless? All married to their sisters?”

He couldn’t help laughing. “Stop it, this is serious.”

“You’re right about the houses. One of his holding companies bought them about six months ago.”

“Another thing. There’s no sign of any children except one who lives in the house where I’m staying.”

“So?”

He sighed. “I don’t know, it’s just so odd!”

“Look, get some sleep, write your heart out tomorrow and then go home. We’ll work on the manuscript and you’ll be home and dry.”

“That’s your advice?”

“If you want a career in a shifting and unpredictable industry, yes. Don’t piss the old man off.”

“He’d be the second one today.”

He had no appetite and no wish for company. He picked at a sandwich Annie made for him. He sat on the bed and rubbed at his eyes. His head was throbbing. He heard the front door close and looked out. Haddon was walking toward the farm. Reece put the light out to see more clearly. Haddon paused and took something from his jacket. He spoke into it.

Reece watched until he lost sight of him. He heard the door open and close again. Annie and her son were walking in the same direction. Then more people passed the house. He put his lighter coat on and went downstairs. The door was locked. He went through to the kitchen. The rear door was also locked. He searched the drawers for keys fruitlessly.

He went back up and looked in Annie’s room. It was simple with an old iron bed covered in blankets and a knitted throw. A mattress was stood against the wall with more blankets on a bedside wooden chair. He searched quickly, guiltily but saw no other choice.

He tried Haddon’s room last. He yelled as his wrist was twisted and he was hurled across the room. The light snapped on.

“You?”

The car was huge and stately. A roller with modifications a businessman or politician in a less stable nation might enjoy. It glided silently through the streets, its occupants screened with privacy glass. The car that preceded it was smaller and sleeker as was the rearguard vehicle.

Erwin King’s niece pointed the black and deadly looking pistol at him. He pedalled backwards his shoes sliding on the wood floor.

“You are a waste of time and a waste of space, Williams.”

“Am I?” he said although he would not remember this. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“You won’t get any. Not if you stay put and behave yourself.”

“What have I done to you people?”

“Get off the floor.”

He did. She sat on the only chair a twin of the one in Annie’s room.

“Sit.” She indicated the bed with the pistol.

“What...”

“What,” she echoed.

“What are you going to do?”

“Don’t crap yourself, English. You’ll be sent on your way when this is over. Mr. Riley only wants one thing.”

Reece felt very cold. His body was going into shock, he reasoned. He sat.

“The children?”

She laughed. A dry sound. “You think he’s a kiddie fiddler? Jesus, you are stupid, for a so called writer.”

He shook his head, tears threatened but he willed them away.

“You think he’d kidnap an entire community of children. How the fuck would he get away with that?”

Reece looked at the pistol. If he got the chance. What? What would he do?

“We had it all under control until he sent you in. He pulled the resources so we’ve been running round like scalded cats trying to get ready for it.”

“For what?”

“Shut up.”

The driver wasn’t a chauffeur but he acted as one tonight. He opened the door. Paul Riley was trussed up so he wouldn’t fall. His two male nurses sat either side of him. The driver bent down and whispered. Riley nodded, the effort of it clear on his face.

The ringing startled Reece. King’s niece took the phone from her breast pocket. Reece heard a male voice.

“Are you sure?”

She frowned and bit her bottom lip.

“Come on Hemingway, we’ve been invited to the party after all.”

Reece was a few steps in front. She reminded him twice she could cut him in half. He walked where she said. They passed the farm. She turned on a torch at that point playing it along the crumbling road. He knew where they were going but couldn’t understand why. His mind galloped. The church. The inn. Annie’s fearful face and her boy urging him to leave the obelisk as frightened as his mother.

He saw more lights as they took the path to the water. Adults of all ages converging on the same place. Voices murmured in the dark.

The obelisk was lit up from beneath by strong lights.

His captor stuck the pistol in the small of his back.

“We wait here. Watch but don’t move. Understand?”

He could not have moved for anything. Connor and Marie were hand in hand with others he did not recognize. More villagers arrived. Then he saw the elderly man from the pub and his wife. Further along were Annie and Joe, their eyes on the obelisk.

Haddon stepped up beside Reece.

“Hello there, English.”

Reece bristled but did not speak.

Haddon stretched behind the writer and stroked King’s niece on the backside.

A man in his sixties left the hand holders and stood in front of them.

“Whom do we reject?”

The man god and his empty promises, the villagers intoned.

“In what do we believe?”

In water and in blood.

Two men carried what looked like a sack until one arm flopped out. They took the figure to the obelisk and bound it hands and feet. Another rope tied around the middle held the man in place.

“Is that...?”

“I told you to be quiet.”

“It’s fine, Rosie,” said Haddon. “It’s old man Erwin, sir. Come for his due portion.”

It was hard to see clearly but the blade was unmistakable. It flashed in the torchlight, more a sword than a knife. The speaker moved to the obelisk and sliced Erwin’s palm. He let blood flow onto his own hand and went to the loch’s edge and held it dripping over the water.

He placed the blade on the ground, stepped back and raised his arms.

“Take the sickness from us! Take it to yourself and make us whole!”

Silence reigned for minutes that stretched on and on. Reece caught the tension. Rosie was panting. Haddon moved back out of Reece’s eye line.

Reece looked at the villagers. Every one of them gazed at the water. It rippled as if a large stone had been thrown into it but there was no sound. Reece peered into the gloom. He could see a scant five feet of the water.

Something broke the surface. It bobbed for a heartbeat and then moved closer. Reece shook his head as the first hand like appendage gripped the edge of the land.

It heaved itself ashore and looked around its smooth head swaying.

“It can’t be?”

“Quiet,” said Rosie.

The dark shape walked on all fours as it moved towards the obelisk. Then it stood upright. It towered over the unconscious old farmer. It stepped into the light and Reece shoved his fist into his mouth.

It was smooth like a seal. Its eyes were dark spots and set wide. It was thick bodied with well defined musculature. It moved closer and smelled at the old man. It looked at the villagers once and then attacked the old man’s chest. Blood sprayed outwards in a black fountain.

Rosie pressed the gun against Reece. Sweat stood out on his forehead. He kept watching unable to close his eyes or look away.

It was over as quickly as it had begun. Now the creature licked at the wounds. Erwin groaned, his head moving from side to side.

The glaistieg turned back to the water.

Something whipped past Reece’s head. Two pop like explosions. The glaistieg dropped to all fours and twisted its body around, rolling on the grass.

The villagers began to panic turning to one another. Annie clutched her son.

Haddon sauntered by Reece. He had a rifle over his shoulder and a handgun pointing at the villagers.

“Lay on your stomachs now! All of you.” He fired into the air. The villagers obeyed, the oldest first, laying themselves flat. All but two of them. Connor and Marie stepped around the others. She went to the glaistieg. Connor retreated into the shadows and returned with what looked like a net. Husband and wife spread it over the creature. Connor rolled it so the net covered it completely.

“Get the van,” said Haddon. Connor ran by and gave Reece a salute.

“Go and help.”

Rosie gave Reece a little push.

The glaistieg was larger than a man. It had stopped twisting and was laid on its side, two darts stuck in its flesh.

Reece looked at the villagers. Joe was the only one looking over. His eyes were round with fear. The adults were silent, even calm.

Marie rolled the glaistieg over with effort. It looked into Reece’s eyes and made a sound that reminded him of a dog he had owned as a child. A plaintive musical sound that gave him a surge of feeling.

“Why are you doing this?”

Marie glanced at him through her hair. She gestured. He looked back. Erwin was supporting himself, his legs now steady. There was no sign of an injury on his chest. He was watching intently.

Reece remembered the restaurant. How Riley had frozen in position before leaving the table. He had come back a different man.

“How much is he paying you?”

“Enough,” Marie said.

“You’ve lived here all your life.”

“And?”

Reece put a hand on the glaistig. Its body was smooth. There was intelligence and gentleness in its expression.

“I want no part of this.”

“Tough,” said Rosie. “You nearly screwed it up for us as it is.”

“Because the old man wouldn’t pay you if I delivered it to him. If I worked out how to call it here.”

“Bingo, the writer gets it,” Rosie said. She came closer, still looking across at the villagers every few seconds. “You have no idea what living in this fucking place is like. I want out!”

“Just leave then. Why this?”

“Don’t argue with him,” Marie said.

The explosion made him duck down. He didn’t realize he had thrown himself over the glaistig. Rosie looked the same but there was a dark spot on her chest and it was spreading. She dropped, the pistol still in her hand.

Several villagers got up only to dive back down as the shooting started. Reece was still over the glaistig. It was breathing heavily.

Three men dressed totally in black entered the light. They were armed with what Reece thought were semi automatics. One stood near the villagers firing over their heads in short bursts. The others were marching Connor and a bloodied Haddon to the water’s edge. They ordered them to kneel with their hands laced over their heads.

“You,” one said to Reece offering a knife. “Cut him down and don’t get any ideas.”

Reece reluctantly left the glaistig and took the knife. It sliced through the bindings easily. Erwin buttoned his shirt while watching Reece, his face neutral. Reece handed the knife back. The armed guard was tall and broad. His face was scarred and his eyes cold. He squatted by Rosie who was still moving and took her pistol. He ordered Erwin to join the villagers.

“You too,” he said.

“Mr. Williams can stay.”

Carter dressed in an expensive looking suit stood just inside the circle of light.

“Be interesting for you to see some of your mythic beasts are real.”

The glaistig shifted a little.

“Is that it?” Carter showed no sign of getting closer. “Ugly thing. I didn’t believe any of this shit until I saw the evidence with my own eyes.”

“What did you bastards do?”

“Valiant, Reece, but foolish. Keep a civil tongue in your head or I’ll have one of these men cut it out.”

“I believe you,” Reece spat.

“We injured a few of the more vulnerable residents. Then we withdrew but we watched the church not the loch. Our intelligence wasn’t good.”

“But you got your information from these shits!” Reece gestured at Conner and Marie.

“We got a garbled version. They were cautious enough not to tell us too much. Good tactic. We withdrew and watched from a distance. Haddon helped enormously with his taste for the local girl.”

Haddon swore.

“Thanks for your help, Haddon,” laughed Carter. He put his hands in his pockets. “I’m cold.”

“Yes, you are!”

“Reece, you are a small man in a small world. Where was I? Yes, the kids were all better the next day but we didn’t see how this had happened. Mr. Riley was so cautious he had us watch from a distance when I thought we should have been here making these country cousins talk. But he was right wasn’t he? He’s an extremely intelligent man.”

“Where are the children?”

“All safe and well. Ask Rosie here, oh wait you can’t,” he laughed. “They’re in King’s big barn. We wanted them close and convenient in case we needed them. Rosie was quite happy to oversee them for us.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Take this thing away with us. Soon.”

“And?”

“Everything goes back to normal. Normal as this place gets anyway. They’ll have to join the 21st century like the rest of Scotland. Get a G.P round here for a start.”

There was movement in the dark. Two burly men carried a stretcher. Riley looked smaller and barely alive but his eyes were bright. He was laid on the ground a couple of yards from the glaistig.

Carter nodded at the armed man who barked an order. The other guard went to join his colleague and they ordered the villagers up.

“Where are they going?”

“To a family reunion,” said Carter.

“Does it have to be the same blade?” Riley’s voice was a whisper.

“Probably best,” said Carter. “Do you want it cleaning first?”

“The glaistig will heal everything,” said Marie.

“When does everyone die?”

Everyone looked at Reece.

“When I’m healed, Reece. You understand?”

“Of course. No loose ends and all that. No witnesses even though most people wouldn’t believe any of this.”

“Regrettable,” Riley wheezed.

Carter took the blade and sliced deeply into Riley’s palm. A little blood came out. Carter squeezed the wound until there was more of a flow. He caught it in his hand and went to the glaistig. He allowed what there was to drip on its dark head.

“It’s not reacting.” Carter looked back at Marie. Marie wasn’t listening, Riley’s words hitting home.

Reece saw Haddon steal a look at the armed man. He was shifting his weight and angle. The guard was watching the glaistig.

“What is it doing?” said Riley.

“Nothing,” said Carter. “Wait, its smelling the air.”

“Cut the net near its head,” Riley ordered.

“Sir, we can still take it with us. Do this in a more controlled environment.”

“I might not last that long, you bloody fool!”

Haddon sprang and took hold of the weapon. His leg wrapped around the guard and they both went down. Reece backed up. Connor and Marie took the opportunity and ran into the darkness.

“What’s going on?” Riley said.

Carter and the two burly men stepped between their employer and the fight.

Haddon raised the weapon even though the other man had a grip on it. He smashed it down into the guard’s face and then he had it to himself.

When recounting this story to an incredulous Mandy, Reece would never understand how he had managed this. He grabbed the blade which Carter was trailing in the mud and stepped forward while swinging it. It went into Haddon’s skull. His eyes crossed and he fell, twitching. Reece grabbed the semi automatic and pointed it at Carter.

“You don’t know how to use that thing.” Carter said.

“Try me!”

They all turned at the snapping sound. The glaistig was biting the net with very white and dangerous looking teeth. It wriggled free. Carter ignored Reece, his eyes on the creature. “Sir, it's working.”

Riley’s eyes ranged trying to see.

The glaistig sniffed the air and headed for the old man. It reared above him. Riley gasped. It swayed side to side as it had earlier. It made a strangled noise deep in its chest and darted downwards. Riley’s cries were awful. The glaistig shook his frail body. His head whipped.

“Shoot it!” Carter shouted.

“Leave it!” Riley screamed. He tried to say something else but his words were cut off. The glaistig kept eating. Riley’s eyes went into his head. Spittle ran from his mouth. Carter moved forward so Reece swung the weapon striking the back of his head. He fell to his knees.

The glaistig ripped at the old man’s chest, emptying it, devouring everything. It gripped his head and there was a cracking sound. The glaistig ravaged the skull and Reece saw the brain squeezed out like a melon from a sack. It was eaten in seconds. Then the creature moved down, tearing at the thick blanket and shredding Riley’s thin garments. His penis flopped as the glaistig continued to worry at the corpse. Reece looked away but kept his eyes on Carter who was moaning, perhaps praying.

Bones snapped and the glaistig still continued. Reece forced himself to look. There was little left.

“Shoot it,” said Carter.

It ceased with Riley’s remains and smelled at the air again, blood and flesh all over its muzzle. It moved towards Carter. He screamed but was snatched away and out of the light. Reece took one of the lights by the obelisk and lifted it. Carter was trying to fight. The glaistig bit through one arm severing it. Carter looked once at Reece and then his face disappeared in two rapid bites. It was over in thirty seconds. The glaistig began to circle Reece. He held the weapon up and then lowered it. The glaistig moved slowly away and then accelerated towards the village.

He ran after it. He passed a sobbing Marie.

“It didn’t hurt me,” she said.

“It should have ripped your fucking head off!”

He ran up the hill, a stitch developing instantly in his side. He had got to the farm gate when he heard gunfire and screaming. He ran by the farmhouse almost doubling over. The barn was massive. He almost opened fire when the doors parted.

Erwin and a younger man he did not know were shouting and shoving people through the door. Scores of people emerged, adults with weeping children in their

arms and older ones on foot. Annie had a small child in her arms and Joe at her side. A man with bound hands and a dirty bandage on his head limped after them. Erwin and the man shut the door. Erwin noticed Reece and pointedly looked at the weapon. Reece threw it over a wall.

The gunfire stopped and Reece heard a man's voice pleading. There was a growl and the barn wall shook under an immense impact.

The villagers were hurrying away except for Erwin and the other man. The resemblance was obvious. Erwin was looking at Reece, all trace of his former anger gone. He seemed younger and stronger.

They waited several minutes until the hellish sounds abated.

"Dad?"

Erwin nodded and the younger man opened one of the doors. He stepped back as the glaistieg shot by. It stopped yards away. Reece couldn't help but back up. It regarded him with liquid black eyes and then was gone, its feet padding over the ground.

Reece followed Erwin into the barn which was well lit by overhead strip bulbs. There wasn't much left. Scraps of cloth and two hot semi automatic weapons.

"We'll work through the night and get rid of everything," Erwin said.

"I know your secret," Reece said.

The older man's eyes were clear. "And that is?"

"The glaistieg doesn't heal does it?"

"No, it never has. Some of us know, others do not," Erwin walked to the barn door.

"Riley was a powerful man. We may have more trouble to come."

"I would have thought so," said Reece.

"Will we have any from you?"

"The glaistieg would have killed me too if that was so."

"You do understand."

"Dad?" Erwin's son was older than Reece but seemed much younger.

"Reece will tell you, son. I'm going into the village. We've much to do." He offered his hand. Reece took it and could feel real power in the grip.

The barn was vast and warm. He wondered how long the children had been held here.

"Mister."

"What?"

"The glaistieg?" There was real hunger in the man's face.

"It feeds on evil. Takes whatever is bad out of the person."

He walked back to Annie's, filthy and sweating. He was almost there when his phone rang.

"Mandy?"

"How come I always have to ring you?"

A child ran by with his mother following. They were both giggling.

"Has the advance come through?"

"Not yet."

Reece grinned. "That figures." He sat on the pavement watching the mother and child. "I wouldn't start spending your commission yet."

Imaginary Solid.

Clive Farrow locked his car and wiped a little streak of mud from the wheel arch with a handkerchief. He straightened his suit, examining it for bits and hairs.

The house was certainly impressive. A true mansion, old and vast. He approached it, feeling small and chiding himself for it. He walked up the stone steps and rang the bell.

A woman opened the door within seconds and asked him to come inside. She had him wait while she went to speak to Mr Rayner.

Rayner was the richest client of Goddard, Harper and Fellowes. Farrow should have felt honoured such an important man had asked for him and no one else at the firm, but he only felt trepidation. The partners had given him a little pep talk the day before which amounted to, 'don't screw up or irritate the old man if you want the hope of advancement'.

Rayner had made his money in property, mainly with his Shopping Experience Helston Village, a rambling mall, the first of its kind in the area.

"Mr Rayner will see you now." The woman looked flushed and nervous.

She showed him to a surprisingly small room. Rayner looked up. He was swaddled in blankets and looked very tiny and ill, not the robust man Farrow remembered from their one meeting last year.

"How do I look?" wheezed Rayner.

Farrow blanched.

The old man laughed and coughed, the coughing lasting four times as long as the laughter.

"Don't look so frightened."

Farrow nodded while trying to smile.

"You're here because I want you to shut Helston Village down."

"I see," said Farrow.

"The investors and them shop bastards are raising a stink. Threatening to sue blah, blah, blah! I want the shitpile shut and buried!"

"That may be problematic."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Farrow listened with a sinking feeling as the old man ranted and argued his point which as far as Farrow could see was nonsensical.

"I hate shopping and shoppers and them shop bastards! I want it shut, you got that? Shut!"

Farrow left a half hour later with Rayner's words repeating in his mind and triggering a throbbing headache. It was an impossibility. He knew that without investigation. Closing one of the areas most important job providers on a whim wasn't going to happen.

Farrow drove back and went straight to the office of his immediate boss. The senior solicitor shook his head over and over.

"This could lose us his business and the partners won't like that."

Farrow agreed.

He worked on it all the rest of the day and continued in the evening after a light meal. He forgot to read to his daughter and didn't notice his wife had gone to bed.

He followed her four hours before he was due to rise.

His wife drove him to work while he rubbed his forehead and tried to keep his meagre breakfast down.

He was summoned to see Mr Harper, the oldest and most ill tempered partner. The meeting did not go well. He left the office near to tears with threats and dire warnings ringing in his ears.

He left no stone unturned but found little. They could manoeuvre some of the lease holders out of the shops and throw out the month to month people easily. It was the heavyweight chain stores that were the problem. They were backed with real money. Money that made Rayner's personal fortune look puny. Farrow worked double time all week but it was no good.

The partners realized they were about to lose the golden goose so they took it from him with threats he wasn't to pass this on to anyone, especially Rayner. They set about the task with the senior solicitors and the rising stars of the firm. Farrow wasn't one of them and never would be.

He took the bus, walking the last half mile to his small, hardly begun paying for house. His daughter was pleased to see him. He played with her. Barbie, then snakes and ladders, half an hour on the computer and then he made supper while she bathed, supervised by his worried looking wife.

They laid in bed that night, talking in whispers. She asked how serious this was and he was honest. He had barely scraped into the firm and wouldn't be at the top of anyone's list. She made suggestions. He made some. In the end she fell asleep and he didn't.

The next morning was a Friday and she announced she was going to Helston Village. He controlled what he knew would have been hysterical laughter and kissed her goodbye. He picked up his daughter who squeezed his neck as hard as she could.

He dropped them at the bus stop and went the opposite direction to town.

The building was quiet and everyone morose. He couldn't look anyone in the eye. When Harper had him summoned he briefly decided to argue his point, to stand up for himself but when he stood before the man his resolve evaporated.

It was over quickly. A stay of execution. He was to visit Mr Rayner who was in a 'bad way', and personally explain that the firm had done everything in its considerable power to deal with his great matter but on this one occasion were unable to deliver.

He was glad to be out of the office. Glad and a little hopeful. If he could get Mr Rayner to understand and maybe get assurances that his property empire would continue to deal with the firm, well, surely that was a result? A result good enough to save his livelihood?

He arrived at the mansion and was shown into the same room. Rayner was now propped up in what looked like a very advanced hospital bed. There were tubes in his arms, one up his nose and mysterious beeping machines with digital readouts arranged about him like a futuristic cityscape.

"Had a bit of a downturn since you were here last," he said. His voice still had some strength to it.

"I'm sorry."

"You look sorry but I bet it's not for me. I know them old bastards you work for. They weren't nothing before I strolled into their shabby little office fifty some years back."

A nurse entered and the old man brightened.

"Here she is my angel of mercy."

The nurse smiled. "Listen to him."

She fiddled with something Clive thought might be a colostomy bag although it was hidden discreetly on the other side of the bed.

“Be counting the seconds, sweetie,” said Rayner as she left.

“Away with you.”

“So young man, you’ve failed me.”

“Mr Rayner,” began Farrow.

“Quiet! You fucking legals are all the same. Verbal diarrhoea the lot of you!”

Farrow realised he was holding his briefcase too tightly and relaxed his hands and put it down.

Rayner chuckled. “Don’t look so worried, boy.”

Rayner looked around the room unable to keep his eyes still.

“You know Helston Village?”

“Yes, Mr Rayner. My wife shops there.”

“Drags you there I shouldn’t wonder.”

“Every other week at least. She’ll be there now.” He added, “With our daughter.”

“How old is your girl?”

“Four.”

“Never had kids and I’ve been married six times. Six bitches from hell.”

Farrow looked at the carpet. Probably cost more than my car, he thought.

“Helston grew at an incredible rate. You watch Ray Harryhausen films?”

“Pardon?”

“Ray Harryhausen films. Stop making me repeat myself!”

“Sorry.”

Rayner coughed for a few minutes and then took a sip from a tube Farrow hadn’t noticed before.

“You know, ‘Jason and The Argonauts. Valley of the Gwangi.’ ”

“Ah, Clash of the Titans!”

“Hee hee,” laughed Rayner. “Used to say that every time my fourth wife put her wonderbra on!”

They were interrupted by another coughing fit. Rayner shook his head violently when Farrow offered to get the nurse.

“If I’d have had an imagination like that guy, the country, no scratch that, the whole world would have been in trouble but I’m a mean little sod. That’s what my mother used to say and she was right. No imagination, no vision but even my small dreams gave me all this and more money than most will see.”

Farrow thought about his daughter growing up with a failure of a father. His parents had never achieved anything much more than the basics. He’d stopped asking for the latest toy, the desired trainers, and the trips his friends went on at weekends. The answer was always no so what was the point?

“Shame really. Another body might have dreamed up a cure for cancer or the elixir of life and we’d all have been able to live forever. At a price. My price.”

He wanted to go. Another man might have walked out, gone to the office and told Harper and his cronies to shove their job, but not Clive Farrow. While there was the slightest chance he could keep his position he would bow and scrape to the last second.

“Don’t know how I did it. I’ve never understood it. Imagine it and watch it grow from nothing. Research it if you don’t believe me. Find the planning application. Find the contractors who built Helston. You won’t be able to you can bet your gonads on that.”

“Mr Rayner I have the detailed report here. Everyone at Goddard Harper and Fellowes did their utmost-”

“Shut up Fallow!”

Farrow did not correct his name.

“Not to worry. I had to try I suppose. I don’t really give a fart what happens when I croak but just in case there is a God I can at least argue I tried.”

“I’ll leave the report with you.”

“One more good deed and then you can get out of my house!” There was some venom in Rayner’s voice but Farrow thought it might be tempered with humour.

“I doubt I’ll get through the night. I’m on a doozy of a cocktail of drugs prescribed and not prescribed to keep me lucid, plus I imagined I would be chatty and in my right mind up to the end and that makes all the difference.”

Farrow felt his stomach knotting and all he wanted was the quiet of his living room and a glass of something strong to take the edge off his feelings.

“Drive that shitty little car of yours to Helston Village and get your family out of it. Forbid your wife from going there again. It won’t be for long, believe me. Then she won’t have the option.”

“If that’s everything Mr Rayner...”

“That is certainly everything, young man. Everything said and done.”

Farrow left the report on a large and ornate desk with nothing but a blotter and an expensive pen on it.

He went to the door and paused. “Get my wife out?”

“Right away.”

Farrow left and got back in his car. He looked at the house. Large, dark and strange. He was suddenly very weary, the last week catching up on him. There was no point in stringing this out. He had to go back to the office and tell his supervisor what had happened.

What had happened?

He drove to the office and was irritated to find his regular space had been taken by a trainee. He’d give the boy a telling off he would.

The trainee was the first person he saw. Farrow said ‘Good morning,’ and went straight to his supervisor who waved him away and said he would speak to him later. Speak to not with.

He fiddled with papers, checked his emails and then looked out of the window for twenty minutes.

A good deed, he thought.

He looked on the company intranet and brought up file after file on Rayner. Hundreds of interactions originally recorded in paper files were here and references to floppy disks, then CDs, then recordable DVDs. A catalogue of the tycoon’s dealings with his employers but containing zero on planning permission. No court appearances or anything personal despite the multiple divorces. He could have used a different firm for personal matters perhaps but nothing other than money management issues? That was odd.

Clive left his office at a run, went straight to the ground floor and out the door ignoring the receptionist and practically hurling himself at his car.

He drove through the town’s one way system at speed. He ran a red light, his eyes darting about praying that God would blind any passing traffic cop. He was sweating and cursing under his breath.

He saw the Helston Village sign and overtook three cars in a row. He headed for the car park. There was a queue as usual and one of the barriers wasn’t working. He tapped the steering wheel. The car in front wasn’t moving. He tried to look round it and could see the driver at the front of the queue impatiently hitting the ticket button. That meant the car park was full and there would be a wait until other cars left.

He got out, leaving his door wide open and ran past the barrier and towards the Village.

The car park had never seemed so wide. He ran and cursed the fact he was so unfit. He went through the main entrance and looked around trying to get his bearings. She usually started with clothes and cosmetics, then food and finally the toy shop if their daughter had been good. He looked at his watch trying to work out where she would be.

Stupid, he thought and began looking for a security guard. They could put out an announcement over the PA system.

He searched the crowds. He went up to the second floor. A woman was serving on the lottery booth. He went up and excused himself. The woman was dealing with a lone customer and put her hand up without looking at him. He shifted from foot to foot, watching her hands move from machine to customer for the money, then tapping keys and hovering over the machine until it belched out the ticket.

She looked at his sweating, red face and frowned. He asked where the main offices were. She looked undecided. He explained he needed to get an urgent message to his wife. She pointed to a door he had never noticed all the times he'd been dragged around the place. There was an intercom on it and a keypad beneath.

He went over without thanking the woman and pressed the buzzer. He waited, pressed again harder as if that would make a difference. A disinterested voice said, *Yeah*.

He garbled his words and the voice asked him to repeat himself. He did, practically begging for help. The speaker went dead and he buzzed again. He waited for what seemed like minutes and then saw the lottery woman talking to a fat security guard.

He ran over.

"I need to get a message to my wife urgently. Tell her she needs to leave and--"

The guard lifted his hand inches from Farrow's face. "Calm down, sir. If you come with me I'll speak to the manager and we'll get that message to your wife."

Farrow felt like kissing the man. He thanked him several times and then thanked him again. The guard looked him over. "Follow me," he said.

They went opposite to the door with the speaker and this wrong footed Farrow. He stumbled. The guard turned to face him and Farrow noticed they weren't walking any longer.

"Have we been drinking, sir?"

Farrow wanted to scream but said, "No, and I would appreciate you getting on with my request!"

"No need for that tone, sir."

"I'm not adopting a tone; I simply want a message relayed to my wife."

The guard sucked at his cheek. "Wait here." He indicated a bench. He spoke into his radio summoning someone to wait with a 'gentleman who wants to get a message to his wife'. His eyes didn't leave Farrow. Farrow looked at the bench then back at the guard.

He started to apologize but the guard spoke into his radio again and walked a few steps away.

Farrow looked around. There must be hundreds of people here. Thousands in fact.

"There's a bomb in here!" he shouted. "A bomb! Run for your lives!"

He ran past the startled guard shouting at the top of his voice.

Bomb Fire Bomb Run Save Yourself Bomb

He heard padding steps and knew the guard was after him. He zigged and then zagged through the crowds remembering a documentary he'd seen where soldiers

were taught to run in anything but straight lines to avoid being shot. He carried on shouting and screaming. He saw people react. One woman grabbed her two children and shepherded them away. Others laughed but not many.

The guard was shouting and he saw another one round the corner in front of him. He changed direction feeling the guard's thick fingers scrape the back of his shirt.

He went into a bookshop he knew had another exit on the ground floor. Startled customers got out of his way. He told one woman she had minutes to live. She clutched at her chest.

He left the shop and saw two more guards. He turned and managed to get past the first one who had just emerged from the book shop.

He scattered a group of teenage girls, knocking a carton of juice from one girl's hand. This slowed him for perhaps half a second and the fat guard grabbed at his shirt. He felt threads snap as his collar cut into his throat, a sensation of weight, a soft blow to his lower back and he went down. Three guards had him. Two more hovered. He continued to shout warnings and demands for an evacuation. They dragged him to another door he hadn't noticed. The first guard, who was huffing and blowing like an elderly carthorse, had a quick check around, noted the position of the nearby security cameras and punched Farrow in the kidneys.

Farrow was in the back of a patrol car. He was handcuffed. One of the constables was talking to a guard and a man in a suit, the other was in the passenger seat picking his teeth. Farrow could see people leaving the Village in droves. He didn't know if this was his doing or an actual evacuation. There were several police vehicles dotted around the car park. He asked the constable.

"Keep your trap shut, idiot!"

After a few minutes the driver got in and set off. Farrow saw his wife and daughter. They were hurrying away in the direction of the bus pickup point. He grinned and felt tears prick his eyes.

The car spun around in a wide arc to face the exit. The teeth picker said something about Saturday night. The other said he would come as long as it wasn't an all nighter. Then they stopped talking.

It was a whoosh and a bang. A blast of air buffeted the car sufficient enough for the driver to turn the wheel sharply. He braked.

"What is it, what is it?" Farrow tried to turn in his seat, hampered by the cuffs. He managed to twist halfway. The Village looked different. Washed out like a watercolour impression. It winked out and for an instant Farrow saw tiny figures suspended in air. They fell and the screaming started.

The teeth picker grabbed the radio and began barking into it. The driver got out. He bent into the window looking furious and vengeful. Farrow should have been terrified. Authority of all kinds had that effect on him. Instead he let his eyes slide off the copper and back to the scene unfolding.

Rayner was dead.

A few days after the wave of hysteria and rounds of interrogations had ended Farrow was ordered out of his cell by a prison officer. Being on remand wasn't as bad as he had imagined. The other prisoners were mostly ok and he did his best to avoid the others. A lot of the lads picked his legal brains, such as they were, about their own cases. He helped where he could.

His wife was standing by him and that was all he cared about.

He followed the officer meekly and was surprised to see his old supervisor. He sat opposite. The firm weren't representing him, of course so he had gone with an old university friend who was slightly further up the ladder.

His ex boss asked him how he was and didn't listen to the answer. He handed an envelope over.

Farrow opened it.

It was hand written and the script was shaky and hardly straight.

If you're reading this then you failed although I sincerely hope you got your wife and daughter out. That wasn't something I could have planned for.

I hung on as long as I could to give you as much time as possible before taking my medicine. They give you as much as you want when you're at the end and all you have to do is press this little button and it juices you up. As soon as I finish this letter I'm going to press it and press it until I can't press it anymore.

Did you guess why I hired a stupid man like yourself? Why I insisted on a barely competent lawyer I knew would fuck up and why I would forbid your very clever bosses from touching the whole shebang?

No offence but you probably have that gormless look on your face right now. It's simple really, Fallow.

I fucking hate them shop bastards!

The Yellow Parchment.

Sarah had lain cold for two days when I was summoned to see my employer, Jack Waring. He sat by his study window and blew expensive smoke. I leaned back in a throne sized armchair. Tears weren't easy for me and that was fine for the moment. I didn't want them to come until I'd caught her murderer so I did what I have always done. I detached. That's why I was number one. That's why Jack trusted me to do whatever was needed.

"The boyfriend?"

I shook my head. "He doesn't know anything."

Jack nodded but kept his profile to me. His eyes were on the garden. The lawns stretched further than I could see. He accepted what I said because I always told the truth. If the boy knew anything I'd have got it from him. They always talk.

"Do..." Jack's voice wavered and I almost gasped for it. To see this man rattled almost made me afraid. He finally turned to me.

"Do it!"

I worked alone. The first three days were inconsequential, nothing more than a time to eliminate the obvious. Our rivals were innocent but to make sure I made a few of them bleed. One, I think, died. It wasn't until I found old man Randle that I made real progress.

Randle was still a pornographer though he didn't need the money anymore. He was at his retreat in the Cheviot Hills. The two bodyguards died quickly and quietly. I found the man himself by following his low, urgent sounds.

He covered his flaccid excuse for a hard on with one hand while grabbing a robe with the other. The kid's round eyes registered my presence, first with fear and then with a conditioned response that was designed to invite me to join in.

"Get out," I said.

The boy looked at Randle who was looking at me.

"Turn left at the gate. It's a long walk but you'll find a village. Use a payphone or go to any house, they'll help you."

The boy hesitated. I took out my wallet and gave over several notes.

"Go!"

The boy ran out and a minute later I heard his feet scrambling over Randle's gravel drive.

"You killed Sarah Waring."

Randle shook his head. He glanced at the bedroom doorway.

"Tweedledum and Tweedledee don't work for you anymore."

"I heard about it. I telephoned Jack to tell him how sorry--"

"Big mistake in itself, fellah. Jack doesn't like you, you know that."

"You've got it all wrong. I wouldn't hurt Sarah for the world."

"No, she's the wrong sex for you. Was the wrong sex."

Randle came towards me hands palms up. I hit him perfectly on the bridge of his nose. Bone crumbled, mixing with cartilage. He screamed like a cat and fell to his knees. I took his hair, very thick for a man over seventy, and hauled him up. I felt my forearm bunch, holding him, stopping him from sliding back down.

"I'll tell you everything!"

"Of course you will." I said.

Randle's hands were the only part of him that looked his age. Swollen knuckles, fingers beginning to twist. They shook and a little brandy slopped on the dining table. I sat opposite him and steadied the bottle.

"Thank you."

"We can thank one another at the end of our conversation. Maybe."

"Jack's not always been a success."

Randle paused. If he was expecting this revelation to bring me to my knees he was a million miles off the mark.

"We worked together, forty years or more ago."

"I know. He's told me."

"Right."

He was getting hold of himself now. His face showed hope mixed with a cunning he'd relied on for years.

"We paid a price for our success. You're an intelligent man; you can't believe that what we've achieved could be done without help."

"Randle, I want you to tell me what you know about Sarah's death. If you try to mess around with me, if I feel the slightest suspicion you're playing for time I'll kill you where you sit."

He glanced at my coat.

"I am carrying but I'll do you with my hands. It'll be slower than anything you've ever done. I know you know about pain, Randle. I know what you and your people have done to boys like that kid. The only difference here is that I'm not interested in your arsehole."

Randle nodded. He was calmer now. Accepting. What choice did he have?

I'd always hoped Jack would give me the order to wipe his firm out. I intended to off him anyway but if he knew that it didn't show on his well fed face.

"I disgust you. Naturally I do. At your age I would have felt the same. You won't believe me but I was married. I had a child."

"Easy access for you?"

He got up. "It wasn't like that! My boy was my life!"

I stopped myself from further sarcasm and indicated he was to sit again. He'd shocked himself and he flopped back down.

"I paid a price for all I have. Jack too."

"I want you to get to the point."

The glass was empty. He refilled it and drank it dry again.

"In 1967 we robbed an old man by the name of Hobbes. A millionaire in the days a million meant something. He was reclusive and an easy target. He lived on the edge of the North Yorkshire moors. We broke in and dragged him out of bed. He never made a sound. We took him to the kitchen and Jack told him he was going to hand over whatever money and valuables he had. Hobbes asked for a drink. It was just like us sitting here except there were two toughs.

"You don't look so tough," I said.

"I could have broken you in half, lad."

I almost offed him then. Not because he'd wounded my pride. I didn't care about his delusions. It was as he'd said. He disgusted me. I couldn't understand why Jack had allowed this scum to operate, even protected him. I'd once asked him why making money was more important than sleeping at night. Jack said it wasn't up for discussion and that was the end of it.

"Jack found a bottle, couldn't tell you what it was, and poured the old man a glass full. He told us his name. We knew already. Hobbes was a lucky gambler. A card

player most weekends in a place we had worked security. Hobbes knew us too; it was all over his face. Young we might have been but we'd gotten a reputation as hard men already.

"Money is a fine thing to have boys," he said, "but you can only live in one house at a time, only wear one suit at a time. What really counts in this world is power."

Jack raised a hand to belt him but I touched his sleeve. He gave me a look and I shook my head. Jack was never the brightest, only the toughest. I wanted to hear what Hobbes was offering.

"You can have what's in my safe. It's in the second room off the entrance hall. I never lock it. Nobody ever comes here."

"Except us." said Jack.

Hobbes gave a tiny shrug. "Happy fate," he said.

Jack went to see and after a minute I heard him shout a big whoopee.

"Your friend is easily pleased."

"You'll find I'm not." I said.

"When he comes back I'm going to give you something."

I listened for Jack. He's always been a large man, as you know, but stealthy. I realized I didn't want him to come back quite yet.

"Tell me now."

"That I cannot do."

I grabbed the front of his pyjamas, hearing threads snap. "You're fucking around with the wrong people old man!"

He started laughing. Giggling actually, as if he was a kid, and I thought maybe his ham had fallen off his sandwich.

"No, no, no," he said. "I have got exactly the right man. And your friend can join you on the ride."

I let go. He wiped tears from his face. I started to get an itch all over my scalp. This old fucker was half mad. I tried to remember what I'd heard about him. Big winner, almost every time. Drove Bentleys, Mercs, and I'd heard someone say he'd had a Silver Ghost. What else? There was something.

Jack was coming. He was whistling, as if on a walk in the park.

Hobbes grasped my hand with terrifying strength. I tried to twist away but he held on. I drew my arm back to punch him but froze. I couldn't do it.

"Will you accept it, freely?"

Jack appeared in the doorway. His smile faded and the tune died. Hobbes stiffened though his back was to the door and dropped my hand.

"What's going on?" Jack had an armful of cash and several boxes. He put them on a counter that ran along three walls.

"Nothing," I said. "What you find?"

"There must be twenty grand and the old fart's got a boatload of diamonds. It's a fucking fortune."

"I notice you aren't wearing disguises," said Hobbes.

Jack laughed and took a chair next to me. "Smart man."

"You're going to rob me and kill me. Is that it?"

"We are!" Jack brought his sledge hammer fist down on the table. The bottle jumped and shattered on the floor.

"Can I give you it?"

Jack elbowed me. "What's he talking about?"

"Give us what?" I said.

“This.” He took a folded paper from his breast pocket. It was yellowed and covered in sepia writing. “Accept it, freely.”

I hesitated. Hobbes was staring into my eyes. He was eager. He wanted me to take it. It was only a sheet of old paper but I didn't want it. I didn't want anything from this man. I wanted to leave without the loot. I wanted out.

Jack said, “Give it here for God's sake!”

Hobbes pulled away and Jack missed. I stood up and reached over. Jack couldn't have it. It was mine!

Hobbes let go and it dropped into my open hand.

I looked at it for a long time. Jack was speaking to me but his words were lost. It was beautiful. Not old and yellow paper at all but parchment. It was golden with careful script drawn artfully over its smooth surface.

I didn't hear Jack's warning but I heard the shot. I fell to my knees covering my ears. The smell of cordite burned. The smoke was blue.

Hobbes was sprawled on the tiled floor. Half his head and face were gone. The revolver was still in his hand.

Jack grabbed me and propelled me out. He paused to retrieve the booty and marched me outside.

We were silent in the car. Even in the scrap yard we were based there was no talk. Our office was equipped with its own safe and that was always locked. There were two keys only. Nothing stayed inside it for more than a few hours. We would deal with Hobbes's property in the morning.

I went home and climbed in beside my wife. I hadn't looked in on my son and that was very unusual for me.

The next morning I met Jack at a pub, ostensibly to talk business, but nothing much was said. Jack commented that Hobbes would probably remain undiscovered for a long time. He'd noted how dusty the house was and thought that meant there was no housekeeper or cleaner. I asked him what had happened and he shrugged.

“The gun wasn't in his hand and then it was. I thought we were finished but he put it against his head and boom!”

“He must have said something.”

“The bat is passed.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Jack gave another shrug and downed the rest of his pop.

We decided to show the paper to our main fence, a man named Jimmy Wilson. He was a lot older than us and knew everything about everything. He came to the yard and roundly praised us over the stones. The cash was ours alone. We didn't need any help to stash that.

To my surprise he was stumped. He said he'd ask around if we were willing to let him take it. We readily agreed. Jack thought it was some historical treasure. Cleopatra's shopping list, he said. Maybe some rich collector would pay good money for it

We waited almost a week. Jack started to get mad. Jimmy had never stiffed us but Jack didn't trust anybody. Not even me.

We couldn't find him and no one knew where he was. He was a mammoth piss artist but none of the pub landlords had seen him for days.

Jimmy had a mistress who he spent more time with than his wife. I knew she lived on the outskirts of town and after some probing got an address. I drove. Jack muttered all the way. He was going to twist Jimmy's head off his scrawny neck etc.

Jimmy's woman lived in a nice neighbourhood. We passed the house a couple of times to get our bearings and then parked a street away.

I didn't like doing this in daylight. It was hard enough keeping a lid on Jack's temper without worrying about potential witnesses but I knew he'd have gone without me anyway. That scared me more than the risk of being seen by some nosy resident.

We walked slowly and knocked on the door. Sneaking about was what amateurs did, not us. We thought we knew it all, you see. There was no answer so we tried again a little louder. Jack slipped around the back and I followed. It was pleasing to see how well screened the rear was. Privacy had taken precedence over security. Hardly anyone had alarms back then so Jack broke in quiet as a prayer.

The house was silent. We were in what served as a laundry. Jack couldn't resist picking up some underwear and smelling it. I shook my head at him and took the lead. The kitchen was large and clean. Nothing out of place. We searched the ground floor in less than a minute. Jack eyed the stairs. Staircases are bad places. You can be ambushed and are at a disadvantage straight off. High ground is always easier to defend and the attacker is psychologically hindered by a feeling of smallness.

Jack went up first. I was ready to run away or fight. It was all the same to me.

Nothing happened. There was no one on the landing or in the first three rooms we looked in.

Jack shoved the final door, the furthest at the end of a passage. Jimmy was here. And so was his mistress. They were bloated with death gases and the smell, so well contained by the bedroom door, rushed over us and filled the upper floor. I didn't hang around to examine the bodies. I was in the kitchen when Jack caught me and spun me around to face him. He slapped me and shoved me against the wall.

"Get a grip you daft git!"

I don't remember what I said. I'd seen three corpses in seven days and that was enough.

"We're walking out of here and back to the car like Sunday strollers. Right?"

I nodded and we did as he said.

The drive was a nightmare. I saw coppers everywhere but in the flesh. Jack was calm. It struck me he was only self possessed when in danger. The rest of the time he was hotter than the desert.

At the yard Jack gave me a drink and dropped the yellow parchment on my desk. I recoiled. I hadn't seen it at the house or Jack pocket it.

"Didn't think I'd leave it there did you? Our prints are on it. You're a stupid sod at times."

"Where was it?"

Jack laughed and slumped in the battered sofa we kept in the corner.

"Jimmy had one end of it and the woman had the other. Looks like they were having a tug of war before he used the gun."

That evening I took the parchment, with Jack's agreement, and hid it in my attic. Not clever you might think. Hobbes would be found eventually and it could link us to his death. I knew that and so did Jack but neither of us wanted to part with it. We were scared but greed is as powerful as fear and if it was near one of us we could always burn it if there was any trouble.

My wife was called Sylvia. She was beautiful. I loved her from the age of sixteen. Our son Anthony was eight. A real lad, he was. A little scrapper. Always in trouble at school but rarely at home. I was too soft on him. Sylvia got weary of my indulgence

and complained that she was always the bad one. The one to rein him in. We never rowed about it but she was vocal enough to get her message across.

I came home one evening to find her mad at him for breaking a vase her mother had bought us. He'd been kicking a football in the house. I held my laughter in and made what I thought were the right noises. I said I'd speak to him.

He was in his room. He grinned at me and I tried to scowl.

"You little bugger," I said. "Your mum loved that vase."

Anthony nodded his face a study in sorrow.

"We'll get her another and you can pay for it."

"Yes my father."

His expression broke and so did mine I caught him up and tickled him He screamed and I put a hand over his mouth. Sylvia would kill me if she heard us laughing. We fell on the bed. I let go and he covered his own mouth, his eyes wrinkled in pleasure. I laid back and he scrambled on top of me. I felt his breath on my neck and his cheek against my stubble. I stroked his hair and put my hand on his back.

His eyes widened and he yelped as I sprang off the bed. He'd caught his arm on the headboard. I realized I had shoved him with force. I fled, slamming his door.

I was blistering hot. I tore at the neck of my shirt. I sank down and put my back against Anthony's door. He was trying to open it and calling for me.

"Stay where you are!"

"Dad."

"Anthony, do as you're told. You don't leave your room until I...until your mother comes to get you."

He protested but I put my hands over my ears.

I jumped with shock when Sylvia touched my shoulder. I pushed past her, ignoring her questions and locked myself in the bathroom. My heart pounded, my body was hot and then cold. I sat on the bath side and went in my shirt pocket for a handkerchief. I brought out the yellow paper. The script on it was blood red. I stared at it stupidly, knowing that I had hidden it and yet here it was. I wiped a finger over the incomprehensible writing leaving streaks that reminded me of Hobbes's blood.

I tore it and picked up each fragment to tear again until it was shredded and unrecognizable. I opened the window and scattered it in the cool air.

Sylvia was frightened. She lived with fear because of what I did to earn our money but this was different. Her shouts turned to sobs and worse still, Anthony had joined her, wondering what the hell had happened to his parents in the space of a few minutes.

I struggled to control myself. I was so fucking hot. I wanted to strip but I knew if I did that I would be forced to confront the reality of what had happened in my son's room.

"I'm fine. Go downstairs, please. I'll be down in a minute."

Sylvia must have heard the desperation in my voice because she fell silent. I heard her comfort Anthony. I could picture her leading him away, her arms around him pulling him close.

Randle had stopped drinking and asked for water. I got it for him. He thanked me absently as if I was a waiter only perceived at the edge of his consciousness. I had a little more time I reasoned and left him with his thoughts for a few moments.

"You know what happened in my boy's room? You know?"

"I think so."

"It was the first time, I swear."

“I suppose you had to start somewhere.”

Randle banged his fist on the table. “Listen to my words not your own prejudices. I was a normal man. A father. A husband. I never...”

“I’ve heard this before. The frightening thing about animals like you is your ability to convince yourselves you’re normal-what you do is normal. Tell me the boys want it next. Tell me that, because you’re no different to thousands of others like you.”

“You’re not listening!”

He got up and rushed around the table. I was out of the chair and had his arm up his back before he had gone three steps. I applied pressure to his wrist and slammed him face down on the floor.

“Fool! You’re as stupid as Jack. You could be his double.”

I drew my pistol. I was finished with this sick old man. He was either guilty or innocent of Sarah’s death-it didn’t matter to me.

“Do it! What do I care if you never know what happened to her. Kill me and let her murderer live!”

He lowered his face to the floor. If I turned him over what would I see? Was he laughing at me? Was he hoping to talk me around or did he think more of his people were going to charge in and save him?

He was right of course. I would keep him alive if there was any chance he knew who had killed Sarah.

I took him back to the chair.

“If you move again I’ll hurt you in a way that won’t stop your mouth from working but will make you wish I had killed you. Understood?”

He nodded.

I replaced my weapon and waited for him to resume.

I couldn’t stay there that night. I left without speaking to either of them. I ended up back at the yard stretched out on the sofa. Sleep wouldn’t come. I spent the night agonizing over what had occurred in Anthony’s room.

There was no window in the office but a narrow rectangle of glass above the door let light in from what was the public front of our scrap business. I watched the night change to ever lighter greys until Jack came in at seven.

“Sylvia throw you out?”

“What did Hobbes say before he shot himself?” My voice was cracked.

“Are you still worrying about that?”

“I want to know, Jack. I’m serious.”

He sat at his desk and opened the drawer he kept sweets in. He was like a big kid in many ways. Didn’t drink at all or smoke back then but ate all kinds of crap.

“I can’t remember. Whatever I said at the time, I suppose.”

I sat up. “Jack!”

He stared at me in that dead way he has. You’ll have seen it. Makes most people shit themselves. “Fuck sakes, keep your hair on.” He waved a dismissive hand. “The baton is passed.”

“You said bat last time.”

“Bat? Baton? What’s the difference? Are you pissed?”

“He was passing the baton. Passing it onto us,” I said.

Jack used the telephone to call one of our legitimate employees, ordering him in early.

“I tore the paper up.”

“The yellow one? You’d better be joking.”

“You don’t understand. There’s something wrong with it.”

Jack got up and towered over me. “There’s something wrong with you. We agreed to keep it. It’s worth something.”

“Not this.” I thought of my beautiful boy.

Jack shook his head and went back to his desk. The subject wasn’t closed only adjourned.

I left the yard. We were only five minutes away from the centre of town. It was a Friday, one of the busiest shopping days but at this hour there was no one about. I walked past the empty businesses wishing I had something to drink. My head was throbbing from lack of sleep. Sylvia would be frantic. She knew not to call the yard office. It was one of my rules. Work and home were separate worlds. It was the only way I could cope with my way of life. I loved my wife but-

That’s when I remembered.

Hobbes had killed his wife. At least that was the general consensus. He’d been arrested but never tried. I’d heard this years back at the casino. One of the cloak room attendants had told me. How did the story go? I sat on a low wall and rested my chin on both hands.

They were small business people and Hobbes had wanted to be bigger. He’d travelled to look into import export opportunities - somewhere in Eastern Europe. It had happened after he came back.

I thought a while longer before deciding my next step.

I was dirty and hungry but drove the thirty miles to Hobbes’s place without stopping. I parked in sight of the house and watched it for perhaps a half hour.

I approached on foot and went quickly around the back. The window Jack had smashed wasn’t boarded up. Inside there was no sign that anyone had been in since that night. I retraced my steps, checking each room apart from the kitchen. I went upstairs and found nothing. Hobbes’s bed was in disarray and I recalled the way he had been silent. There were no questions or pleas. It was as if he had been waiting for us.

I searched thoroughly starting with the safe. It was empty. He had a huge desk, all the drawers unlocked. I was methodical until I came to his bedroom again and then frustration took over and I upended furniture and threw the contents of his wardrobe and chests all over. There was nothing. I cursed and smashed a mirror set over the bed. One shard hit my hand causing a small but deep cut. Shit, why didn’t I just call the police and confess. I was going to have to burn the place now. DNA wasn’t in our vocabulary then but blood grouping was.

I went to the bathroom and ran cold water over my hand. There was a bandage in the cabinet and a small safety pin.

I’d been stupid to come here; only increasing the chance of being caught. I was at the broken window when I remembered Hobbes producing the parchment. He kept it on him the way anyone might keep a valued piece of jewellery.

Back in the kitchen the smell was appalling. I covered my nose and breathed through my mouth. The blood had turned the colour of autumn leaves. I got as close as I could and was sure the old bastard had a look of satisfaction on his face.

Kneeling close to the corpse made me sick to my stomach and I was grateful I hadn’t eaten anything. I put my hand on his chest and felt something slim and square in the same pocket he’d produced the parchment from. It was a photograph. A very old one. The man in it was him I had no doubt. The same features only smooth and strong. He was with a woman. A good looking woman dressed fashionably by

twenties standards. She was covering his hand with her own, the wedding band obvious. I tuned the picture over. The writing was made by fountain pen.

I'm sorry for what I am and what I have become.

“What did you do to me, Hobbes?”

I left, taking the photograph and feeling I was no wiser for coming back. I forgot to set the house on fire.

I went home and was relieved to find Sylvia had taken Anthony to school. I didn't know what to say to her nor her me. She watched me while I bathed, vainly trying to wash off the disgust I felt for what I had done and what I was. I lied that I was fine and everything was right in our world.

I forced myself to stay at home and when Anthony came home I tried to be normal. There was nothing. When I looked at him I felt the same as ever. He was just my boy and as evening drew on I began to relax. I thought of the parchment. I had put it in the attic. I knew it.

Sylvia settled Anthony and I looked around his door to say goodnight. He was already half asleep. Sylvia was perched on his bed reading to him.

I climbed into the attic and shone a torch at the various boxes and discarded things we had built up over the years. The light fell on the tea chest I had hidden the parchment in. I went to it, my head skimming rafters. I had put the parchment in an old jewellery box of Sylvia's. My hands shook as I placed it on the floor.

It was there. I laughed a little. It had been in my pocket in my head alone. Was it any wonder with what I'd been through the last few days?

I held it in the light. Jack would think I'd lost my mind and in a way he would be right. I put it back and locked the door thinking I should get round to putting proper lighting in there.

Sylvia was in the kitchen. I put my arms about her waist and she turned and kissed me.

“Are we all right?”

“Yes,” I said.

She kissed me again and I ran my hands under her sweater and over her bra, she responded immediately and I revelled in the normalcy of the moment. She went to her knees and unfastened my trousers. She took me in her mouth. I gripped her hair and exhaled through clenched teeth. I closed my eyes and let the feeling build. I tried not to thrust, the effort only increasing my excitement.

I was almost there. I felt a shudder through my whole body and looked down.

Anthony met my gaze. His eyes were full of tears. He was choking.

I fell or jumped back, my trousers bringing me to the ground.

“No!”

I scrambled backwards, my head hit the wall.

Sylvia was on all fours, her face a mask of shock.

She followed me outside. I leaned on the bonnet of my car, my breathing whistling from a tightened chest. I couldn't answer her pleading, her need to understand why I had rejected her.

I looked up and saw Anthony at his window. I got in the car and sped away. The images of my wife and son's bewildered faces burned in the forefront of my mind.

I was at Jack's house within minutes. He was visible through the lounge window. I hammered on the door and saw the hall light come on.

“What's up?”

I didn't know what was wrong apart from the fact I was losing my mind and it was something to do with Hobbes and his damned gift.

Jack led me to his lounge where a woman I didn't know sat.

"Out."

The woman got up without a word, obviously used to Jack's brusqueness. I heard her footsteps on the stairs and overhead where Jack's bedroom was.

"Hobbes fucked us over!"

Jack didn't answer but I knew I had his attention.

"That thing we took from him is cursed!"

"Calm down."

"I won't calm down! There's something wrong with it. I nearly..." How could I tell him? Only the year before the Moors Murderers had been tried. The reality of child molestation was becoming something that England was waking up to. Was there anything lower? Did I really wish to tell the one man I feared that I was...what was I? And what was I suggesting? Did I believe that a scrap of old paper had transformed me from a common criminal into some kind of monster?

A chasm opened in my stomach. I could feel a hellish weight. I put my hand in my back pocket and felt a rough edge against my fingers.

Jack's expression never altered. He started to tell me about the day's trade at the yard. He spoke as if unaware of my emotional state. If he was doing this for my benefit I had to acknowledge it was a master stroke of psychology because within fifteen minutes I was actually listening to his words, even asking an occasional question.

I left with a feeling of foolishness muted with a belief that something good, at least from my point of view, had been accomplished. When I got home Sylvia was in bed and when I climbed in beside her she stirred and turned her bedside light on. I comforted her and promised that all was right between us and my odd behaviour was the result of fatigue.

Weeks went by and I began to believe the explanation I had given my wife. My relationship with Anthony was back to normal and I was finding it difficult to reconcile my day to day feelings with the memories of the two incidents.

Jack and I were finding ourselves in a golden age where our businesses, legitimate and otherwise, were literally skyrocketing. Every job and scam we attempted went right. Money poured in and our biggest problem was where to hide it.

We were untouchable. The police were blind to our activities. Our rivals deferred to us. But it came at a price.

It was months later we were invited to a chamber of commerce dinner by a local businessman named Jagger. He ran a fruit and veg wholesalers and Jack had met him at one of the better pubs in the area. We'd spent time and cash courting him

Sylvia was delighted when I asked her to join us and told her Anthony was invited too. She went out and bought new clothes and insisted I had yet another suit.

It was a good feeling to be among the town elite. We'd bought our way in it was true but looking around the circular tables I recognized more than a few characters whose business methods were not dissimilar to our own.

Jack brought his girlfriend along and I wasn't surprised to find she was unknown to me and Sylvia. His love life went on at the rate of an intercity train.

Jagger and his wife joined us and we were pleased to see they had a boy the same age as Anthony. Mrs. Jagger was friendly and Sylvia took to her well.

It was only ten when the meal ended and Jagger suggested we all go back to his house. It was a Friday so the boys didn't have school the following day.

They lived in the type of house I was aiming for. A six bedroomed place in a village called Thorner near Leeds.

The boys were in and out of the room playing with model aircraft, arguing over which one of them was the German.

I felt a little woozy from the wine we were all taking except Jack who was still very much the teetotaler. Jagger was talking at length about his beginnings as a market trader.

I was talking to the boys. Jagger's son came to sit with me and I asked him about his schooling. He was a polite boy; a gentleman I hoped might be able to tame the wildness in Anthony a little.

The evening ended suddenly. Jack took my arm and half lifted me from the sofa. The boy disappeared and I realized Jagger and his wife were watching me coldly.

We were in the car, Sylvia driving. She was crying a little and I asked her why.

"What's wrong with you? You've changed!"

"Sylvia, I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"I don't know you anymore!"

She ignored me the rest of the journey and went straight to bed. She slept with Anthony. I fell into our bed and was asleep in minutes.

The house was empty when I awoke. I crashed about cursing a hangover and striving to recall what I could have done to upset Sylvia. Someone was rapping on the door. I opened it to a livid Jack. He barged me and went into the lounge.

"You've got five seconds to explain yourself."

"What the fuck's up with everybody?"

Jack swung a fist and missed me by at least a foot. He recovered well and tried again this time falling and clutching at his chest.

"Jack! Jack!" His face was deep red; he was trying to breathe as if underwater.

He swung his arms at me and I backed out to the hall and picked up the telephone. I had dialled two nines when he took the receiver from me and replaced it.

"I'm fine," he said and it was true. His face was fading to pink, his breathing easier. "If you ever come near me again I'll shoot you. Got it!"

I was too stunned to do anything but watch him go. I stood at the door until his car disappeared.

I telephoned Sylvia's mother and heard the ice in the old lady's voice. When Sylvia came on it was obvious she'd been crying. "Have you seen the news?"

"Sylvia, come home."

This brought on more tears.

"Is Anthony there?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I want to talk to him."

"He's at school!" The last word was drawn out, almost a moan of agony.

"I'm not angry yet, Sylvia, but I'm on the way."

She hung up.

I went upstairs and changed. My clothes were disgusting. I flung them item by item across the bedroom.

Blood.

It was everywhere. I looked at my discarded trousers. They had been drenched and were now hard with it. It was on my arms. In my hair. Under my fingernails. I ran to the bathroom and examined myself. I was whole. Not a scratch.

I washed most of it off not wanting to bathe until I knew what had happened.

I went to the yard wanting an explanation. Jack could bluster all he wanted. I ignored an employee who smiled and rose from his seat.

Jack was sat on the sofa, a cigarette burning at the corner of his mouth. The first of his life. He had spread newspapers all over the floor.

I didn't have to say anything. I waited until he looked away.

"It's all here," he spoke quietly, his eyes going from me to the papers. "What the hell are you, Randle?"

I squatted and began to read. It was all there alright. I read every word, scrutinized every grainy image.

The Jagers were dead. Their beautiful house was painted in blood. Even the child had not escaped. I noticed the date in the corner of the tabloid. It wasn't possible.

"We were there," I said.

"Yes."

"Last night. It was last night."

"It was three nights ago."

I don't know how he knew but I saw him pause and catch his breath. He sat back and ran both hands through his hair.

"You don't remember." It was bald the way he said it. A fact told as a fact. "You told the boy that you were going to go home and then come back later and murder his mum and dad. You told him you would make him watch. You said other things too."

I shook my head. It was my turn to breathe underwater. I clawed at my throat. Anthony! I saw him under me, choking. I saw what I was going to do to him-what I would make him do to me-and then it all dropped into place.

I had left home that night and walked all the way back to the Jagger house. I had broken in and knew that they were awake in their beds, paralyzed and waiting. They had believed my words yet couldn't do a thing to save themselves. I went to the boy's room and took him to his parents. I undressed him and hurt him. His father broke teeth trying to get out of bed. He fought until his last to break what held him. He died after his wife. The boy last.

The world knew that a madman had slain these people and bayed for justice. They would never see it.

Dozens of witnesses had seen us at the Jagers table but we were not arrested. We were not even interviewed.

I never saw my wife again. She died last year peacefully. Anthony is a success. I have guided his life from a distance but never had the courage to see him in person. I love him too much for that.

I do what I must or the parchment will make me do that which I must not do!

Jack got over what I had done. It was either that or lose the protection the parchment gave him through me. We chose life.

Randle wiped at a line of drool that had been steadily seeping from his mouth. He had drunk almost a full bottle of brandy yet appeared lucid. I drew my pistol again and rested it on the table. Randle glanced at it but didn't appear afraid.

"What'll happen if I shoot you? Will the bullets turn into daisies or will they rebound off you and kill me? How did I hit you if you are invulnerable?"

"I understand. I wouldn't believe it either."

"We agree on that at least."

Randle shrugged and leaned back. I said nothing because I had nothing to say.

I took out my wallet, removed a photograph and put it before him. Randle moved it a little nearer and bent to see. "She was beautiful. Did Jack know about your feelings for her?"

"I don't think so."

"Pity. He might have given her over to your care. She might have lived longer."

I aimed for the spot between his eyes. His blood would hit me from this distance but I wanted it all over me. I wanted to carry it back to Jack. I wanted to tell my employer and mentor Randle's story as proof of his guilt and insanity.

When he had been dead for as long as it had taken him to tell me his tale I finished the brandy, taking it straight from the bottle.

I didn't forget to set the house on fire.

I was back at Jack's mansion within two hours. One of the men let me in. I ignored his questions about the progress of my mission but turned to him when he informed me that Jack wasn't home. He had left word that he was visiting his mother's grave. This was code. Code that only I and two others in the firm knew.

I was back in the car again, pushing well over the speed limit. We kept a house that was as isolated as Randle's in the peak district.

I was within a mile of my destination when the feelings overwhelmed me. I had succeeded. I had only failed to find a true explanation but in my experience reasons behind crimes, other than for profit, are seldom worth knowing. I pulled over and finally wept.

When it was over I gunned the accelerator, determined to end this evil day.

The house was in darkness. I parked alongside Jack's Bentley. No one answered the bell so I pushed at the door, already alert with my handgun drawn. I eased into the entrance hall. It was cold. The antique grandfather clock Jack was so fond of was silent. I crossed to the room we used as a council chamber. This was where we made decisions that often ended with the death of those unfortunate enough to get in our way.

"Put the piece away."

I snapped the light on. My boss was in his usual chair. Number three and four in the organization were present but dead. The bullet wounds were large and the blood was well past tacky, almost at the stage where it loses the colour I know so well.

I stared at my ex colleagues. My expression question enough.

"Necessary, I'm sorry to say."

I sat. "What happened?"

Jack was lighting a cigar. By the look of the ashtray it wasn't his first.

"Good boys they were," he said. "Loyal, brave and so clever. Do you think that describes me?"

"Jack, I need to tell you something. I want to..."

"Shhh."

His eyes were wet and that almost made me cry again.

"They were no good in the end. They were too imaginative. No one could accuse you of that?"

"Why did you do this?"

He'd made a mistake. His grief had sent him beyond reason. Maybe he'd turn on me too. Maybe I'd let him. I didn't want to survive without her. There was no fucking point.

"They worked it out. They knew."

“I know who killed her. It was Randle.”

Of course he knew. He knew everything. In the fifteen years I’d worked for him he’d never put a foot wrong. He was at the very top. Even the police feared him. Everyone who had ever tried to put a lid on him ended up dead. Jack was too slippery for anything to stick. Evidence disappeared. Witnesses. Whole organizations sank beneath the waves he created.

“You were the perfect soldier ant. You never noticed anything. You bulldozed your way through any job I gave you.”

We were united in this. I didn’t care if he’d tipped over. It made him human for me. Less the god I had known.

“I loved her, Jack. I never said anything…”

He put a finger to his mouth and I stopped speaking. I would sit with him. I would wait out the night and grieve with him.

“I loved her,” he said. “But in the end not as much as Randle loved his son.”

Jack rose. He was still all muscle at seventy-two. His suit didn’t disguise the powerful shoulders and deep chest.

“In the end it knew that and knew I’d give her up if necessary. I would give anything to take it back. Anything!” He raised the Luger; I hadn’t seen him draw it. I watched his hand slip slowly into his jacket. The pistol was level with my eyes. He brought out a dirty, piss coloured thing covered in scrawl.

“What would you do? Would you pass the baton the way Hobbes passed it to Randle and Randle to me?”

I gripped the arms of the chair and looked into the dark eye of the gun.

The explosion was abrupt and deafening.

I stood on shaking legs and looked at the impossible. His face was calm and clean. The blood and debris from his ruined skull had not intruded on his features.

I ran one hand through my hair and listened to the beat of my heart. I was cold and tired. I stood over Jack until I got a hold on myself.

This was something I could deal with. We could cover this. Business would resume. Jack’s empire would survive.

I reached into my coat for my phone. I would start the firm’s machinery and all this would vanish.

The parchment was rough against my fingers. I held it close and studied the writing, admiring the exquisite curves and whorls. What had I said of it? Piss coloured? Covered in scrawl? How could I have entertained such thoughts?

It was beautiful.

The Stranger, the Pipe and the Prayer.

I remember Papa's big hand. It was a warm thing, a comfort in the beginning. A little later I did not like it and in the end all I felt was hot hatred.

My home was large and comfortable in a rough hewn way. We thought it was a palace when we saw the homes of other children. My sister was younger than I and I loved her. I held her on my lap when our relatives visited, Mama close by lest I should slip or let my concentration wander.

This would never have happened. My sister was at the centre of my world. When Papa came to our room I bore it and mostly she was left alone. Mostly.

My sister was a good dancer and would dance any time she wished as long as it was not chores time or the Sabbath.

My Papa was a city father and had a high place among the council. I was allowed to accompany him from time to time as long as I was quiet. I listened to the talk of walls and watches, neighbour disputes and other things I did not understand.

I met my friend Harbert there. He was also the son of an important official and we played with a peg doll he had hidden in his shirt. I shared my biscuit with him and we smiled when the crumbs went down his neck.

My lessons were very long and the master often hit me when I couldn't remember. At night I thought about Harbert and wondered what he was doing. Was he laid in his cot looking out at the stars?

I thought about him when Papa came to me and remembered his smile and the crumbs often.

When my Uncle Wilhelmus from Hanover came to stay things were different. He was bigger than Papa even and played funny games and made me laugh until I cried. He stayed for a month and Papa never came to our room all that time.

One day we were visited by Harbert and his father who was the Chief Magistrate. We ate special foods and a strong drink that was pleasant and then we went to our room. Harbert was too loud and his Papa was angry. I was quieter than a mouse. It was a long, long night and I was happy that my sister was not there for she had been taken to sleep with Mama. I had to stay indoors for many days and I thought that Harbert would be the same.

There was a new place in the city where people had to bathe in big vats of water. Men on one side and women on the other Papa said although I never saw any women, only boys and men. We went there for drinks and long times that I did not like. The other city fathers were fatter than my Papa.

One day Harbert and I went outside the city where we were not allowed to go. We stayed out all day among the trees. We ate berries that were horrible and Harbert laughed at my funny faces. We had a dance in the river shallows but then I thought of my sister and we went home.

Mama was sick. Very sick and abed for a long time. I loved Mama sometimes. She sang sweet songs and made good bread and had a soft tummy that I would lay upon and sleep. She was always worried and weepy a piece of the day. Every day that I could remember.

When she died I cried all day and my sister would not leave me until our cook pulled her away. I was very angry at Mama.

Papa was sad and furious all day and night. He went to the moots but I was not allowed to go anymore. I did not see Harbert and I dared not ask. Cook would feed me too much until my belly ached.

Papa would come every night now and started to stay away from me. My sister was sad and one day she was not in her place at the other side of the room.

We had to bury her and I was crying so hard I thought the ground would swallow me and keep me in its darkness. I saw Papa looking at me and I knew he was not too sorry about my sister as long as he had me. I prayed then to the Earth, not to God who I was taught to pray to. I did not care what my Papa taught anymore and his fat city fathers at the moots.

Harbert ran into my house the next day and was squealing so loudly it hurt my ears. I went to look. All the men and Papa were outside the hall. They were arguing and sick and shouting. The people were laughing until the watch came and told them to be off or there would be trouble. Harbert came up beside me and held my hand. I was scared to look at him in case he vanished too.

Then they came out of the hall. A hundred of them, I said. Harbert said a hundred hundreds and he might have been right. They were big and black like a dark river flowing over the stone steps and out into the dusty streets. Harbert was crying and trying to climb on top of me to get his feet off the ground. They parted around me and I watched them go everywhere. Into the market and through open doors. They climbed on barrels and carts and went through the windows. I saw some of them drag a big old cat to the ground and kill it with their sharp white teeth.

Harbert ran away and I tried to catch up to him but I was beginning to be a little frightened so I went home.

All that day I heard people scream and shout and run outside our shuttered windows. Dogs were barking and yelping. Men were cursing and a group of them were shouting for Papa. Cook told them he was not at home and didn't they know the house was in mourning and to get their selves away or else.

Papa was gone for many hours and then he came home and drank a lot. When he looked at me I ran out and disobeyed him when he shouted for me to return. I went to the city wall where there should have been fires and men. It was empty except for the black eyes all looking at me, not moving or quivering with the cold. I rested my head on the wall and saw some sacking by an empty pigeon cage. I made a bed and slept there. I awoke to more screams and oaths. Many people were leaving. I saw a crowd arguing at the gates and even the watchmen were quiet and didn't try to stop them.

One man was walking in the opposite direction. He came through the crowd, walking very slowly but not as an old man would. He saw me and gave a little bow. I followed him through the streets. He had a bag on his shoulder and very poor shoes that flapped as he walked. He looked hungry and I wished I had something to give him. He went into the hall and I sneaked in which wasn't hard because there was no one to forbid me.

The City Fathers were all there. The man went straight to them and wasn't afraid. They jeered and told him to go with rough words that made my head hurt. He spoke to them and they laughed and said they would throw him into the street. Papa noticed me then and frowned.

The Chief Magistrate stroked his beard and I shuddered when I looked at his fat fingers. He made a bargain with the stranger and I knew he was lying. The stranger seemed satisfied and left. They didn't even speak about him after he was gone. They started shouting and blame laying. I went into the street but the man was gone.

It was nearly evening and the light was red and made everything look bloodied and sharp. Papa was in drink and complaining to the cook. He hadn't spoken to me but I could tell he was thinking about me because his eyes were cold and he kept smiling. I prayed again but I wasn't sure who I was praying to.

We heard the music then. Cook threw a ladle but her target had already escaped. I went to the window and opened the shutter. They were all running from the houses and the shops I could see in the distance. I climbed out after checking Papa wasn't watching. He was at the other window looking concerned and afraid.

I followed them to the city gate and saw the stranger with a pipe to his lips. It wasn't a very good sound. I had heard much better minstrels and there was a player in the city that was much greater than this man.

He nodded to me and walked through the gates. They all followed him. I watched amazed as the last of them left. I went up to the nearest tower where we weren't allowed to go but as in the hall there was no one there to stop me.

The man was playing and strolling away with them in his wake. I watched until he was swallowed in the darkening evening.

Cook woke me at dawn and I was surprised to see Papa had already left the house. I breakfasted and wheedled until cook let me go out. I went straight to the Hall but a watchman wouldn't let me inside. I lingered until I saw the Chief Magistrate. He hooked a finger at me and I reluctantly went to him.

He gave me a penny which felt very warm in my hand. Then he lifted me up and whispered that he would see me that night. He was to be a dinner guest.

He almost dropped me and then lowered me to the ground.

The stranger was a few steps away. He smiled at me but lost his smile when he looked at Harbert's father.

The magistrate hurried back inside. The stranger took my hand and walked me by the watchman who moved aside with his eyes downcast and his hellebarde trailing in the dirt.

I slipped my hand from the stranger's and waited outside the moot. He gave my shoulder a squeeze and I didn't back away.

I listened to the voices of the fathers and the unthreatening tones of the stranger. My Papa was shouting and I trembled at the anger in his voice. I heard one man say something about gold.

The stranger passed me with the curses of the fathers following.

Later, I saw Harbert outside my house. His mouth was very swollen and the smile was barely there. We sat together but didn't speak.

He said he had to be home and I stopped him by holding his arm. We stood there for many minutes until Harbert shook me off and said he would see me that evening. I remembered what his father had said to me.

Cook scrubbed me and put me in fresh clothing. She waited until Papa was home and then left. He didn't acknowledge me nor did he take any strong drink.

The magistrate came before sunset with Harbert. Another City Father came and another until it seemed everyone of importance was in our home.

Harbert and I stood by the hearth. The men began to drink but there wasn't any food prepared. Harbert tried to embrace me but the magistrate raised his voice and my friend dropped his arms.

They got louder, wilder and my Papa seemed so full of fury I thought he would burst. He came over and grabbed me by the shirt. He hauled me over his big shoulder to cheers and laughter. I heard Harbert cry out but I couldn't see him.

The music wasn't pleasant nor was it sweet. It vibrated in my ear like a giant's bowstring. Papa let me go to the floor. All the men were silent. They looked about like confused elders. One by one they went to their knees. Papa too, his eyes darting around the room.

Harbert was on the floor. He shoved at the man over him and scrambled across to me. I led him to the door watching the men who seemed lost to us. Or we to them.

I unbolted the door and opened it slowly lest it draw their attention.

I took a last look at my father and left.

We were a legion. We marched behind him, his tune ghastly and as welcome as summer fruit.

I held Harbert by the hand. We swung our arms and giggled as we walked. The others were behind us perfectly in step.

He lifted his pipe to heaven which was losing the sun and beckoning stars. We sang along and I looked back just once. The city was still but I fancied I heard wailing and impotent raging.

In a short time we saw the mountain open and rejoiced. We walked into the light.

The Earth had answered my prayer.

The smallest god.

Cranitch started his career as a journalist on the day Princess Diana died. He was at a jumble sale run by a church raising funds for its endless roof restoration project. When the twin towers were attacked and the world looked on in horror he was covering the closing down of a shop that had reached its centenary the year before and gone bankrupt to the general head shaking and shock of a council estate that had grown around it.

The Wrestwick Chronicle was a Yorkshire newspaper founded in 1850 and still owned by the same family. Cranitch was the oldest reporter and junior to several colleagues he had trained up himself. He wasn't a bad writer if a little florid. He was unlucky. He knew this because he was never in the right place at the right time. He also knew because he had gone egg bald at the age of twenty-two and his wife of nine years had run off with a swarthy builder with massive forearms covered in tattoos. All a matter of bad luck.

When his editor sent him to a row of terraced houses he had little hope of a big story. The houses were the last few intact dwellings of an ill fated hamlet called Thorpe Parva. Subsidence had destroyed the other four streets. The residents had been moved in plenty of time and the cottages once used by farm workers had been dismantled piece by piece.

The remaining six houses were council built and all occupied. The tenants were determined to stay and calling on their M.P and the Chronicle for aid.

"Might be half a page in it," growled Ed Sidall. Ed the Ed as he was known had been the news editor for thirty years. He was big and rough with no fear of anyone or anything.

"I'll get on it," said Cranitch.

He drove over in his Toyota wishing he had an Audi like the tattooed builder.

The houses were mostly red brick and narrow as a wasp's waist. They had front gardens small enough to traverse in a single step.

It was a hot day. He looked at the sky which was cloudless and cursed under his breath.

He knocked on the first door.

A large lady opened the door an inch.

He showed a battered ID. "Rupert Cranitch with the Chronicle. Can I ask a few questions about your issue with the council?"

"My what?"

"The council want to move you all out and knock the houses down. What are your thoughts on the matter?"

"I'm not worried about that."

Cranitch wasn't sure what to say.

"Try that lot at number 6." She slammed the door before the thanks was out of his mouth.

He walked down the houses. Three of them did not have numbers. Number 6 did. The numeral was shining brass. He knocked while looking over the facade. It was painted white and shone next to the other dull exteriors. He admired the flower baskets.

A woman of about thirty greeted him uncertainly. He flicked the I.D and introduced himself. She brightened and invited him in. She showed him to a clean but cluttered living room. He sat looking at a large collection of ornaments. Cute frogs and little

girls on swings, moulded to look like children from what he thought of as the Gainsborough era. The walls were filled with the same horrendous style prints.

She bustled in with a nervous, painfully thin young man behind. They introduced themselves as Horace and Doris Kemp.

He took out his recorder and set it on a glass top coffee table.

“Can you tell me about your struggle with the council?”

Could they?

Doris spoke in hysterical tones. They had received a notice. A NOTICE, not a request or even a knock on the door telling them they had to move and...

Cranitch tuned out. He would let them talk and nod and look concerned. Then he would knock on more doors, ask the same question, go back to the office and ring a few councillors he knew, get a quote or make one up, write the article, hand it in and have a kip in his car.

He kept his eyes on Doris watching her mouth make wide shapes. She already had deep grooves by her mouth no doubt made by many years of talking, talking, talking.

Horace sat, a pale spectre in the corner, his eyes flickering over his wife, wincing when her gob reached the highest pitches and relaxing as it dropped to mid range shrieking.

Cranitch glanced through the window. A man was stood in the road looking in. A small man wearing beige trousers and a brown cardigan over a deep green shirt. His hair was sandy and his face was pale.

Cranitch thought he'd better ask a question although he couldn't think of one.

Then it came.

“Have you any communication from your M.P. I might look over?”

Doris looked delighted. She left the room and he heard her thudding on the stairs. Horace was looking at his fingers.

The man outside waved. Cranitch stole another look at Horace who was now picking at the bottom of his slippers.

He waved back. The small man broke into a dance. A tap dance by the look of it although he couldn't hear the tapping. There was a series of ceiling shaking bangs upstairs and then more thuds as Doris came back down.

She handed an envelope over. Cranitch turned it over noticing the House of Commons portcullis emblem. The letter was short but assured the Kemps the Honourable gentleman would do everything in his power to help.

“Mrs Kemp, have you considered what the council are saying about subsidence? Are they not acting in the interests of public safety?”

Doris went a deep red. He leaned back a little.

“It's all lies and when we get our own survey done we'll present that to our legal team.”

“Can I ask who is representing you?”

The red faded somewhat.

“We haven't engaged anyone yet, but we will!”

Cranitch thanked them effusively for their help. Doris softened and asked him if he would like a cup of tea and said how remiss they had been in not offering him refreshment.

Too right you stuck up bitch, he thought.

“Not at all, Mrs Kemp, you've been a delight.”

She tittered and smoothed her blouse.

“We'll be sending a photographer to take your picture.”

“Lovely,” she said.

If my editor bothers to print this shite.

She showed him out. The dancing man had gone. He knocked on the rest of the doors but no one answered although he saw curtains twitch at number 8.

“You won’t get anyone else talking to you.”

The small man wasn’t dancing but he was back in the road.

“Oh, yes. Why is that?”

“You’re here about the enforced evictions and demolishing of my hamlet.”

“I am. I guess news travels fast in a place this size.”

“Certainly does,” he said. He closed the gap between them. He barely reached Cranitch’s shoulders.

“Which house is yours?”

“It’s hereabouts.”

“Right.” He walked back to the car with no desire to talk to the local nutter.

He drove back and called his most amenable councillor, an elderly alderman called Jasper. Jasper didn’t have much to say other than the council had no choice. The houses had to come down and the council were not only in the right legally they were compelled to re house the residents of Thorpe Parva. Imagine the outcry and ramifications if anyone was hurt or worse. Cranitch had to agree.

He wrote it up and handed it to Ed in person. Ten minutes later it was back on his desk, rewritten in Ed’s own hand. As far as Cranitch was concerned that was that.

A week later Ed asked him to go back to Thorpe Parva. A couple called Kemp had stormed a council meeting and threatened to chain themselves to the houses to prevent eviction. They had been removed by security but the police had not been called.

No, thought Cranitch. That would only fuel the situation.

He drove back. The houses looked solid and peaceful, no sign of the hidden danger below ground.

The house next to the Kemps was empty and the last house had a removal van outside. Two fat men were carrying furniture out the door.

Doris opened the door before he knocked. She looked angry. She looked at the van and shouted. “Traitors!”

He followed her to the living room where she burst into tears. His scalp itched. He hated crying and any other kind of public display of emotion. Horace stood and mechanically patted his wife’s back.

“I can come another time,” he said hopefully.

“No, no, no,” she said.

She explained that their campaign wasn’t going well. The M.P. had backed off and they couldn’t raise the money for an independent survey.

“The neighbours aren’t at all concerned,” Horace said. It was the longest sentence Cranitch had heard him utter. “They are either giving up the fight or totally apathetic.”

“I understand the council have agreed to house you anywhere in the borough.”

“But we want to stay here, Mr Cranitch. We’ve lived in council houses all our lives and there simply aren’t any like this,” she said.

“My wife doesn’t want to live on an estate in town or anywhere else. She loves this place.”

Cranitch felt a pang of compassion for the woman. He also felt a little guilt. He asked a few questions and was shown the latest letters from the council. He ended by saying he would do everything he could to help but he walked back to his car knowing there was little he could do.

“Not quite.”

The small man was sitting on a very uncomfortable looking stone wall.

“Excuse me?”

“You can be a witness.”

Cranitch had his hand on the car door. “Witness to what?”

“A miracle.”

Cranitch opened the door. “Got to go.”

“It might make the difference between your shit career and a real one.”

Cheeky little twat. Cranitch slammed his door and walked round to the man.

“What did you say, pal?”

“Something is going to happen.”

“It might,” Cranitch said, making a fist.

“Before you demonstrate your prowess by hitting a man half your weight why don’t you imagine how much money a reporter could get covering a real biblical proportions miracle?”

Money! Money to buy an Audi. Money to rub his ex wife’s face in.

“What miracle?”

“The miracle I, god of the family of Thorpe Parva, will perform.”

Cranitch let the laugh out and went back to the car.

“Good luck at the psychiatrist’s, pal.”

The man slid off the wall. “Go back to your busy day, Cranitch. Back to writing up baby contests and fights on a Saturday night.”

Cranitch paused. He thought about Ed’s face if he wrote this one up. It wouldn’t see print but it might raise a few laughs and a bit of goodwill. He could use that.

“Ok. Thrill me.”

The man led him to an outdoor table at the back of one of the houses.

“Is this your place?”

“No, it belongs to one of my believers. She let’s me use it.”

“Mind if I record this?”

“Not at all although you might be better off taking notes. My voice doesn’t always record.”

“Because you’re a god?”

“Indeed.”

Cranitch set it recording.

“Tell me about this miracle.”

“You have to witness it so that others believe. You’ll become my living witness.”

“When will this happen?”

“I can’t see into the future but it will have to be when the forced evictions start.”

“I see. Have you done miracles before?”

“A few. Or more accurately the same miracle a few times.”

Cranitch wished he had something to drink. The door at the rear of the house opened. It was the woman who had sent him to the Kemps. She waved. The small man returned it.

“Any chance she’ll give us a drink?”

“I’ll bring you some lemonade,” she shouted.

Cranitch unbuttoned his shirt letting a little air at the sweat on his chest.

“What shall I call you?”

“Never had a distinct name. They called me the small one to begin with. Luch for a while which sometimes means mouse.”

“Luch it is,” said Cranitch.

"I was thought of as a brownie at one time. A little household spirit doing good deeds. Never done a good deed in my life."

"And when did you realize you were a god?"

"When I materialized, of course. My original believer heard a story about a god while he was in a trade delegation journeying to another tribe in the south. He liked the idea so he brought it back here. There was only one family on this parcel of land. Seven people in all. He made an idol and they called it 'the small one' on account of how small it was. The children believed in me as they listened to their father's stories. Then I was here."

"You had no parents."

"No. Some of us do. If a god and goddess are compatible super nature takes its course."

"Are there more of you?"

"No, the family were too busy surviving to bother much with religion. They were an insular lot anyway. Not exactly shunned by their tribe but on the fringes."

The woman came down the path. Cranitch noticed the garden was full of gnomes and fairies. Hideous plaster and plastic things that made the Kemps' ornaments look like Michelangelo sculptures.

She was enormously fat. She put a tray on the table and patted Luch's face.

"Isn't she a treasure?" said Luch,

She's a something, Cranitch thought.

Luch watched her waddle back to the house. "She's a direct descendant of the youngest daughter. She was a sweet little thing, may her bones be kept safe by Mother Earth."

"How old does that make you, Luch?"

He shrugged.

"And the people here are all descended from that one family."

"Not all. The Kemps are incomers. At least they stayed though. They'll be believers by the time I've done. You saw one of the houses was abandoned." Cranitch confirmed he had with a nod. "They were from the father's second wife. A bondswoman originally but later freed and married. The father guessed she poisoned his wife but he didn't care."

Cranitch grinned and decided that was worth writing down. He took out a tiny notebook and scribbled shorthand.

"I'm getting weaker. When the Wheelwright's go at number 8 I'll be weaker still."

"So you rule over your worshippers?"

"Reign I'd say. And they don't worship me anymore. They just believe."

"A god must be busy."

"I've been that. Busy, busy, busy."

"Why don't you just do a little magic and solve the problem?"

"Magic is for the fairies, Cranitch. I look after my own in different ways."

Cranitch drank half a glass of lemonade in one swig. He looked expectantly at the small man. A god with messy hair and big blackheads on his nose.

"I work."

Cranitch waited.

"I work a lot."

"I need a bit more than that if I'm going to present your story to my readers."

"I've worked on farms, in the mines, as a shepherd even."

"Yes, every god needs to be a good shepherd."

Luch talked on. "I worked in the forests. I was a mason. I castrated pigs for a few memorable years."

"Charming"

"I wrote a play that ran for two years in Wakefield." Luch scratched his head. "I was a bouncer in the sixties, yes I know I'm little but I can't feel pain or be touched by mortal men. Ideal qualities, given the job."

"What would happen if I patted your face like your fa...your believer did?"

"I wouldn't do that if I was you. Your blood might pour out of every orifice or turn to dust. You might be transformed into some evil haunt or regressed back to a baby. Seen that happen once or twice. Not worth the risk I'd say."

"What does a god need money for?"

"Money is power. You've heard that saying before I'd guess."

"Sure but what could you do for your believers on a pig mangler's wages?"

"You're thinking like a mortal. Pennies add up if your working life extends for thousands of years."

Cranitch nodded. "But why can't you use that money to fund a legal fight. That's what the Kemps want."

"Spent a lot over the last few decades, haven't I? Bribed councillors not to build here. Took out contracts on troublesome residents. Paid a well known rock star not to build a super palace not a mile from this very spot. Can you imagine how much money it takes to buy an ego maniac with millions in the bank already? Makes me want to weep thinking about it. So I'm tapped out. Skint. Bereft of the folding green. Haven't got time to make enough now and the evictions are imminent. I was never a good planner you see. Sort of limited because of my lack of believers. The big gods and goddesses could sort this out with a gesture. A snap of the fingers, but I haven't got the juice."

Cranitch topped his glass up. The lemonade was delicious. Freezing cold and tangy.

"You are in contact with other gods then?"

"Most of them went to America. Lot's of opportunities over there. The colonists are less cynical than you lot."

"Tell me about the other gods. If you can."

Luch looked around and leaned over the table.

"If I can! Wowiee what a bunch! We've had 'em all here. At first there was Brigit and Taranis. Succellos and Toutatis plus a lot of lesser deities like me. Well, maybe not quite like me but you get the idea. Then it all got a bit crowded."

"Crowded how?"

"Bloody Romans came here didn't they? Brought dozens of the buggers. Souped up gods who made us look a bit weedy in comparison. A great tribal god personifying the power of the horse is a big thing at ground level but when you get your Zeuses and Jupiters, Lords of the Heavens, and all that, it make the horse god look like a bit of a clown doesn't it? Even the Norse lot had a foothold here thanks to the Vikings. Odin, Loki, Frey and his slutty sister. I always had a soft spot for Thor. He wasn't the brightest of divinities but ok to chat to as long as you didn't mention trolls. Used to set him off something terrible. And he smelled a bit. Ozone and sweat isn't a nice combination."

Cranitch made more notes and wondered how many sessions it would take to treat this lunatic.

"So you've no powers?"

"I didn't say that. I've got one left. A thought one of my worshippers had one day. He was looking at his life and feeling dissatisfied. Hated his wife and the kids were

driving him mad. No gold or silver. A life of toil and pain. He wished the power into being and it crystallized in me.”

“Your forthcoming miracle?”

Luch nodded.

“Time’s up,” he said before Cranitch could ask another question. “I’m a bit tired and I need to conserve my strength. I’ll see you soon.”

Like hell you will, thought Cranitch with a smile on his face.

Luch got up and left by the back gate. Cranitch watched his hair lift and settle as he walked away.

He heard a slam and looked back. The fat woman was glaring.

“Now you get the fuck out of my garden!”

The week passed with little in the way of excitement. Cranitch was busy covering an exclusive on a camera that had been found in the ladies toilets at a local over sixties club. The proprietor strenuously denied planting it and said he had no desire to look up the skirts of his patrons.

Then he did an article on fly tipping and a follow up on the camera when the police found films and stills on the proprietor’s home computer.

He spent a pleasant evening with a secretary from the Chronicle offices. She was nervous before and irritable afterwards but he didn’t care. She’d only cost him a taxi fare and a Chinese takeaway.

His ex wife phoned him to bitch about the kids. He took it in his stride only losing it when she mentioned she was going to Alicante with the builder.

Ed rang him at home.

“Get to Thorpe Parva! The tenants are having a stand off with the council. There’s a bloody demolition team there and the police. Why didn’t you know about this?”

Cranitch didn’t know.

“Get your lazy arse over there now. I’m sending Neville.” Neville was the younger of two photographers the Chronicle employed full time. He was a dickless wonder.

Cranitch sped all the way. He couldn’t get by a police vehicle so he abandoned the car and cut across fields. There were diggers, backhoe loaders and articulated trucks lined up on the road.

A man in a high visibility jacket was arguing with the fat woman. She had a chain around her arm. As he got closer he could see it was wound around her gateposts and extended back into the house. The Kemps were there. Doris was making rude gestures at a group of workmen who were watching and laughing at a safe distance.

He reached the houses. There was another family he hadn’t seen before. A man, woman and little boy all with red hair. The child stuck his tongue out as he caught Cranitch’s eye.

He walked straight up to the council official.

“Have you a few words for the Chronicle?” he said. The official lowered his clipboard.

“Aye, and they ends in off!”

Cranitch tried to look at his name badge. The man covered it with his sausage fingers.

“Madam, any words?”

“You’ll all be sorry!” she screamed.

“Look, the police are present. I’m going to ask you all to leave immediately or they will arrest you.”

“You fat bastard!” the small boy shouted.

The fat bastard coloured and muttered something Cranitch didn't catch. He threw his hands in the air and walked over to a middle aged policeman. The others coppers were younger and built like rugby players.

Cranitch looked out for Neville. He rang him but got the answer service.

Luch hopped over the wall near the workmen. He greeted the family and the woman. They all beamed.

"I knew you'd be here, Cranitch."

"Well, I am to be your living witness."

"Indeed."

A van pulled up followed by several smaller vehicles. Cranitch glowered, jealous and more than a little protective of his story. A well dressed, groomed to perfection journalist leaped from the van's passenger seat. A camera crew assembled with military precision.

"Not your only witness, I see."

"Don't be like that, you're my chosen one," said Luch.

Cranitch didn't hear him. He stepped up to the other reporter.

"Can you move so we can get a good shot of the protesters?"

"Can you report with my shoe up your arse?"

The well groomed man showed his straight white teeth. "Mike, we've got a *little* problem."

Mike detached from the crew. He was closer to seven foot than six. His eyes were flat. Cranitch felt his stomach lurch.

The fat woman yelled. Both reporters looked. The police were walking towards the houses. One of them had his baton out. The camera crew shifted like one animal zoning in on the action.

Cranitch cursed Neville.

"Are you ready, Cranitch?"

He had no time for Luch and his nonsense now. He whipped out his mobile phone and brought its video function up. He couldn't get it to work. It kept defaulting to a video he had taken of his son eating a cream cake.

"He that believeth in me believeth in nothing!"

Luch was holding his arms in the air. He had a small brown leather bag in one hand.

Cranitch shook his head. He got in closer. Two coppers had hold of the red haired man and his wife. The boy was biting another policeman on the leg.

The fat woman was screaming and had her sizable bottom in the air as two policemen restrained her from attacking a colleague who was trying to get in the house with a bolt cutter.

Everyone ignored Luch. He walked back and forth. "In what do you believe, my children?"

The protestors stopped struggling. "We believe in nothing, small one. The god at our feet. Mouse of the field and the hearth!"

"Cranitch, witness my power. Witness my miracle!"

The reporter looked at the leather bag.

"Look inside," said Luch.

Cranitch stepped up. The little bag was empty. "There's nothing in it."

"Nothing," said Luch's followers.

"Exactly that," said Luch.

He went towards the police and opened the bag. There was a pop, an implosion of air and the police disappeared. Cranitch felt his bladder throb. He squeezed just like the doctor had told him.

Luch pointed the bag at the workmen. They vanished, one of them leaving a plastic cup of tea behind. It dropped and exploded.

The council official was looking around not sure what he had seen. The fat woman was sat on the ground, clapping her hands. Luch pointed the bag and the official disappeared, his clipboard with him.

The god walked over to the film crew. The well groomed reporter was glassy eyed. He had lost the battle with his bladder. He vanished along with the crew and all of their expensive equipment. Luch dispatched the machines.

He turned to Cranitch. Cranitch dropped his phone.

“Ye of little faith,” laughed Luch.

Cranitch put his head down and ran.

Life Sentence.

Michael Court experienced his first fist fight at the age of twenty-eight. His opponent outweighed him by a hundred pounds and possessed the skill to put most of that weight behind a punch that knocked him to the metal deck.

Court got back up; his ineptitude did not come from a lack of fitness or courage. He swung a right that clipped his tormentor's jaw. The next punch broke Court's nose, the last robbed him of consciousness.

"You awake?"

Court put a hand to his face. The blood was almost dry. He turned over spitting out three quarters of a molar.

"Thought you were dead?"

"I am," said Court. "So are you."

"Of course but you ought to be quiet about that."

Court grinned and stood up. His head buzzed but his legs were steady. He touched his throbbing nose.

"Bastard!"

"He a bully. You ought to keep clear."

Court's advisor was a small man, probably in his late forties. His accent was a cross of Common European and United American, pegging him as a citizen of the failed artificial Atlantic lands. He wore a blue overall. He was shaven headed with sharp features and a gap between his teeth big enough to poke a pencil through.

"I'm Wordy Clare."

"You were I'm sure."

"There you go again. You need to take heed."

Court looked around. They were alone in a vast empty space. At the far end was a single exit, high and wide.

Wordy Clare gestured with a skinny arm.

"Opened up the second you hit the floor. Saved you a kick in the head. You'd a been dead otherwise and don't be saying anything smart about that."

Court made for the exit.

"Wait up." Wordy fell in step with him.

"What kind of name is Wordy, anyway?"

"Short for Wordsworth."

"Suits you."

"Like your nose."

Court laughed. A hard bark. A sound that his companion did not like.

Outside the hold was a long corridor.

"Left or right, Wordy?"

Wordy looked him in the eye. "You born yesterday? How long you stand on the line?"

"Since yesterday."

It was Wordy's turn to laugh. It went on longer than necessary.

"You a card, my man. A real joker in the pack, hee haw!"

"Which way?" Court's jaw tensed and Wordy stopped laughing.

"Don't get mad, it's just my teasing. We all need to get along. It's three days after all."

Court turned left.

"Food's that way, the other is right. I wouldn't wait. There'll be no one left if we do."

Court turned back. "What are you talking about?"
Wordy stared. A 'are you taking a rise out of me,' stare.
"Women," he said.

Wordy was in front. Court tried to ignore the pain in his nose. The corridor curved. He supposed they were on the outer rim. The gravity was good. Pretty much G-1.

"I hope the well isn't dry. I waited with you to make a pal. Thought we could look out for one another."

Court ignored this.

"What shall I call you?"

"Court."

"Hee haw! That's funny. Court caught by the court."

"How many women?"

"God, I don't know. Hope it's a good crop. Plenty of lady crims these days. Heard one time it was one woman to four hundred. Imagine that. Bet she was croaked before the big one. Bet she was."

Court picked up his step.

"Don't get me wrong, Court. I'm no hurter of ladies. I love 'em. Love 'em all. I want to sideline one of them. Just one. All by ourselves. A little conversation and then wham! A three day poke!"

Court felt vomit rising. The gravity could be more off than he thought. Or the beating had taken more out of him.

Wordy continued talking, more to himself than his new friend.

They came upon it shockingly. The spectacle made Wordy clamp his mouth shut. Court swayed and grabbed hold of a handrail.

The clear dome gave an uninterrupted view of the stars, the number staggering. More stars than space it seemed.

Below, the padded circular area was a forest of limbs. The noises and smells excited and repulsed, offended and confused.

Wordy ran along the gangplank and descended steep metal steps. He tore off his overalls, almost falling in his haste. He clambered over bodies, slipped and disappeared into a mass of serpentine arms and slick flesh.

He half ran, his hands groping at the featureless walls. He noticed for the first time his feet were bare and he recalled the warders ordering them to remove their footwear.

He remembered a little further back. The judging panel had returned a verdict of guilty. He had seen Alice briefly. A wordless goodbye, a numb farewell and then the bailiffs took him. The ride to the prison had taken an hour, no more. He had filed in with other men and showered – real water, which was too hot, the spray like cannon. New clothes. An overall in blue.

Then he was marched to a tiny space with a cot.

He had slept, exhausted in his cubicle for one, dreaming of freedom. His short life as a citizen of the world gone forever. His job, his amazing job, instructing the young, delighting in their achievements which were, after all, his achievements. Alice – beautiful Alice, her arm linked with his, full of plans for a bright future. Then darkness, the mistake that led here.

Court leaned on the wall, face wet and hot. Salt stung the cut beneath his eye.

He allowed his body to sink. He would rest.

He might have stayed there until the end but for the slap of feet and the cries.

The woman appeared around the curve, her eyes widened when she saw him. She backed away looking at him and then behind.

The man in pursuit stopped too. His grin broadened.

"I'll share," the man said. "It'll work out better."

The woman stood equidistant between them.

The man continued. "Say we found a quiet corner. Just the three of us."

Court looked at the woman, a girl really. She had a thickened, bloody lip. She was thin with short hair and very dark eyes. Her arms were bare, her overall torn showing heavily tattooed arms. Court took in the unfamiliar symbols. Perhaps Cultish?

She was frightened but not resigned. She waited. He had no doubt she would leave two corpses behind if she could.

"Go," Court said.

She stepped around him her eyes watchful and her body facing him. He nodded. She ran.

The man rushed at him. Court ducked low and hugged the man around his middle. Blows rained on his head and neck. They wrestled. Court took hold of hair and tore at it. He got hold of the man's fingers and bent them until he heard a snap.

"You bastard! You fucking piece of fucking..."

Court got his hands round the throat and squeezed cutting off the curses. The man struck out with his good hand and connected with Court's nose.

Court gasped and put everything into crushing his opponent's windpipe. He could almost see the rage flow through the muscles of his forearms.

The man flailed, his eyes losing focus, his face purpled.

Court let go and rolled away. He crawled to the wall and put his back to it. The man was breathing and Court felt some relief. He wiped his face and gulped air.

It was good air, a proper mix. All the right gases. The authorities wanted them to live. Perhaps they told themselves the three days would pass in contrition all the while knowing what hell they had condemned society's rejects to.

He watched the man's halting breaths. He was making low, self pitying noises.

Court climbed shakily to his feet.

"I'll leave you to it."

He walked in the same direction as the girl. Wordy had said food lay this way. He would eat and maybe try to find her.

The food hall was a twin of the other in size and shape. A circular expanse surrounded by a gangway, but the floor wasn't padded. Eight sets of metal steps led to the floor. Court descended to hundreds of tables laden with every type of food and drink. They were arranged in lines to create wide aisles. Stools were provided. He noted everything was bolted down or more correctly seemed to grow from the deck.

"Hello," he called. "It's ok."

He plucked an apple from a bowl and bit it, chewed and swallowed. "We won't go hungry."

She rose from behind a table stacked with hot meats. Court watched her through billowing steam.

"I'll fight," she said.

"I won't hurt you." He sat. "Don't think I'd have the energy."

He sniffed at a jug of dark liquid. He filled a plastic tumbler. It was sweet and fruity.

"It's good. A cordial, I think."

"Did you kill him?"

"I hurt him. I think he'll live."

“I would have killed him.”

“I believe you.”

Court picked at a piece of white cheese. “You’re safe with me.”

“We won’t lie down like the others.” She looked away and quickly back. “Most of them were as enthusiastic as the men but not all. I tried to help.”

“I know. I tried to help you but not so I could have you. Jesus, this is a nightmare.” Court stared into the tumbler. The reflection showed his dark hair and marred features.

“You’re hurt.” The girl came closer until only two tables separated them. He smiled and his nose flared.

“Ow, yes. I’ve had two fights in less than an hour. One loss and a win by technical knock out.”

“I was a nurse. At one time.”

“No offence but I’d prefer a doctor. One with his own ship.”

That earned a tiny, tight smile.

“I’m Michael Court.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

She sat but her posture showed she could and would take off if he made any quick movements. “I read about you. They allow news on the line.”

“The mythical line.”

“It isn’t a myth. We’re here aren’t we?”

He gathered food. Fruit, salad and chocolate.

“Bon Appétit!”

“You were convicted, I see.”

“Apparently.”

“You like raping women, Court?”

“I haven’t raped anyone, Miss...?”

“Fleur Steadman. Innocent are you? Like everyone else on the line.”

Court tired of her. It happened quickly. He went to another table some distance away and sat with his back to her. The food smelled fine and he would eat until he puked and then eat some more.

“I heard she begged. Pleaded for her life.”

“Chicken’s good. Tastes like chicken.”

“Did that help? Spur you on?”

“Do we get beer? Where are the fries?”

“How old was she? Fifteen?”

Court ran at her vaulting one table. Plates hit the floor, food spilled in his wake. Fleur tried to push herself back, not noticing the stool was immovable. She fell on her back. Court landed on her knocking the breath from her body, fixing her wrists over her head.

“She was seventeen which is legal in the United Nations of Europe. She said her name was Maria. I had sex with her. She came, so did I. I met her, liked her, fucked her because I’m an idiot and was flattered and it overrode my common sense. She was alive when I left her. Someone else killed her. That’s it! That’s why I’m in this flying coffin with scum like you and your boyfriend back there!”

He released her and went back to his food. She got up and massaged her wrists.

“I’m sorry.”

He ignored her, shovelling bread in his mouth and swallowing it with artificial milk.

“I am, really.”

“Forget it. Go and sit somewhere else.”

“You did a good thing back there.”

“No problem, now fuck off.”

She sat at the next table and poured a drink.

“I heard there’s an engineer on board.”

His jaws ground on. He belched.

“I was thinking, we could try and sabotage the flight plan. Maybe land somewhere.”

“Good luck.”

“There must be a hundred and fifty people. Surely between us we should be able to work something out. A way out.”

“Fleur, this boat is carrying rapists, murderers, terrorists, psychopaths and God knows what else. I doubt that mix of delights could string a coherent sentence together let alone derail this ark of shit.”

“You think everyone who commits a crime is stupid?”

“No, I think they’re evil.”

“Evil is just a word.”

“No, dear, it’s an action. Or in most cases a series of. Go away before I truly commit my first crime.”

“Jesus!”

“Heard about him. He was a trouble maker too.”

Fleur stalked away.

Court felt clogged up. His stomach ached. “I hope there’s a toilet on this thing or the black hole will choke on shit.”

“It’ll probably spit you out, you fucking coward!” She hurled a pineapple. It bounced on Court’s plate sending the remains of his feast in all directions.

“Fleur, I would bet my last penny that a hundred rapists are going to come through that door any time now. Do you think you should be here when they arrive?”

“Should you? Hope you packed your chastity belt. The bulls like a bit of variety.”

“After three days with you I would imagine that’s true.”

“Fuck you, Court!”

He watched her leave and then ate some more.

The first of the condemned rattled down the steps, a trickle of blue that became a river of jostling bodies. Court tensed but no one bothered him. They began snatching up food. Someone was laughing. The general volume rose. To Court, some of them looked like they were enjoying the experience. And was that surprising? Some had waited on the line, their advocates pleading for clemency, for years. Here, they were not guarded or shackled. There was food, drink, women and a kind of freedom. If freedom was hurtling towards a black hole in a ship with no manual controls. Maybe they were right to act on impulse.

He struggled to recall what he knew of black holes. It amounted to very little.

The prisoner who had attacked him in the men’s hold winked at him.

“No hard feelings, laddie.”

“No,” said Court, thinking he’d like to feed him razor blades until they poked out of his arse. The man had a woman on his arm who looked more than willing. Quite a few women were here. Some young but even the oldest was a sex goddess in this shallow pool. He had imagined the orgy to be a massive gang rape but there didn’t appear to be any victims here.

“Room for me?” A grinning Wordy Clare sat next to him. “What’s good?”

“All of it.”

“How didja do?”

“I didn’t, I came here.”

“Girls not to your liking?”

“Girls? Most of these look like my mother.”

“Not to my eyes. I’m fifty-two next May.”

“I’ll get you a card.”

“Hee haw. Pass those onions, will you?”

The prisoners looked genuinely happy but if he looked closer he saw fear. The gaiety was low level hysteria. He got up.

“See you again,” said Wordy.

He pushed through the throng. A woman grabbed at his crotch. He twisted away ignoring her laughter.

Food was thrown. Someone screamed.

A fat, bald man barred his way. “I’m Angel,” he growled.

Court backed up and took another route. He reached steps and carefully climbed, avoiding an embracing couple.

There were people in the corridor. Some coupled oblivious, others talked. One man wept and thrashed his feet on the floor. Court ignored them all.

He headed in the direction of the orgy hall as he was beginning to think of it. He reasoned the women had been kept in an identical hold which should be further along. He passed the hall. A few prisoners were still there. He saw a splash of red on one wall and a heap that seemed all arms and heads beneath it. The sickness that had threatened him earlier tried to return.

He came to the woman’s hold. Two tall women flanked the doorway.

“The girl, Fleur, is she here?”

The first woman smiled. “She is baby. Come inside.”

Court made to walk by them. The second woman screamed and drop kicked him in the chest. The first woman was on him before he hit the floor. She clawed at his face. More women poured into the corridor. They hoisted him and carried him inside. One older woman bit his thigh. He fought and she backed away spitting at him. He pulled himself into a ball and that did the trick. They dropped him. A woman with shock pink hair grabbed his testicles and squeezed.

“Stop it! Leave him alone!”

Fleur pushed through the women.

Pink hair hung on but decreased the pressure. “Why, honey?”

“He’s the one who saved me earlier.”

“Saved you for what,” said one to laughter.

“Let him go!” Fleur pushed pink hair. She let go but gave him an extra squeeze as she did. Court rolled into a ball.

“That’s it baby, rub ‘em better.” More laughter.

Fleur knelt and put a hand on his shoulder. “Are you ok?”

“Been on rougher dates.” He sat up. His balls ached and the bitches had busted his ribs, he’d swear.

Pink hair stood over him. “If you want a pet that’s your choice, darling. Just keep him out of my way.”

The women drifted away. They stood or huddled in groups. The two guards headed back to the entrance. One of them gave Court a wink.

“So I’m your pet.”

“That’s Charlotte. Charlotte the Harlot.”

“Charming.”

“She’s mean as a wolverine, Court. You’ll have to stay out of her way.”

“No problem.” Court put a protective hand between his legs.

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m getting used to it. This is my day for pain and fighting.”

Fleur stood and put out a tentative hand. He took it and she helped him up. She led him to a corner. He sat with his legs apart.

“What’s your plan? You can’t stay here for the rest of the time. You must be hungry.”

“Charlotte says they’ll turn on each other soon. They will eat and have sex and then kill each other.”

“If those men decide they want you they will take you. There must be more than a hundred of them and what? Thirty women here?”

Fleur looked angry and spoke to him as if he was a child. “Maybe, but rolling over like a dog is not our way.” She leaned on the wall.

Court looked around at the women. They all bore similar tattoos to Fleur.

“Why did you leave here?”

“I was scouting. Nobody has ever been on a black ship and come back to tell have they?”

“No.”

“We didn’t know exactly what to expect. Some of the warders let things slip and there are rumours, even outside the prison system.”

“The rapist stuff certainly. The bogeyman for adult women everywhere.”

Two women were exercising nearby. They took turns holding the other’s ankles while performing sit ups. They were strong looking and well developed. Court took a closer look at Fleur. She was small but obviously worked what she had.

“You’re Cultish.”

Her face softened. “Yes.”

“Which one?”

“Elizabethans.”

“Ah.”

“You’ve heard of us?”

“Named for an English Tudor monarch. Virgins all.”

She snorted. “Supposedly. Not all of us. Celibacy is the important thing.”

“You risk execution to be part of a gang.”

“It’s more than that!” She started to get up and he put his hand on her arm.

“None of my business. Really. I don’t have a problem with your beliefs.”

Fleur closed her eyes. The room was almost silent. A few murmurs occasionally drifting across.

“We were rounded up one by one. We moved often, working where we could. I was a nurse.”

“You mentioned it.”

She nodded slowly. “Yes, I took work in small towns. I stayed away from hospitals and clinics. Worked care homes. The elderly and children mainly. Whatever I could get.”

“Cash work?”

“Yes, that’s why most of us ended up in the U.N.E. You still use cash in the provinces. You’re European, I think.”

“English to be precise.”

“I’ve heard of England.”

“I should hope so. You’ve usurped one of our most famous Queens.”

She laughed a little.

Court joined in. She was a distraction. A pleasant one.

“I worked in a town called New Dortmund. I was picked up there. One of my co workers got suspicious. I wouldn’t let him have me in a stock cupboard. He assumed I was a lesbian or Cultish, naturally.”

“Naturally.”

Shouts resounded out in the corridor. Half a dozen women got up and went to the doorway. Others lined up. Court noted they seemed to be in formation. Disciplined.

Moments passed, the tension built and then the women drifted back inside. A false alarm.

“The police caught up with me. They had over eighty of us. We’ve never numbered much more than that. A hundred or so at our peak. We were tried en masse. Most went on last quarter’s ship. We’re the last.”

“Has it been worth it? How old are you. Twenty-one?”

“I’m nineteen and yes it was worth it.”

Court stretched his legs. His thigh was tender where the old bitch had bit him.

“You’ve achieved nothing. I’m sorry but it’s true. People died for nothing.”

“Exploiters of women died!” She caught herself and lowered her voice. Several Elizabethans were watching. She stared them down. Court wondered at her status. What had she done to be so respected by these harpies?

She sighed. “We killed those who didn’t deserve life.”

“All your victims were men.”

“That’s the way it is.”

“I doubt my wife would agree.”

Charlotte called. Fleur jogged over. Court couldn’t hear but he got the impression he figured in the conversation.

She walked back. “Charlotte wants you to leave.”

“Not a problem. I only wanted to see you were safe.”

“I persuaded her you might be useful.”

“Oh?”

She looked away. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Ordinarily being trapped with thirty women would be a dream.”

“I’m serious. Maybe you could be a go-between. Get some of the men to work with us.”

“There isn’t a way off this ship. It’s a fantasy. There are two holds, two domed halls and a single corridor joining all. That’s it! No doors. No way to get at the engines. No bridge, no controls, nothing. Christ, there isn’t even a toilet. We’re here to suffer and die. The three day wait is part of the terror. We’re being punished for our crimes.”

“Apart from you. The innocent!”

“Fucking right.”

“If we found a way, you’d want to be in on it.”

“If you found a way I’d be your slave for life but it isn’t going to happen.”

“Fine!”

Fleur was already halfway across the hold.

Court made a pillow of his hands and laid back. He studied the ceiling. It was seamless. The lighting was muted and the source hidden. He was asleep before Fleur crept back to lie at his side.

Fleur held her growling stomach. Her bladder ached. Some had urinated in the corridor already. They had agreed to keep the hold clean.

The other women hadn't come back. Most of them had gone willingly, even eagerly but more than a few had been made to go. She had seen bodies in the domed hall but had not lingered to get a better look. Even Charlotte had stayed clear, not venturing out at all and she was fearless.

They could only wait.

Court was right. They would come and there was little hope they could have a rational discussion. One Elizabethan, a skinny girl her own age, said she would throw herself off the gangway and make sure she landed on her head. They could do what they wanted to her corpse. No one had spoken when she had said this.

Charlotte was tough but no Mary. Mary would have had them eating out of her blood stained hands by now, but she was dead. Killed by the Off World Police at a Jovian port.

Fleur had been there along with three others. They had managed to get off Earth and joined up with a vague plan to flee to one of the colonies. Fleur and one other survived the attack and eventually got back to Earth. Survived so they could be thrown into the singularity. Ripped apart or whatever happened in the big eaters of worlds.

The Elizabethans had scattered, each chapter splintering into smaller and smaller groups until they ran alone. They all told similar stories. Running from town to town, stealing, working and begging. Charlotte had made it easier on herself by whoring. Actual prostitution whereas in the past she had earned her nickname leading men on, taking their wallets and jewellery for Elizabethan funds and disappearing or slitting their throats, whichever was easiest.

Fleur's place had been assured through Mary's patronage. Mary's death led to Charlotte's ascendancy. She was the right choice in a time of war.

If they got out of this Fleur was going to leave the cult. Her loyalty had been to Mary. Mother Mary, the only one she had known.

Court was snoring lightly. His nose was a mess. She remembered his face in the news reports. A blown up image, probably a simple snapshot. He had looked sad, but still had a little smile on his face. It was a good face. Worth a second glance in the street. The nose would be different without surgery. He had to go to his death with the wrong nose. It was absurdly wrong somehow.

Charlotte sat with her favoured lieutenants, Jo-Jo and Saskia. Jo-Jo was cunning but Saskia was just muscle. They were supposed to be planning a defensive strategy. The others had faith but she didn't share it.

There was activity at the door. One of the guards shouted for Charlotte and she left the hold with Jo-Jo and Saskia following.

Fleur ran over, others followed.

Two men were in the corridor. Young pretty boys. Charlotte was laughing with them. Jo-Jo put a hand to Fleur. "Stay put, sweetie."

"I'm Nathan," said one, "This is David."

"What can we do for you, Nathan?" Charlotte was using her pro voice. Honeyed and low.

"We've been sent to ask you if you would join us. There's no pressure. There's more food than we could all eat in a month."

Fleur said, "It'll be rotten long before that."

Jo-Jo gave her a little shove.

“That’s very kind of you, boys. How about you bring us a little of that food? We’ll think about your offer better with full bellies.”

“No, ma’am,” said David. “We have to be clear here. You come quietly and we’ll all feel the better for it.”

“You’re not as polite as your friend, David,” said Charlotte.

David shrugged. Nathan lost his innocent boy face briefly. Fleur saw anger and menace but it seemed to be directed at his companion. He smiled and inclined his head restoring the illusion.

“Excuse him. He’s tired. We all are.”

Charlotte nodded.

“We noted your markings.”

Fleur rubbed at her arms.

“We don’t want to harm you, although we could have overwhelmed you and even now could take you all.”

Charlotte stiffened. Saskia stepped forward, the muscles in her great shoulders flexing.

Nathan continued. “But that is not our intention. Please consider our offer.”

The Elizabethans watched them walk away. Charlotte stopped Saskia from following.

Fleur was the last to go back in the hold.

He reckoned they were on the second day but it wasn’t possible to be sure. No one stopped him when he left after taking a last look at Fleur.

The corridor was empty. Someone had vomited copiously. There was blood and shit on the walls and floor.

He intended to search every part of the ship. He would pretend to formulate an escape. Anything to distract him from thinking about Alice and Judith.

The halls were fairly quiet. A huge amount of food remained. People slept, a handful were having sex.

Everywhere smelled. It reached into the corridor. He walked the gangway of the food hall, trying to ignore the stars and examining where the metal wall met the dome. There were no joints. No bolts. The whole thing a product of nano technology. Smart materials ordered by micro machines into a glass smooth rat trap.

He descended and took a large platter. He piled it as high as he could and took two jugs of the cordial.

“Where you go with that?”

The bald guy Angel came towards him stepping over the prone.

“I’m going to eat in the corridor. I don’t like crowds.” He backed up looking for an escape route.

“You don’t like our company. I ask about you. No one knows you. Which compound you in?”

Court couldn’t place the accent. German perhaps.

“Burdham briefly.”

He was huge. Massive shoulders and gut.

“I heard of it. You English?”

“Yes. You?”

“Dutch but I live in England long time.”

“Well, we’ll talk another time. Excuse me.”

Angel clamped a broad hand on his upper arm. “I would let you go but it’s not up to me.”

“Bring him here, please.”

Angel took the platter spilling half of it. It clattered on the table. He propelled Court to a group of seated men.

An older man with white hair and a neglected cybernetic eye spoke first.

“Thank you, Angel.”

Angel pushed Court onto a stool and left.

The men were of varying ages. The white haired man offered a cigarette.

“No, thank you.”

“There’s plenty of tobacco at the far end.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“I’m Arthur Twiss.”

“Michael Court.”

“Don’t take food or drink to the Cultish.”

Court’s denial was cut off.

“Don’t try to fool us either.”

“What do you want?”

“Very little, Mr Court.”

The others laughed.

Twiss said, “These gentlemen are your best friends on this ship. Nathan and David Moore.”

Court nodded at the two young men.

“Bela Kaye.” Kaye was thin and tall. “Bela is an off-worlder. He’s spent time on practically every colony. Some penal.”

The Moore brothers laughed loudly at this. Court saw something of hero-worship in them.

Twiss waited for the guffaws to end. “And this is Phillip, my son.” Phillip Twiss was a long limbed heavily muscled man of around thirty. His hair was fair and tied back.

“Happily we have been reunited after a three year separation. We are in every sense, family.”

“I see,” said Court.

“We are offering you, an educated man, a chance to help us.”

“Help you with what?”

Twiss stood and limped to a table bearing a variety of drinks. He drank heavily. He sat back down favouring one leg. Court heard the tell-tale sound of artificial muscles. Like the eye it was probably a neglected prosthetic. The authorities had few obligations to its prisoners.

“Mr Kaye will explain, but Michael - I am taking a leap of faith here. This information is confidential and will not be shared without my permission.”

Court nodded, fighting a smile. Confidential in a room bursting with people.

Kaye leaned close. “It is my understanding that at a certain distance from the black hole our perception of time will alter. It may already be skewed.”

Court knew little of space time mechanics. The three governments on Earth were sparing and jealous over the science of space travel. Only select scientists and technicians were permitted to study the field. For the last two centuries the most astute were separated from their fellows and trained in a kind of priesthood. Any sharing of secrets led to execution. Even an innocent recipient would be killed.

The privileged, the connected and anyone with money to spend had the freedom to use the officially provided commercial sub light ships, travelling anywhere in the solar system. Access to hoppers, the interstellar crafts was strictly controlled. The

knowledge behind the technology was sacred. Dissidents could rage all they wished. Civil libertarians could pretty much say anything and criticize whomsoever they pleased but any physical action was stamped on. Everyone was free as long as they respected the limits of a long leash.

“I believe our journey will take much longer from our point of view. Much longer than three days.”

Court tried to digest this. “How long?”

“I don’t know.” Bela Kaye combed fingers through his thick black beard. “Weeks, months, years.” He shrugged.

“So we’ll starve or drown in our own waste.”

Kaye shrugged again.

Court threw his hands up. “And what am I supposed to say to that?”

Twiss broke in. “Michael, you are the only man who has been allowed access to the Cultish. I want to know why. I also want you to help us control the others. Look around. Most of these men are animals. They want full bellies and empty balls. They fear me because I am the head of an organization they respect. Every man knows my name. Some, like Angel worked for me and continue to do so. Associates on Earth take care of their families. I am in one sense, father.”

“Christ, listen to yourself. You’re a gangster. I knew you the moment I saw you. It doesn’t matter if our perception of time is off. We’ll die one way or another. Your control is an illusion. They’ll do what they want. Even when you deliver the hold out women what ultimate good is that? They’ll be spent currency. They’ll turn on you and each other. We’ll all be dead whatever the method.”

Twiss was unperturbed. “Perhaps that is true but it is the manner of death that concerns you at this time. I could order you dead this second. Or I can string it out. Angel likes you.”

The Moore boys smirked.

Court glanced at the big man. He was watching from a distance, slumped against a table. Court tried to keep the fear and disgust from his voice.

“Can I think about it?”

The Moores roared. Twiss allowed himself a chuckle. “Take a little time, Michael. Remember how long you could be in our company on this tiny, tiny ship.”

Court left the hall. He was shaking. How dare they turn his remaining time into a game! He went to the men’s hold. He was alone.

Could it be true? The time thing. Were they condemned to a long, slow death? Seventy-two hours was torture enough. He struggled to bring up everything he knew about space travel. The time distortion thing could be right but didn’t interstellar craft travel differently to normal ships? Bend space or something. That would mean the time here was the same on Earth. Then another thought struck. That meant that Alice and little Judith were still reeling, trying to come to terms with the loss. He wouldn’t be there to see Judith grow and start school. He wouldn’t be able to know her, guide her and help her when she was ill or upset.

“I’m a coward,” his voice was shockingly loud. “I’ll betray everyone here to save my life. I’d betray Alice and even my child. I’d probably hand them over to Twiss to save myself.”

“Who is Alice? Your wife?”

Fleur was in the centre of the hold with a dozen Elizabethans.

Court went back to the women's hold without an argument. They encountered zero resistance. Ardent eyes watched them. A line of men including Angel were stationed outside the food hall. Fleur led confidently. A show no doubt, but a good one.

Charlotte welcomed him back, sarcasm dripping from her tongue.

He sat meekly and told them what Twiss had said. He was sent to a corner.

Hot tears fell down his face. He was way out of his depth with these people. He was a teacher, barely able to control unruly teenagers. He was a weakling among a small universe of hardened men and women. Even Fleur had more balls.

He decided he would go back to Twiss at the earliest opportunity. In truth he had known it before leaving the food hall. Twiss was a legend. An old style gangster who adapted the rules of organized crime to fit the times.

It was a matter of numbers. Twiss had them and the Elizabethans did not. Twiss might have a tenuous grip on power but it was enough for now. Fleur, Charlotte and the rest would die fighting or at the gangster's pleasure.

The Elizabethans broke up. Fleur came straight over.

"Don't feel bad, Court. No-one could blame you for walking out and joining them. You aren't part of this world, I know that. You were good to me. That's more than any other guy ever did for me."

"Stop it, Fleur."

"Go and report there's no deal at the moment. That's all you have to say."

"I can't."

"Go." She took his arm. "I'll walk you part of the way."

Court kept his eyes down. They left to silence.

Outside she said "Is Alice your wife?"

"Yes. Thanks for not saying *was*."

"How long have you been together?"

"Three years. We have a daughter. She's almost two."

"Nice."

"This is impossible."

"It's all the reality we have now. I meant what I said. If I go it will be on my own terms. I won't be used. You should be as self interested. If siding with those bastards means you get an easier ride, take it."

"Better to abuse than be abused."

"That's not what I meant." She stopped. "This is where we part."

"You were right when you called me a coward."

He walked on.

Twiss had been thoughtful but pleased with Court's report. He had presented him with a woman named Louise who immediately offered sex. He declined. She sat where he sat. Ate where he picked at food. She was distant and he was glad of it.

Twiss and his four captains sat talking and occasionally calling Angel over. Angel organized the men into small groups. Less important prisoners were made to shed their overalls. Some were completely naked; others were allowed to keep the bottom half of their clothing. Some of the overalls and scraps had been fashioned into pillows and laid on cleared tables. Court presumed these were beds for the elite. Some strips were taken to Angel. From the way he tested and flexed the material Court thought they were to be crude garrottes.

No one approached him.

Wordy was already nude. He was eating as much as he could and creeping up and down annoying women. He did not appear to be having any success, his nakedness a sure sign of his lowliness.

Court looked at his own intact overall and his groaning table. Louise was young, another sign of his rank. He was a rich man here.

“Hello teach.”

Nathan had approached. “You don’t mind if I join you.” Nathan sat and gave Louise a smile that split his face in two but remained a million miles from his eyes.

“Frankly, Court I have zero respect for you. I’d kill you right here if Arthur hadn’t taken a shine to you.”

Court shrugged.

“Yeah, you’re a cool one but if I popped your eye out you’d crumble. I’d make you my boy and you’d do whatever I told you.”

Court looked down at the gap between his body and the table. He could see his bare feet tensing on the floor. He felt a stab of hatred. Who did this boy-man think he was?

“I don’t fuck many guys but I like to watch.”

Court conjured up Fleur’s young, brave face.

“Ha!” Nathan clapped him on the arm. “Don’t be fretful. You’re safe! Arthur wants you to lead one of Angel’s squads. All you have to do is walk them to the women and let them loose.”

“I see.”

Nathan stood. “And watch. That’s a must.”

“I’d rather not.”

The slap stung Court’s cheek. “You’ll do as you’re told!”

Court nodded.

“Bring back as many as you can. It won’t hurt to lose a few. Sets a good example.”

Nathan leaned to Louise and kissed her. She responded and moved closer. He pushed her gently away. Her eyes dropped, her passion turned off like a tap.

Court’s men looked expectant and nervous. He inspected them as instructed by Angel. They stared back wondering how a guy who had got a beating early on could be their overseer. This made some of them all the more wary of him. They were bare chested except one who was naked. His skinny body went with his wasted face.

Angel snapped his fingers. Each team leader went to him. Court walked slowly, appalled with them and himself.

He hardly heard the orders. The fat man was drooling as he spoke. Fine spittle erupted from his yammering mouth. He brought his hands together in a thunderclap and they were off, marching in a rag tag manner. Someone started singing, others joined. Court didn’t know the song.

Twiss sat, dispassionate. Phillip and Bela were at his side enjoying the reflected night.

Angel led. His team were made up of heavy, powerful men except for one rangy looking prisoner who no doubt possessed talents to make up for his lack of size.

Court was next, his position probably deliberate so he could be observed from both angles.

The orgy hall was empty of the living. Court gave it a cursory glance. He wondered how many bodies were piled in it. Thirty perhaps.

They came to the women’s hold. There were no guards. Angel held up one massive arm. He looked to be enjoying himself. He stepped aside and waved his men in. Court was pushed forward by his own team. He tried to keep his balance but was shoved to

the floor. He rolled up, protecting his head as more men poured through the hold door. He was lifted and shoved aside. He looked up to see Nathan grinning. Court got up and put his back to the wall. Nathan held two fingers to his eyes and then pointed them at him.

Yeah, I'm watching you too, he thought.

Court jumped and stood on tip toe trying to see over the men. He glimpsed pink hair. The woman began to scream and shout, not in fear but in battle cries. He shoved through. A fist connected with his right ear. He didn't know if it was male or female. One woman had a naked man on the floor; she had her hands around his throat. He beat at her ineffectively. Another man grabbed her around the neck and pulled. They both fell backwards. Court ran over to help and then stopped. Help who?

He heard Angel's growls. The fat man was swatting men and women aside. His face was twisted and red. He was in his element.

Court got back as far as he could. The men were fighting as individuals. He couldn't see much but most of the women seemed to be right in the centre of the fight in a circle. Clever.

Then he saw Fleur.

She was pulled outside the protective zone. Two men immediately dragged her away. She was kicking and slashing with her arms. Court noted she wasn't speaking. Saving energy. Another wise tactic.

He closed his eyes and thought about Judith. Small, vulnerable and beyond his reach forever.

He charged at the men, hitting one with his full weight. Court catapulted over the man and was trod on by someone in the main fight. He tasted his own blood. The man he'd struck was stringy and tall. He went for Court, cursing in a language he didn't recognize. Court stayed down and kicked out with both feet. His big toe connected with bone. The pain was terrible. The man stumbled. He didn't get the chance to get back up. Fleur, her mouth bloody got him in a choke hold. Her small wrist dug into the throat, her other hand securing it. The man clawed at her face but she tucked it down against his neck expertly moving with his movements so he couldn't butt her. Court got up. The other attacker was on the floor, crawling and clutching his torn throat.

It was over quickly. The stringy man lost consciousness. Court was reminded of documentaries showing old recordings of extinct cats hanging on with powerful jaws as they extinguished the life of their prey.

Fleur let go and turned to the main fight. She hit one man in his kidney area. He tottered to the right and she swept his legs from under him. She glanced at Court and he at her.

In for a penny, he thought and grabbed a man around his neck dragging him out of the battle. He did what Fleur had done. It was easy. He dropped the man and chose another. He had killed three more before Nathan saw him.

Court ran out to the corridor. He expected to see more men but they had obviously all gone into the hold. He turned back and almost collided with Nathan.

"You thought I was running, did you?"

Nathan had a moment of doubt. Brief but unmistakable. Court went for him. They landed on the deck. Nathan was trying to get some distance. Court believed he would get beaten badly in a fist and foot fight. He wasn't going to let that happen.

They wrestled. Court outweighed him. Perhaps only twenty pounds but that might be enough. He hugged and pulled.

"I'll kill you!"

Wasting energy, boy. Not wise.

Nathan tried to punch but Court was too close. He continued to shout and curse.

Court got his arms around Nathan's chest. He kept his head tucked in. He twisted to one side and let his weight drag on the younger man. It worked. They went down. Nathan bucked and twisted. Court let him. Nathan tried to crawl away his stomach to the hard deck.

Court grabbed at hair and pulled Nathan's head back. Then he was around his throat. He applied the locked wrist and wondered how long he could rely on Fleur's technique. Once more, at least.

Nathan fought but Court hung on. He was enjoying this. The thought almost made him stop but he did not. He squeezed until he felt something pop in his own neck.

At the end he rested, the dead or dying young man was an uncomfortable bed but the only one he had. He closed his eyes. The battle raged on. He could hear it over the roar in his ears.

He heard feet on metal and looked up. Men were fleeing the hold. Maybe a dozen. He got up, a pain in his head and neck almost making him fall back down.

The hold was still chaos but now there were bodies and dying men and women spread like litter. Angel was still on his feet but his face was marked and red. One eye was closed and his overall was torn. He was sweating and staggering. A man ran from the room making Court stand aside. Others were crawling. The men to the exit; the women just away from the centre of carnage.

Court walked over to a man who was straddling a dead woman. He was ripping at her clothing. Court bent to catch his breath. The man managed to tear the overall near the crotch. Court jumped and landed with his hip on the man's back. His full weight did the trick. The man said something about 'broken' and laid his head across the throat of his victim, blood was oozing from his mouth. It ran down the woman's neck and began to pool around her head.

Court watched what was left of the fight. Three more men left with swollen faces. One of them limped.

Court counted eleven women. Fleur was one of them. Angel was on his own, an injured mammoth trying to fend off a pack of dire wolves. He was boiling hot and surely half blinded. He swung at the women who looked fresher and certainly faster.

"Huren!"

Angel swung too hard missing a dancing Charlotte by a mile. He stumbled and was tripped by Saskia. They fell on him with feet and fists. Fleur's head whipped back and forth. Her mouth was red with his blood.

Angel fought on catching Saskia hard once. Her head snapped back but she answered the blow with her own. Court closed his eyes. Sick and sickened but also something else. Something that warmed his insides and made him a stranger to himself.

He felt her arms snake around his neck. He held her close and tight.

They rested for an hour. Charlotte paced. She watched Court some of the time. Her sneer had gone.

"Shall we go?"

Charlotte nodded at Fleur. Court followed them.

The floor had blood smears on it. Court looked straight at Nathan's corpse. He looked asleep.

The walls also held tell tale signs of injuries. They passed a man who was gurgling through a ripped throat. Court glanced at Fleur.

Charlotte paused when in view of the food hall. Court passed her and looked inside. The dome was black, no stars, no anything. Court did not know what this meant.

The men were huddled and that was the right word. They still outnumbered the women, perhaps two to one.

Twiss was sat apart. He looked at them and then his feet. His son still looked confident. Kaye was impassive, at least on the outside. The other men were sat alone or in small groups. The injured and the non combatants both. That was the difference that had defeated them.

Charlotte whispered something to Saskia and went down the metal steps. Court and Fleur followed. Saskia and the others waited.

“Who is in charge now boys?” Charlotte said.

Nobody answered.

“Are we going to carry on fighting or what?”

“I don’t know,” said Phillip.

“That’s up to you, sweetheart” said Charlotte. “I’m ready if you are.”

Kaye smirked.

Charlotte waved and the other women came down. They went for the food. Court looked for Fleur. She was taking food back to a cleared table. She was also taking cloth and piling it up.

Kaye said, “We think we’re approaching the hole now, the stars and all.” Court looked up. “Thing is we don’t know how long this will take but I don’t reckon we’ll notice any difference.”

“You said different before.”

Phillip stood up. He was much taller than Court.

Charlotte and Saskia came to stand by him.

“You sit down, honey,” Charlotte said. Phillip looked them over. His eyes went to his father.

“Mind me, now,” Charlotte said.

He sat.

“The other possibility is a moment in time being stretched out. As we near the damnable thing we’ll be locked in that moment. It’ll take an age to pass,” Kaye said.

“Will we be conscious of that?” Fleur had joined them. She leaned into Court. Kaye smiled a little and shrugged.

Fleur took Court’s arm and pulled him away. She took him to her table. She had made it into a tent. Cloth hung in various widths all around it anchored by platters. He pulled some aside and saw food and drink along with more cloth on the floor. She climbed in. She looked very small.

“Call me Wordy!”

Wordy was following Charlotte. The woman was drinking from a jug while walking over to the tobacco table.

“I saved you plenty. I always knew you ladies would win the day, hee haw!”

“Sure you did, honey.”

“Good luck there, Wordy,” Court whispered. He felt fingers brush his hand. He climbed into the makeshift tepee.

Fleur lay out on the cloth. He sat cross legged.

“You must be starving.”

“Hardly. I know what starving means. I’ll eat later.”

He nodded.

“That old man said we might get stuck in a moment in time.”

“He did,” Court said.

“An eternity.”

“Maybe not that long but I know what you mean.”

She rubbed at her eyes.

“Why don’t you sleep? I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“I’ll do that later too, if we get the chance.” She pulled him closer, her arms around his neck. “What do you want to spend eternity doing?”

The Seventh Sense.

Lacey Turner crossed the Square and went into Val's Tearoom. Val, a huge woman looked up from the counter and shook her head.

"What are you doing here?"

Lacey gave a smile and a little shrug. A shrug she often used and knew was cuter than babies with chocolate smeared faces.

"Can't stay away."

"Mad," said Val and began making tea in a large mug.

Lacey leaned over the counter and looked through to the kitchen.

"On your own?"

"Aye, Eloise is in town with that new boyfriend."

"The one with the eye patch?"

Val grunted.

"I've nothing to do. Mum's home and she's driving me nuts. Always going on at me for something."

Val put the mug before her. "Well, you're welcome as ever. Young girl like you should be out enjoying herself though."

"I am." And it was true. Lacey's year and a half as Val's waitress, occasional cook and verbal sparring partner had been a happy time.

The door opened and several elderly women came in.

"Want any help?"

"No, flower. Sit down and I'll bring you something."

Lacey sat at the table nearest the counter and watched the group of women settle. She didn't recognize any of them.

Lacey had lived in the village all her life. Working in Val's made her a kind of local celebrity. Everyone seemed to know her or about her. This was comforting in a way. A lot of her friends had already left the village for university or employment but she had never really felt the need to leave.

No ambition, her mum said. This was probably because she had more or less given up her own life for Lacey's feckless but loved father. The divorce had kicked her mother hard but barely grazed Lacey.

Val came over with a bacon sandwich (extra bacon, no sauce) and placed it in front of her with a big grin. Lacey slapped the laughing woman on her rear as she walked over to the group of ladies.

She bit into the sandwich, washing it down with gulps of tea.

The Square was the centre of the village and was as busy as she had ever seen it. The village was becoming ever more popular with coaches arriving most weekends, disgorging tourists and shoppers. The Norman castle, visible on the hill, was probably the main magnet although many decent shops had sprung up in the last two years.

The door jingled and two men came in. They were even older than the other customers. One was black, the other white. The black man took off a hat to reveal short grey hair. They went to the centre of the room and took a two seat table.

Val looked through and gave Lacey a nod. She grabbed her notebook from behind the counter and went over.

The white man looked her over with a smile. He ordered a steak pie with seasonal vegetables and coffee.

The other asked for a tuna salad.

"He eats salad because he thinks it'll help him live longer," the white man said.

Lacey smiled. The accent was strange. Lacey thought he might have originally come from overseas. His English was perfect. The formation of each word precise and formal, almost and island in itself, as if a very advanced machine was working its way through a menu of words driven by software that could reproduce but never understand the nuance of human speech.

She called the order. Val waved her away so she sat back down and finished her drink. A moment later Val gave her a huge cherry tart and another mug of tea.

The men thanked Val warmly when she gave them their meals.

Lacey watched them. She was a compulsive people watcher. The black man had spoken in a strong Yorkshire accent.

Val was delighted and went back to the kitchen. The black man caught Lacey's eye and winked. "Penny for your thoughts," he said doing the accent again.

"Cost you more than that."

"I'm sure."

Lacey looked out at the crowd. People of all ages, walking, chatting, running across the Square. A gang of youngsters were huddled in the centre, smoking and talking loudly enough for the odd word to reach her. They were talking about football and giggling like much younger children.

The sun had brightened considerably and the air had taken on an early summer feel despite the season. Lacey loved autumn. The changes in the trees, the colours and scents.

The old men had produced a chessboard and were struggling to find space for it between their empty plates and cups. Lacey got up to clear the table. She reached down and the white man knocked her hand into the chessboard.

"Sorry, young 'un" he said and his accent had also changed.

"No problem," she said, quite sure he had done it on purpose. The accent thing was wearing thin.

"I'll leave you a tip," he said.

For God's sake don't say a red hot tip, she thought.

She gave him her professional smile and quickly stacked the crockery.

The door opened and more customers filed in. Lacey did a head count and warned Val.

"Put your apron on, girl. I'm not paying overtime mind."

Lacey stuck her tongue out and went to deal with the new people.

The next hour and a half went by in a daze as more customers came and went. Lacey was called over four times by the chess players who ordered coffee and water. She noticed the pieces scattered over the board were more like lumps of stone than the usual cast of characters. She thought about commenting on it but they were still talking in ever broader Yorkshire accents and she was out of patience with it. Silly old sods.

Eloise came back in an effusive mood and was shocked to see how busy they were. She got changed in the flat above and came down ready to help. Another hour went by and the stream of the hungry continued.

Val was always over warm given her size but now she was practically melting. Lacey went in back and helped prepare the orders, darting back and forth to help mother and daughter.

She was washing down one table by the window when the commotion started. The boys she had seen earlier were arguing with another gang.

One boy shoved another and all hell broke loose. They seemed to be one mass of fists and feet. Others hurried out of the way making a no man's land around them.

Lacey opened the door and shouted for them to stop. Val called out she was ringing the police.

“Close the door,” said Eloise. “Leave them to it, the bloody idiots.”

Lacey wasn't the 'leave them to it' type but Eloise pulled her back and shut the door firmly.

The customers were craning their necks and some left their seats to watch.

The two men were hunched over concentrating on their game. Lacey felt a wave of nausea and staggered from it. Eloise saw and made her sit down. “Stay here,” she ordered.

Lacey rubbed at her eyes. Val came over and reinforced Eloise's command. Lacey said she was fine and no she didn't want any air. She agreed to water and to sit tight at least for a little while.

The chess players were whispering and smirking. She knew they were talking about her. She watched them play. She didn't indulge herself but from what she'd seen they were playing an unusually fast game, barely waiting for the other to move before countering. Occasionally they would stop and drink. They were in one of these periods when she noticed the board was wrong. It had extra spaces. Wasn't a chessboard the same as a draughts board? Yes it was, she was sure. She squinted, her stomach still lurching a little. The pieces were different. They had replaced them with others. She lifted herself up slightly to get a better look. They were now playing with misshapen human figures.

She jumped at a loud bang and saw two of the combatants had backed up to the window. She had forgotten the fight. She tried to get up but sat straight back down as the sickness returned tripled. She dry heaved, her stomach in uproar. When she looked up several police officers were dragging the boys apart. The others were nowhere to be seen. She watched them being taken to separate patrol cars that were parked almost opposite the tearoom, a place no other motorists were permitted to stop.

That was that. A nice afternoon laughing and joking with your mates ruined. No doubt for something minor.

Eloise gave her a bottle of water which she drank from deeply.

She burped and saw the old men looking at her. She felt a flash of embarrassment followed by anger. Pair of old creeps.

They went back to the game and she saw more new pieces. A shape too large to fit on one square and another long enough to cover four.

She swapped seats so she didn't have to look at them.

The Square was back to normal, still crisscrossed by reams of people. She sat until some strength returned and then risked standing. She was shaking but managed to get to the kitchen.

“You look terrible,” Val said.

“Go up to the flat and have a lie down,” said Eloise.

“Don't think I can make the stairs.”

“Keep still then,” said Val. “I'll ring your mum.”

“Don't you dare! I'm not going home until she's in bed.”

The next half an hour was much quieter.

Lacey sat with her head in her hands until she felt more like herself. She left the kitchen and wasn't surprised to find the tearoom empty except for the chess players. They didn't notice her and carried on, cackling and moving pieces quickly and smoothly. It was more akin to tennis than chess.

Lacey frowned at the board. She was sure she caught movement. She looked closely and saw what looked like an aircraft of some kind and a shape that was unmistakably a castle. She looked at the real castle through the window.

The men stared at her, their hands suspended over the board for seconds before continuing.

She checked the time on her watch and on the wall clock. Forty minutes and she would have the pleasure of asking them to leave.

“You like games of skill, Lacey?”

She nearly asked the black man how he knew her name but resisted. Obviously he had heard Val or Eloise say it.

“Not really.”

“Pity. I’d like to play with you.”

She flushed. Dirty old bugger. One more remark and she’d pour something cold where he would not appreciate it.

The black man sighed. “Got you, you old fraud,” he said.

“You think?”

The white man slid the aircraft and bumped the castle from the board.

The noise was deafening and Lacey’s heart skipped a beat. She was aware of Val and Eloise gaping at the window.

There was a huge cloud of smoke coming from the castle and she thought she could see flames. She rushed outside. Everyone in the Square was watching. She could see chunks of ancient masonry falling and spewing dust into the air.

She went back inside but Val was already on the phone.

“Good God,” Eloise said, her eyes riveted to the scene.

The old men laughed out and Lacey decided it was time they were going. She stalked over.

“Sorry gents but we’re going to have to close. I suggest you get out of the village if you can before the roads block up.”

“They won’t,” said the black man.

She started to ask him why and then stopped abruptly. They were both sat there in the café but not. She stumbled. She was on a mountain top beneath a scorching white sky. The chess players were huge and ancient. Slate coloured skin with long, bone arms stretching over a board covered with leathery hide. They were looking at her with vast yellow eyes rimmed vividly in red. She took a step backwards and watched them both stretch massive wings like monstrous peacocks. The wings were covered in powdery scales that shed with their movements.

She could see the old men like transparencies over the vision, wavering in and out of focus and then she was back. Val and her daughter were clucking and watching the drama outside.

The men turned back to the game.

Lacey went to the kitchen and splashed her face with water. She towelled and took a bottle of coke from the fridge.

She drank half of it before forcing herself from the kitchen.

She sat near the men. Val and Eloise were still rapt at the window.

The pieces blurred around the board. Lacey watched closely. The shapes changed every time they were moved. Two formed into rough car shapes. She winced as the white man knocked one into the other.

The crash was loud and very near. She made herself stay put as her colleagues hurried outside. Moments later she heard ambulances and fire engines.

Figures were appearing on the board. She saw people running by the window and a fight break out.

A building rose beneath the black man's furrowed hand looking very much like the village hall. It was immediately crushed. Lacey got up this time. The hall was across the Square. It looked unharmed at first glance but then she noticed cracks running along the Roman style pillars. They shattered and the front doors blew outwards, one hanging loose the other striking a man who was running towards the castle.

"Stop it!" she shouted.

"We didn't start it," the white man said.

"We go where we are invited," said the other.

Lacey knocked the table, scattering the board and pieces.

"Silly little bitch."

The white man took a deck of cards from his jacket. "It's the game that counts not the mode."

He placed one blank card in the middle of the table and deftly dealt the rest.

"I'll call the police!"

"Think the boys and gals in blue might be a tad busy right about now, miss," the black man said.

She almost screamed in frustration. She went out but couldn't see Val or Eloise anywhere. Two women were fighting outside the bank. They were kicking and had an equal hold on the other's hair. A dog ran by chased by two boys who were throwing stones at it.

She looked up and saw the sky had darkened in one area directly above. It was widening as she watched.

She saw a blur and felt a blow to her stomach. She was on her back, her head scraping the pavement. A man she recognized from around the village was trying to get on top of her. She screamed and grabbed at his hair. He tried to bite her hand but she got her feet under his body and shoved. She got to all fours and scabbled for the tearoom door. He swore and she felt his fingers on her back then she was up on her feet. She fell into the door, got it open and slammed it. She slid the bolt and jumped back as the man crashed into it. He grinned and licked the glass while rubbing at his crotch and then he was gone, racing across the Square whooping and laughing.

Lacey shook as she sat down. She touched her head and found blood in her hair.

The card game was well underway. They were dropping and picking up cards at the same breakneck speed. The card in the middle was darkening and rippling like fluid. A face formed slowly. Lacey got to her feet. It wavered as they had wavered in her brief vision.

"Good choice," said the black man.

"Appropriate." They grinned at her in tandem.

The face swam into focus. A middle aged woman with a pinched face and sour expression.

"Mum."

The white man said, "Don't take it personally."

"They always do."

Lacey's stomach fell. She felt a pain in her chest. A swelling pain that threatened to flatten her.

"Wherever we play," agreed the white man.

"Europe and the Americas. Asia and Africa," he looked at Lacey. "We've played in every country on the planet as is our right. We are older than the Earth, girl."

“Everywhere,” the white man said. “Everywhere except the walled garden. Could never get in that place, although it turned out fine in the end.”

The black man laughed, “It did that!”

Lacey staggered. Her head hurt, her stomach contracted.

“Who invited you?”

They turned back to the game.

The ground seemed to tip sharply. She crashed into a table and hit her mouth on a chair. Blood sluiced into her mouth.

“Almost there.” She couldn’t tell which of them had spoken. The voice had changed. There was no accent to it. Nothing human whatsoever, just words pronounced flatly.

She got up, the effort producing another gush of blood she let fall from her slackening mouth.

“I invited you,” her voice was thick and muffled, her lips swollen and purple.

She put a hand on the table inches from the card which was beginning to go beyond the two dimensional and look half alive. She felt tears drop as her mother’s eyes darted from side to side and locked on her.

“Now I want you to go away.”

They looked up, withered fingers poised over the cards.

She touched hands with the black man.

The world went quiet. Distant shouts died down. Lacey went to the window. The two women were still there, one on the ground. The other offered a hand and helped her to her feet. They looked dazed, confused and then ashamed.

The black man put his hat on while the white man put the cards away. They left money on the table.

Lacey stepped back as they walked by her. The white man left, the black man lingered.

“We had to come and meet you, Lacey. You’re a rarity and we have seen every type of human being.”

“Just go.” Fresh tears fell from sore eyes.

“Such a rare sense. The first five get you through life; the sixth drives a strong mind crazy but the seventh! Even we can’t stay around it for long.”

He went halfway through the door before turning back.

“Was worth a try though, Lacey. Be seeing you.”

She closed the door and slid the bolt again. The street was clear; the Square deserted whichever way she looked.

She wiped her face, smoothed her apron and began straightening the chairs and tables.

Thank you for reading *The Seventh Sense*.

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