

Dark Horizons



DH41
Spring 2002
edited by
Debbie Bennett

Dark Horizons

Published by the British Fantasy Society



Issue 41
Spring 2002

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Dark Horizons

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Editorial

Debbie Bennett

What they said about the last two issues of *Dark Horizons*:

‘Finished *Dark Horizons* the other day and again, it was a very good read. Favourites this time round were *In Her Eyes*, *The Baby Who Sang*, *Workshopping The Gorgon*, *Defenceless* and *Children Of Tomorrow*.’

‘Every story was at least enjoyable (a rarity in any mag) and most were better than that; *Children Of Fortune* was one of the best stories I’ve ever seen in a small press (hope you don’t mind the term) mag. Other superb stories from Paul Lewis, Stuart Young and LR Davies among others. And the cover was absolutely wonderful.’

‘I particularly liked *Dun’s Pictures*, which had a really nasty chill factor, and *Frights in Light Latin* – silly and clever at once.’

‘Congratulations on *Dark Horizons*. The stories are unfailingly excellent. Dark and wintry, challenging and complex with such laces of ghoulish humour. They dance on that stiletto edge that separates life and death and peer into the abyss without trembling.’

So well done and thanks to all the authors and artists so far.

This month’s magnificent cover art was done just for us by Steve Lines and influenced by the recent *Lord of the Rings* epic film. I think it really does the film credit. Steve’s work includes music and lyrics (is this man talented, or what?) and you can buy his CDs and books from Rainfall Records, 28 Churchill Close, Calne, Wiltshire SN11 8EN or check out www.bigfoot.com/~Stormclouds. More of artist Dee Rimabud’s work can be found at <http://visionary.writernetwork.com> and <http://artist.writernetwork.com>

On the subject of art, can I correct Lara’s name please? She illustrated Paul Lewis’ story last issue and I printed her name as Lara Bandillo, when it should in fact be Lara Bandilla. Many apologies for the error. There’s more of Lara’s work in this issue or you can check out www.philosophers-today.com/larabandilla.html Sarah Zama’s art has featured in many BFS publications, and while Chris Leaper is new to *Dark Horizons*, I expect to be using his work again too. I wish I could draw half as well as these guys!

So enjoy the latest batch of stories and keep them coming in.

Debbie
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Heretic

Martyn Prince

illustrated by Dee Rimbaud

I turn a corner and find a familiar face staring back at me, much like my own. For a moment there is recognition, a kinship. But quickly it turns to fear and hatred when it sees the company I keep.

‘It cannot be!’ he says.

‘It’s the only way,’ I reply.

Beneath my iron another falls, the fifth today and more to come. There’s blood on my hands, but my soul is clean.

Exhausted.

‘No more,’ I say. ‘No more.’

But there’s always more.

Fish to the left of me. Fish to the right. Screaming my name.

How different it all is now; how much has changed since the beginning.

Yet how much is really the same.

That’s the one part of the job I never liked. The beating. But it was nearly always necessary. Rarely would any of them come quietly. Can’t blame them, of course; they all knew what the Inquisition would do once they were caught. But that didn’t stop it being hard, and I’m not a violent man by any means.

I’d always try reasoning with them, even at the last moment. ‘Come quietly and it will go easier for you,’ I’d say. Then I’d hit them – once across the backs of the legs if they were still running, or across the hands if they’d stopped and turned to face me. The Enquirer Seven I used was the standard issue mace for Stalkers like me, and in the right hands it could make its mark without causing too much damage. Small but sturdy, and I never lost a spike in over twenty years.

But then the crying would start, and I’d look down at my mace and regret what I’d done. That was my weakness.

Some people said that it wasn’t their fault, that they’d been coerced by the Fish and didn’t know what they were doing. Some said they were just rejects – retrograde fanatics that resisted the Changes and the new ways of life. Lunatics, blasphemers, villains and heretics. Whatever they were, it was still hard to look at someone crying, despite what the book said.

And that’s when I’d go soft. That’s when I’d slip the cowl off my head and let them see my face. It always helped. There were still so many that didn’t even think we were human.

‘It’s okay,’ I’d say, calming them down as much as I could. ‘I’ve got something that will help.’

That would always work. They'd stop crying in an instant, clinging to the hope that maybe things weren't that bad after all, that perhaps there was a chance. But then I'd get out the pills and they'd understand what I meant.

The Stalkers called them 'gushers'. The Fish had a different name I think, but either way they were the best option by far. 'Place the pill underneath your tongue and hold it there until the casing melts.' I tried to make these instructions sound as caring as I could.

They never asked any questions. They always seemed to know what would happen, though I'd never heard of anyone bearing witness to the results and living to tell the tale. Less than a minute it took; fifty-four seconds from the moment the casing cracked. And then the blood would come. Every vein, every artery; a simultaneous eruption both inside and out. It was a sight to behold and, despite what you'd think, a blessing for the victim. They never even knew what hit them. And better to face the effects of the pill than come along with me.

So it went on.

That was me.

Twenty years as a Stalker. A member of the Duchy elite. Pride of the Pit. An unblemished record.

Until the incident at the church.

It was a Friday afternoon, not two hours before I'd be finishing up for the weekend. I'd even packed up my things and stashed them in the boot of my car, eager as I was to be on my way. In typical fashion, that's when the call came through, the Duke's voice crackling over the radio with grim intent. Seven Fish had gone to ground in the abandoned church at the corner of Kingston Road and the High Street, just down from the river where the children still ran cross-country from the local school.

I was local too. I knew the church and it was a real hole, a stinking pit the likes of which were almost forgotten since the Changes – not worth pulling down when it was too dirty to be an insult to the Duchy.

I cursed under my breath, and acknowledged the call with as little enthusiasm in my voice as I could manage. By way of return, the Duke grunted an incomprehensible reply, though I fancied I caught a few choice insults before the radio died.

This was typical, I thought – farm out the worst jobs on the Stalkers when everyone else had gone home. And this weekend was worse than most. Saturday, October 31st – Halloween. Party time at the Pit. A national day of rest and reward. Every Stalker from every duchy would be out trying to bring in his own batch of renegades. Even if I wrapped this one up quickly and without any fuss, I'd still be stuck in Admissions for most of the night.

Come to think of it, I'd be lucky if I was finished before Monday.

I'd cleaned a hundred churches in my time – old ones, ruined ones, ones that had

been built just a few years before the Changes. I'd taken out Fish by the dozen. Sometimes there was only one; others, a hundred. And only once had I ever have needed to call for backup or to pop an extra stim-pill into my mouth. For all my weaknesses, I was good at my job and I knew what I was doing. Twenty years' experience had shown my everything.

But in all that time I'd not seen one like this.

This church was an insult. Desecrated.

I felt the wrench in my gut as everything I held true was flaunted before me.

On the wall outside, perhaps a dozen years earlier, someone from the Duchy had done the decent thing. A great wooden crucifix had been upturned and nailed to the crumbling stone above the doorway, a good ten feet above the cobbled pathway and in full view of passers-by, even from the road. And just to keep unlawful hands at bay, an array of mace heads had been hammered into the surrounding wall to make climbing impossible.

But despite the precautions, despite the care of the Duchy, it was there – the usual mark, the desecration – sprawled across the upturned wooden chest of Detestable Christ, with a telltale drip of glistening white paint marking the crown of thorns, blighting the last of the autumn sun.

They had a nerve, that much was certain. No one risked the punishment for desecration unless they had taken leave of their few remaining senses. Even I didn't like to think about it, and I'd seen the worst the Inquisitors were capable of.

But there it was, bold as the Pit.

That damned fish. Their symbol.

I cursed under my breath, gritting my teeth as I went inside.

'Good afternoon,' I said, standing just over the threshold and letting my eyes become accustomed to the shadowy interior. Light still filtered through stained glass that had become dirty beyond recognition, supplemented by shattered frameworks and crumbling stone. Pointed shards illuminated my surroundings, slowly picking out the worst features, so it seemed.

Silence greeted me, not that I expected much else. They weren't likely to welcome me in with open arms, despite what they preached. And I'd been in this position before. Silence, followed by the pathetic attempts at ambush, then later by the inevitable fleeing or straightforward resignation. So predictable.

'Good afternoon,' I said again, this time drawing out my mace so that the chain rattled against itself for the benefit of any ears turned my way. There were only seven, so the Duke said. I probably wouldn't even need the mace at all. In truth, I only ever used it as a visual warning or for those taster shots across knuckles and knees. But today, having seen the mark outside, I felt the urge. They were bold and they were fearless or they'd have never left the sign. And bold enough, perhaps, to have hidden strength, and that was something I had to be wary of at least. No point getting careless in my old age.

I'd still give them the chance to come quietly though, like I always did, but

there'd be no option for a gusher. No quick and easy way out that might give them the chance to try something else. No, not for them. Hiding was one thing, desecration was another. Even I had my standards.

I was about to call out again when the first one came towards me. A tall, broad beamed figure in white cloth robes, dusty and marked now from the rubble of the church, but white nevertheless. His head, higher than my own by nearly a foot, was half shielded by a mess of unruly curls, and only the presence of a tangled headband kept it from his eyes.

He came out from the shadow of an upended pew and marched with bold steps into the faded light filtering in from above. It was a bold move for a heretic, confronting a Stalker unarmed and bare faced. Most would come in from the side, trying to surprise me with sudden moves and a stealthy approach. I almost felt a twinge of respect for him. Anyone whose faith was strong enough to put them face to face with the Duchy's best was not to be underestimated.

For that reason alone I allowed him to approach me, to come within a few feet of my brandished mace, and all without the benefit of my traditionally searing glances from beneath the cowl.

It was then I saw the other one.

He was a small man. Perhaps only five feet tall, yet he moved with a speed and grace I'd associate with much loftier men. He'd followed the bulky form of his friend out from the shadows, hiding behind his girth as they walked. Only when they came within arm's reach of me did he make himself known, darting out from behind his companion's cassock and sprinting to my rear.

I was curious, intrigued – if only by his guile. I let it happen. They could not have been aware of just how quick my reactions were. They could never have appreciated how much I really saw. To me, these peasants merely crawled. My stim-pill had been firmly ensconced beneath my tongue even before I left the confines of my car. And the adrenaline flowed well.

I let it happen. I let it proceed until the little one was behind me, getting himself into position for...

An old trick. Put the first one down behind you, then let the second push you over him. A normal man would go toppling, or at least be unbalanced by the speed at which they moved. Not I – I had time on my side.

I turned to face the little one as he slipped past me, acrobatically diving to the floor and positioning himself without so much as a sound. And I'd already felt the hands of the giant rise up to push me. I'd smelt the move. I'd felt his essence as he attempted the action that would bring me down. So I let that happen too. I let him push me, but instead of clumsily stumbling over his prostrate friend, I leapt – I leapt over him and somersaulted to the other side.

I resisted the urge to laugh at the ease of my movement, not wanting the distraction of echoes. Instead I spun around, drawing my mace high into the air before my startled attackers. I paused briefly, enough to see – to understand the expression on the faces of the startled Fish. It was one I'd seen before.

Determination. Grim determination of spirit. Instantly I knew: these were not the kind who'd listen to reason, these were not the sort of Fish to take the easier option.

So I didn't give them the chance.

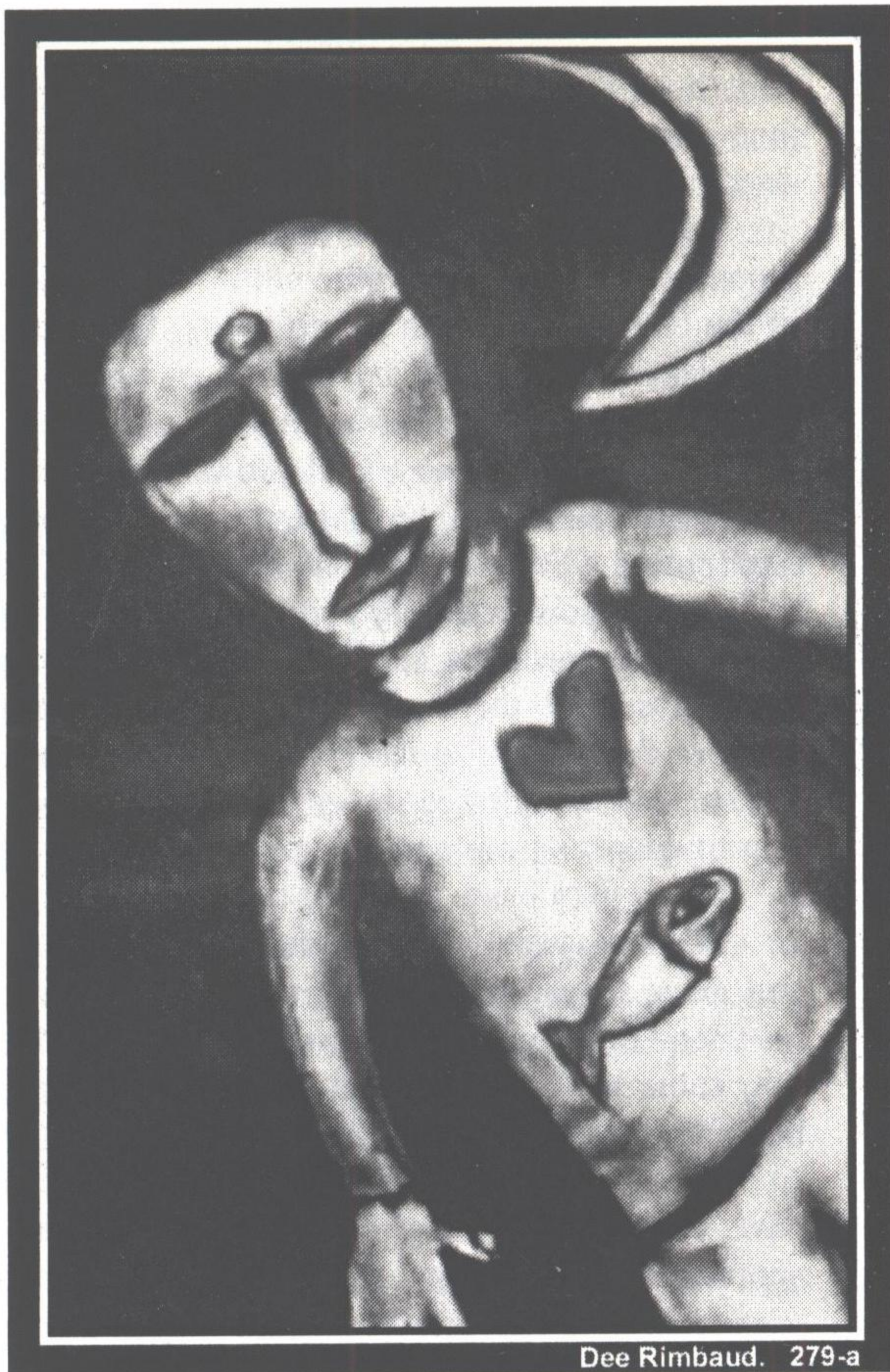
I brought the pointed head of my Enquirer Seven hard down upon the little one's back, shattering his spine with a single blow and splattering his blood across the white cassock of his bulky friend. The sound of shattering bone filled the church.

But the giant was not daunted. He came at me with the instinct of a fighting man, bearing down upon me with considerable force. My respect grew, yet I had already left the arena of the fight before he could close his bear-like grip about my person. Mimicking the move the midget had attempted, I darted around his cumbersome structure and positioned myself low at his rear, waiting for him to turn his bulk to face me. And when he did, when he'd swung himself around and found me gone from site, I struck. I struck hard and true, swiping upwards with the mace and opening his skull from jaw to forehead.

It was over before it had really begun.

'That's a fine greeting from a Fishman, isn't it?' I said out loud when I had recovered my composure. My voice echoed back from the crumbling rafters and bounced across the walls. 'Surely you should want to talk first, or to offer me a perverse salvation? Come out and face me, and it will go all the better for you when we reach the Pit.'

The first rustling came a few moments after. They would have realised by then that there was no point in resisting me. They would know that violence and aggression would be pointless. I had seen to that quickly. So I readied myself for an onslaught of a more subtle nature as the first human shadows lengthened from



Dee Rimbaud. 279-a

the back of the church.

I was not to be disappointed, nor could I have been any more shaken.
The Duke had said nothing about children.

They emerged in unison – two cassocked women and three shabbily robed children. The women were in their thirties; the offspring – three girls – little more than eight or nine. The two men I'd just killed were doubtless their protective fathers and, in mere moments, I had made orphans of the children and widows of their doting mothers. It was not something I gave much thought to as a rule. I cared little for the families of the dead because a Stalker was rarely called for when women and children were the quarry. Likewise their fates were even less my concern, and I tried not to think about them too often. Pain was one thing, but for them it was so much worse.

The Inquisition had special methods.

In the face of children, my anger at the desecration had dissipated. My mood had altered almost at once, and I had to make a conscious effort to regain my former stance. Stalking is not a job you can do when you feel sympathy for your charges. I resolved there and then that I would do what I could to make it easier for them, despite what that meant. Placing a gusher beneath a child's tongue would not be a pleasant task.

'You would have done well to attack me also,' I said to the first woman, a tall, fair-haired creature not unattractive by Duchy standards despite the robes. 'For at least then you might die screaming, which is far better than you'll get from anyone else.'

She fixed her eyes upon me sternly. 'Is there a greater punishment than widowhood and the care of fatherless children?'

What was this? Questions? I never got questions before, only pleas and cries and continual wailing. Things I understood.

I raised my mace so that they could all see it, the spiked head swinging in the light and spilling droplets of blood onto the dusty floor.

'Is that meant to frighten us?' said the second woman. 'Or is it merely to act on your behalf in the timely death you so kindly offered?' This one fixed me with a stare also – a bright-eyed glare that made me shudder beneath my cowl. What manner of Fish were these that they could suffer the death of two of their number yet still have the strength to face me so boldly? The children too – they seemed calmer than I would have expected, almost resolved to the destruction I carried with me.

I didn't know what to say. I had just killed their husbands and murdered their fathers, yet still they found the time to stand and talk. And on top of this I felt... guilt. A lowlier emotion no Stalker would admit to.

Damn them, it shook me.

'Like I said, you should have attacked me.'

'And what would that achieve?' It was Fairhead that spoke again. 'Would it

help if we rid the world of one of you, only to have him replaced by another?’

‘Do you actually want to suffer?’ I asked. ‘Is that how you people live, waiting for the end?’

‘The end comes to us all,’ she said. ‘It is how you live that matters.’

I was angry now. Confrontation was never part of my job description. ‘And you live by heresy!’ I snapped. ‘You think your actions are good and lawful? Vandalism, subversion?’

‘Our actions are true to what we believe, the same as yours.’

‘My actions do not involve desecrating public buildings and blatant opposition to all that holds society together.’

‘Society? You mean the Duchy?’ Now it was the second woman again – Brighteyes – and she had sarcasm in her voice the likes of which I would have killed many a man for. But not now, not in front of the children.

‘The Duchy is the rule here,’ I said. ‘The Duchy is the rule everywhere, since the Changes.’

‘Ah yes,’ she sneered, ‘the Changes. Such a benefit to the world.’

I’d heard this argument many times, though never to my face. Everyone knew the world had nowhere to go before. People were weak, apathetic, indifferent to all that would make them flourish. War was the only constructive thing mankind ever did, so the Changes embraced it and took it to new levels, bringing out the driving forces and freeing the dark spirits to roam the earth unhindered by moral fibre. It was a stronger world, a better world. And there was no place for the unbelievers but the Pit and all its instruments of death.

Yet for all that I felt sorrow for the people before me, clinging to their ancient gods and their secret signs, clinging to their pathetic beliefs even in the face of death... or worse.

‘If you’re so sure the changes were a bad thing, why hide yourself in secret codes and hidden chapters? Why not stand up and be counted?’

‘We did,’ said Fairhead again, ‘and we were struck down for our trouble. We preach forgiveness, yet we were never forgiven. We preached compassion instead of war, yet were shown no such kindness ourselves.’

‘You fought with strength as well,’ I said, pointing to the bodies at their feet and remembering the uprisings of the past. Great swathes of Fish had marched on governments around the world. Violence had been no stranger to the Fish’s cause. They weren’t so innocent. ‘Your husbands stood against me, to protect you, and they embraced the darkness inside them or they would not have got as far as they did.’

‘We fight with desperation and compassion,’ she said. ‘We have nothing else left. These men you have taken this day – they are not our husbands. You killed them a long time ago, offering them salvation only in the form of pills that would make their bodies explode with blood.’

She talked about men I had killed myself, for I was the only Stalker who might offer the chance for such an easy death. That was the act that had left them

widowed and the children fatherless, not the slaughter of today over which they stood so easily.

My guilt should have vanished by now. I had done nothing wrong, only my job.

But it didn't.

'You killed them and left us and our children defenceless,' she continued. 'Yet the kindness of our people led others to help us. Men with compassionate hearts willing to protect us. That is what we fight with, and it's something your kind will never understand.'

One of the children, a girl – the smallest – walked towards me and stood at my leg, her hands gripping the foot of my cowl and tugging at it gently. She was young, much younger than the others, I noticed. No more than six, I thought. Too young to understand what was happening. Too young to be afraid of the mace above her head.

'When you die,' she said, 'do you want to go to heaven?'

I looked to the two women, not knowing which was the girl's mother. 'Is this what you preach?' I asked, almost despairingly. 'Heaven for the dead?'

'Of course,' said Fairhead.

'Heaven is in ruins,' I said. 'It crumbled along with your churches. Only the Pit is real, its fiery depths a melting pot for all the faithful to rise again.' I knew that I sounded like a preacher, one of the devout who spouted this stuff from morning to night to anyone who would listen. It sounded real, most of the time. Honest and true. In front of the Fish, I wasn't so sure.

'And flames of torment for the heretics, yes?' enquired Brighteyes, shooting a look of distaste in my direction.

'Yes,' I said. I tried to make it defiant, to make my stand. My manner fell short of the mark.

'And you are comfortable with this segregation of Hell? You are assured that Satan himself will distinguish between his own legions, and that the Pit will be a mercy for some and a damnation for others?'

'Yes,' I said. I was sure. I had always been sure.

'And the reward for your acts on earth will be this melting pot?' said Fairhead.

'Yes,' I said. I was always so sure.

'And if you fail?'

'I don't fail!' I snapped, suddenly defending myself.

'Yet you offer kindness instead of death to our children?' Brighteyes gestured towards the three girls, the smallest still standing beneath me, in the very presence of her own demise. I looked down, trying to see only her shape and form, not the light behind her eyes that would make her a child.

But those eyes stared back. They stared at the Stalker and were not afraid.

Did she know? Could she understand that there was no part of me beneath the cowl that could truly strike her down? Did she realise that, even if she had

attacked me like I asked, I would still have struggled?

‘Sometimes there is no need for the worst,’ I reasoned.

‘You show compassion then?’ said Fairhead.

I didn’t answer. What answer could I give? I was always so sure.

‘You show compassion, and compassion is a sin since the Changes, is it not?’

‘Compassion is a sin,’ I agreed, ‘but my work is good and true and I will be forgiven for my lapses!’

‘Lapses? More than one?’

I was always so sure.

‘Yes,’ I admitted, as if standing shamefaced before the Duke himself. ‘More than one.’

‘And what of forgiveness?’

‘What of it? I see no forgiveness in my actions.’

‘If you did not forgive your victims – your many victims – for their heresy, then how could you show them compassion?’

‘I did what I thought was right. If that is forgiveness—’

‘And forgiveness is a trait of God!’ snapped Brighteyes.

I could see which way their argument was heading, but I was ready.

‘And this God of yours killed millions for their lack of faith, did he not?’

‘So you find similarities when it suits, but ignore them when it doesn’t?’

‘I see no similarities, woman!’

‘Yet you hand out compassion, rely on the forgiveness of your master in the Pit and find solace in the actions of God himself when they appear as unholy as your own!’

That was it. I’d had enough. The conflict. The reasoning.

I raised my mace into the air, holding it high above the little girl’s head.

She looked up at me, knowing little of the death that hovered above her, knowing nothing of the ease at which her tiny skull would crack beneath my mace.

And then I lowered my arm, letting the mace fall weakly at my side.

Reaching inside my cowl, I retrieved my box of gushers, holding them up to the light. ‘Do you know what these are?’ I said, resignedly.

The two women looked at each other as if consolidating their response. ‘We call it the Crimson Sleep,’ said Fairhead. ‘And we wondered if it was really true.’

‘If what was true?’ I asked.

‘The effects of the pill are well known to us, but it was rumoured that hereabouts a Stalker carried them with him as an act of kindness to the suffering. We wondered if, after all, it was really true and if such a man could truly exist.’

‘And what of it? What if I am the man of whom you speak?’

‘It is proof of your compassion. Proof of your faith.’

‘Faith? Faith in what?’

‘Faith in your own soul. Faith in the salvation that might await you for relieving the suffering of others, despite your allegiances.’

I was sweating now. Something in what they said affected me, that much was clear. It was true – I did want to relieve their suffering, but only because I saw no reason for its existence. Nothing more. And I was as determined to enter the Pit as any man in the Duchy, and confidant of entry into the melting pot where I would...

Something moved inside me. It was only slight but I felt it. A shift. An alteration. I put it down to the effects of the stim-pill wearing off, to the fetid air in the church.

But that wasn't it, I knew.

I pleaded to the unseen presence of the Duke, to the Lord of the Pit himself, who had been my guiding darkness since it all began. I pleaded for the strength to do my duty, to kill as I had been taught.

But my pleas went unanswered.

'We came here for you,' said Fairhead. 'We came here for the Stalker who showed compassion.'

I was always so sure. So devout.

But not any more.

Not any more.

'Come,' I said, tucking the pills back inside my cowl and checking over my shoulder as if the Devil himself might have been watching my progress. 'I have to take you from this place.'

They followed meekly. Right at that moment I didn't know what I was going to do, whether it was death or salvation that awaited them at my hands. Part of me, no matter how small, just wanted to leave them there, to go back to the bosom of the Duchy and say that they were all dead by my hand, resisting arrest. They'd believe me. No one questions a Stalker. We answer only to the Pit.

And part of me just wanted to run.

I shuffled them all inside my car. The two women climbed into the back and took the two tallest children with them. The littlest one, the girl who had stood beneath my cowl, climbed in the front and sat beside me. Still looking.

I drove for a mile or so, away from the church and up towards the town. Everything seemed normal, yet somehow I saw it in a different light. More quizzical, I was. More awake.

People were busily going about their final business of the day. The sun had gone now, the street lamps casting their yellow glow down upon the shoppers and merchants. The stores and markets were still open, of course – and business was good. The record store booming with its supply of pro-Duchy rants, the bastardised Gregorian chants that preached the new ethics of the Pit. The chemists and drug vendors offered all manner of self-destruction for the weak – gushers for the terminally cowardly, or the over-dosed sleeping drafts for the infirm. 'Get out while the going's good!' the neon shouted. 'Free your soul for the warriors of the Pit!'

‘Life is overrated.’

Local Duchy offices and those of the Ministry of the Pit had their presence on the high street too. Windowless buildings with bar-fronted doors; the Inquisition logo painted on blackened wood and bearing the slogans of hatred and war. Anyone could enter the store; surrender to the Pit if their soul was unclean.

Was this how it was across the world? It was a question I had never asked myself. And yet somehow I knew the answer.

It was.

This was the world, full of hate. Fighting against itself, for the pleasure of the fight. For the ethics of the Pit. And what was my part in it?

Where did I stand?

Regular Duchy cops patrolled both sides of the street looking for Fish and Fish sympathisers as was their way, their eyes searching out every nook and cranny, every shop doorway for their sacred mark. They were a credit to the Duchy. Slow but honest; stupid but devout.

But even they would stop what they were doing and join the clamouring throng for what came next.

Ahead, a fellow stalker gave chase to a white-robed figure as it ran across the street. It was a furious pursuit. Many pedestrians went flying as both figures went crashing into them, their very speed a weapon in itself. But this pursuit was soon to be at an end. Likely as not it had gone on for some time already, for the pace slowed with obvious exhaustion as they came upon impassable blockades of people. And I knew the methods to be employed.

I saw the Fish take cover in the doorway of the munitions shop, where imported slave labour wrestled with the latest developments of our Duchy’s warlords. In moments he had collapsed, and the Stalker, still standing, began beating him savagely, his Enquirer Seven rising and falling in movements of quick succession. And all to the applause of the shoppers and merchants and cops who had stopped to congratulate the Stalker on his prowess.

I stopped the car just out of sight of the throng, where I could still see the movements of the Stalker. He was a fine specimen of our profession. Relentless. Pride of the Pit.

I turned to the little girl at my side. ‘Is there forgiveness for him in heaven?’ I asked, gesturing towards my colleague.

‘Yes,’ answered the little girl. ‘If he wants it.’

‘And what about the men at the church? What about the things I did to them? Will I go to heaven for that?’

‘Do you want to?’

My eyes flared. What sort of question was that? Heaven was in ruins!

Suddenly my mind reeled backwards, to my job, to my motivation. The Pit is good. The Changes were good. Heaven is in ruins. The Pit is all that awaits me.

And the Pit is good.

‘The Inquisition will deal with you!’ I snapped at her. ‘Heaven is in ruins,

and the Pit is—’

‘But do you want to?’ she said again, ignoring my outburst and fixing her clear, untroubled eyes on my own.

I felt her soul upon my own.

‘Yes,’ I said.

I drove forwards again, pulling the car up a few yards back from the scene in the shop doorway. The road had become blocked by the throng. I could go no further in any case.

Slipping from the driver’s seat, I locked the door behind me keeping the Fish safe inside. Then I pushed my way through the crowd until I was standing behind the furiously pounding Stalker.

I tapped him on the shoulder.

‘What?’ he shouted, angry at the interruption to his work and rounding on me furiously. His face was savagely purple, and splattered with the blood of his victim. I thought he might attack me there and then, but when he saw that it was a fellow Stalker, one of the elite, he softened and threw down his mace.

‘Do you like it?’ he said, kneeling and pointing to the bloody pulp where the Fish’s face had once been. It was a horrible sight, the worst I’d seen at the hands of my brethren. The head of his mace leaked blood and gore on to the concrete, so encrusted had it become. It almost made me sick.

‘Not really,’ I said. ‘I always tried to give them the option of taking a gusher.’

A few people in the crowd drew breath. They’d never heard a Stalker preach compassion before.

My bloodstained colleague laughed briefly. ‘Why use a gusher when you can achieve the same results with a bit of hard work, eh?’

He pointed back to the bloody corpse, still chuckling. But something in his manner told me that he wasn’t too happy with my compassionate views. And as I watched, so his hand reached back down for the mace, fingering the iron grip almost absentmindedly.

Then he knew. Somewhere inside his skull there was recognition. I could almost hear the wheels of his mind turning.

With reactions trained to perfection, he spun upon his heels brought himself up to full height. The crowd about us gasped as the mace, so quickly retrieved, swung high above his head ready to come crashing down upon my skull.

But I was too quick for him. I had the advantage. I knew what I was there for, where as he could only guess. And I’d popped a stim-pill into my mouth before I left the car, where his must have been exhausted by the recent chase.

He didn’t even see my Enquirer Seven as it leapt from my robe, not until it had entered the side of his head.

I slipped back into the car amidst confused shouts and heckles from the crowd.

They were unsure of what had happened. They couldn't understand it, even if they knew. But the face of a Stalker, even mine, was enough to keep them at bay for at least a moment or two.

Enough time to escape. Enough time to run.

But run where? Was there really anywhere I could go? Was there anything I could do? I had killed a Stalker, setting myself apart from all that I'd held true. I had forsaken the Pit for the salvation of the Fish. And could they really save a soul like mine? Was there enough compassion in the world for that?

No time to think. Just time to run. Flee the Duchy, save the Fish. Join their number. Lend them my strength and be their guide. It was still my world, and in it they would be dead before long without decent help.

As we drove past the shop doorway, with frightened bystanders backing away, I looked and saw the crumpled body of the Stalker. 'What about that?' I said to the little girl at my side. 'Will I be forgiven for that too?'

I felt four pairs of hands touch my shoulders from the back of the car, the firm pressure a reassurance, a comfort. I looked down to my left and received the warm gaze of the child, her eyes picking out and reflecting the diminishing street lamps as we left the confines of the town, heading into the uncertain night.

'Especially for that,' they all said.

I turn a corner and find a familiar face staring back at me, much like my own. For a moment there is recognition, a kinship. The hooded cowl and brandished mace; the symbol of the Pit.

But quickly there is fear and hatred. And soon there is death.

'It cannot be!' he cries.

'It's the only way,' I say.

Beneath my iron another falls, the fifth today and more to come. Their blood is on my hands, but my soul is clean.

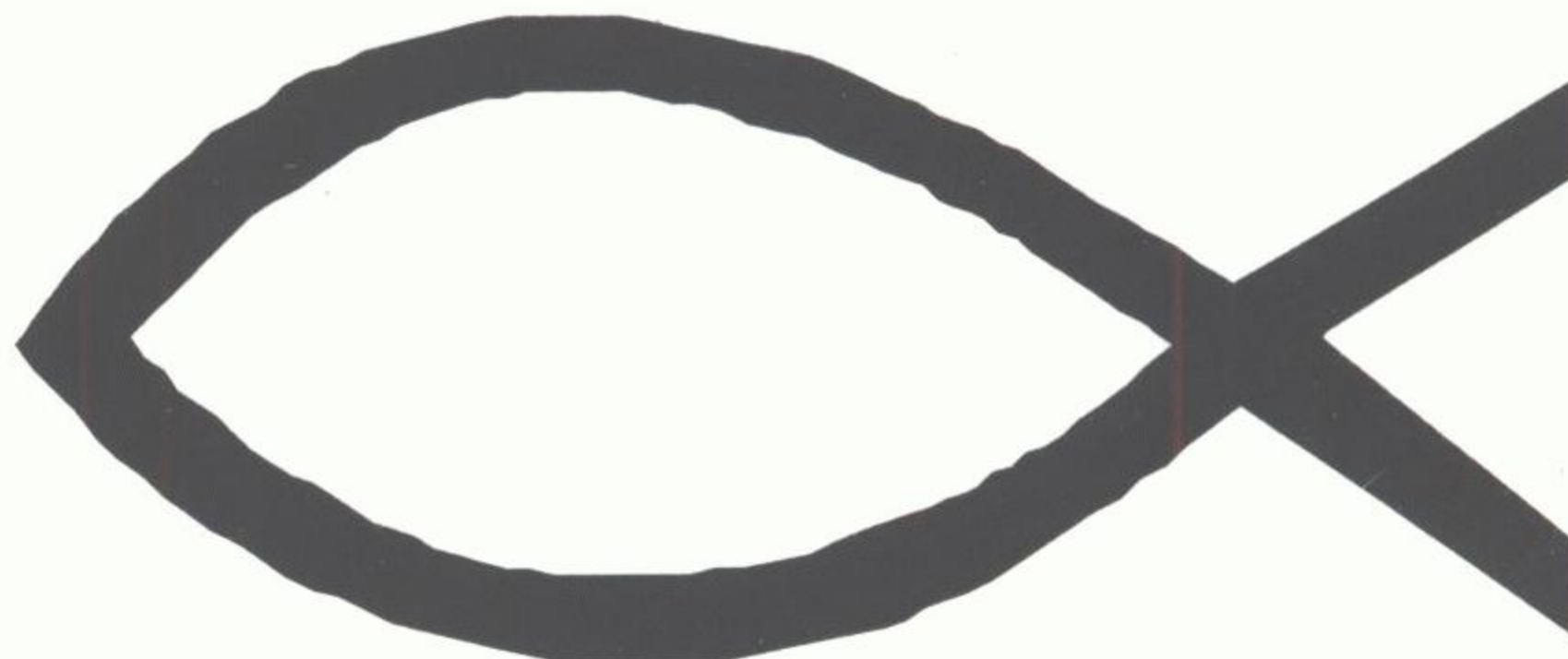
'No more,' I say. 'No more.'

But there is always more.

Fish to the left of me. Fish to the right. Screaming my name, praising my glory.

How different it all is now.

Yet how much is really the same.



The Teeth Park

Ray Clark

‘That’s it...!’ Gerald slammed his knife and fork down on the table and caught the edge of his dinner plate with a resounding clang, splattering gravy as far as the portable television in the corner of the room. On the screen, Coronation Street’s Fred Elliott looked as if he was suffering the effects of a plague.

‘I’ve had enough!’ shouted Gerald.

‘For God’s sake, Gerald, what’s wrong now?’ asked Sarah, his wife of thirty-seven years.

‘Same as always,’ grunted Gerald, glaring at her. ‘They’re uncomfortable! They give me ulcers – and – they just don’t feel right!’ He cradled his head in his hands.

Sarah placed her knife and fork on the table and mopped at the globules of gravy on her chest. ‘Don’t be silly, Gerald. You’ll need time to get used to them.’ She was beginning to feel the strain herself. For thirty-six years of their married life she’d had no cause for complaint; in the last year however, Gerald had undergone pioneering technology – against his better wishes – which had enabled him to have false teeth fitted permanently in place; since then, he had become unbearable.

‘I’ve had long enough,’ he replied, glancing upwards, before quietly adding, ‘And that’s not all.’

‘What do you mean, that’s not all?’ She recognised from his tone that it wasn’t just another minor grievance.

‘I didn’t want to say anything.’ Gerald folded his arms and rested them on the table.

‘About what?’ Sarah’s stomach tightened.

‘The dream...’

‘What dreams? What are you talking about, Gerald?’ Sarah was confused; she sipped from a glass of red wine.

‘Since I’ve had my teeth, I’ve been having a strange dream.’ He was staring blankly at the television screen, paying little heed to the characters.

‘Oh, Gerald ... I think it’s stretching things a bit too far to blame the nightmares on your false teeth.’ Sarah was relieved. She had thought for one awful moment that he was going to blame his eccentric moods on some terminal illness.

‘I knew you’d dismiss it,’ replied Gerald.

‘And for good reason, Gerald, dear. Do you seriously expect me to believe that you’re having nightmares because of your obsession with your false teeth?’ Sarah had resumed eating, convinced that it was simply another moan.

‘Not dreams in plural, just one. Always the same one.’

‘What is this dream?’

‘A car crash. I’m out on a winding country lane, I don’t know where. There’s a girl in the car with me, I don’t know who she is. We drive up to a bridge over a river. As we cross the bridge some idiot comes out of nowhere, forces me off the road. We both scream ... and then I wake up.’

Once again, Sarah placed her knife and fork on the table, perplexed about her husband’s health and state of mind. ‘What car ... which girl?’

‘I’ve just told you! I don’t know the girl, or where we are,’ he said, becoming more agitated.

‘You’ve never told me any of this before.’

‘I didn’t want to worry you.’

‘Gerald, I’m your wife for pity’s sake!’ Her tone softened. ‘Look, I’m sure it’s just coincidence, but if you’re not convinced, go back and see the dentist.’

‘I have. He says the same as you, I need more time to adjust. He says they’re the best on the market ... look real, feel real, can’t be faulted. I haven’t told him about the dream.’

Gerald seemed embarrassed about admitting it, even to Sarah.

‘I should think not. It’s a phobia. You’ve had it all your life, ever since your father’s embarrassing episode.’

‘It’s got nothing to do with my father!’ shouted Gerald.

Like Gerald, his father had been a music hall entertainer in London’s West End. The embarrassing moment to which Sarah referred was a meeting with King George V in 1934. The king walked down the line shaking everyone’s hand after the performance. As he drew level, Gerald’s father suffered a serious coughing fit and his teeth landed in the monarch’s hands.

‘I hate false teeth!’ continued Gerald, his anger still fuelled. ‘Always have, always will. I really can’t abide them. For God’s sake, they’ve made my life a bloody misery! Can’t talk, can’t eat, can’t sleep. I bloody well had to retire because of them! I’m sick of it, why the hell did it have to happen to me?’ He slammed his fist hard on to the surface of the table, causing his plate to bounce.

‘Gerald!’ Shouted Sarah, ‘Calm down! If you’re that bothered go and see Peter. I’m sure he’ll help. At least he’ll put your mind at rest.’

Peter Noble was a family friend of twenty years; he also happened to be a psychiatrist.

A week later, following relentless pressure from Sarah – and the threat of divorce proceedings – Gerald was in Peter’s Harley Street office.

Like most Harley Street offices it was executively furnished with dark wood, leather Chesterfield’s, bookcases filled with first edition, leather bound volumes, pure wool carpets and over-powering heating. In the background Gerald listened to the original London cast from the musical *Les Misérables*; oblivious to the message it carried, such was his tension.

‘I’m pleased you came to see me, Gerald. From everything you’ve told me, I’m inclined to agree with Sarah, it’s a simple phobia, a natural aversion to false teeth. Problem is, you don’t have much of a choice any more. You will get used to them.’

‘I doubt it. You don’t have to live with them. Why me? That’s what I’d like to know.’ Gerald studied his friend. He looked well; tall, slenderly built, thick brown hair with a smooth, tanned, almost polished complexion that only a Harley Street specialist could have.

‘You were unlucky, Gerald, it could have happened to anyone.’

‘But it didn’t, did it?’ Gerald was becoming annoyed again, his voice rising. ‘A hotel full of people on a tropical island and I was the only person to catch it.’

Gerald shuddered and his stomach churned as the terrifying experience replayed in his mind.

He and Sarah had spent a week on the island of Papua New Guinea. The last couple of days were spent deep in the heart of The Sepik River around the Chambri Lakes and involved a trip into the remote jungle.

Most of the group followed suit with the tribal warriors and ate the tropical fruit on the trees. One fruit carried a virus. Gerald was unaware of another fruit which contained an antidote. On his return to England Gerald’s gums ached intensely. He awoke one morning to find blood on his pillow – and three teeth. Before dinner on the same day he had lost four more. Five minutes into the dentist’s chair, he’d lost the rest.

‘I wouldn’t mind but I looked after my teeth obsessively, cleaned them after every meal, flossed them, used a regular mouthwash, new brush every month...’ Gerald could have gone on. He was palpitating at the thought.

Peter offered his friend a cool glass of water. ‘There’s no point going on, Gerald, you’re just upsetting yourself. It’s happened. Learn to live with it.’ Peter paused. ‘Do you mind if I make a suggestion?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘I want you to try a course of therapy.’

‘Therapy!’ spluttered Gerald, feeling like a freak.

‘Don’t look so horrified. It’s a natural treatment. Lot’s of people undertake therapy for phobias.’

Gerald gulped another mouthful of water. ‘I’m not sure. What do you want me to do?’

‘I want you to go and work for the manufacturers, The Teeth Park, at the dental laboratory.’

‘Absolutely not!’ screamed Gerald, rising from his seat. He felt the rush of adrenaline to his head. ‘Work for people who make false teeth? Are you out of your mind?’ His palpitations were returning. Gerald felt hot, the prickly heat overtaking his body.

‘No I’m not,’ replied Peter. ‘I’m suggesting it to help you. They’re based in Epsom, about three miles from you. I have a friend who works there. They’re

looking for a cleaner.'

Gerald stood up, exasperated. 'There's no way I'm working for those people, and that's final!'

Two weeks after his adamant refusal, Gerald had started work for The Teeth Park. He liked the rest of the staff – although they appeared secretive about their work – and found the environment clean and pleasant. His tasks were menial ... almost boring. Apart from cleaning he was also expected to make the tea and run errands.

What he didn't like was the overpowering smell of anaesthesia, the posters on the walls – which made him cringe every time he looked at them – and having to get used to handling the teeth, even though they were well wrapped. And the locked room with the red door.

Gerald's phobia of false teeth continued. He loathed how they looked, the feel of them; just the thought of someone else's molars was still capable of making him retch. Most of all, his recurring nightmare continued.

However, his relationship with Sarah had improved. She was pleased he had taken the job and their marriage appeared to be returning to normal.

It was nine-thirty in the evening. Gerald had finished his first night shift. He'd been with the company a month and now had his own set of keys.

His curiosity having overcome him, he'd tried in vain for fifteen minutes to gain access to the room with the locked red door, but none of his keys fitted.

Gerald wondered what they did in there that was so important. Why were they so secretive about this room? It wasn't just the red room, it was the way the staff often became quiet in his presence. The odd looks they gave him, particularly if he was near the red door, which still made him feel like an outsider.

He finally gave up and called in at the Supervisor's office. He placed his report inside the blue folder lying next to the PC monitor. Gerald was about to leave the room when he noticed one of the filing cabinets had been left open ... one which was normally locked.

After debating whether or not he should snoop, he found his curiosity gaining the better of him.

Gerald crept across the room on tiptoes and opened the top drawer. As usual, most of the paperwork was marked *Private: Confidential*. He didn't think it would do any harm. Perhaps now he may learn what the company had to hide, if indeed there was anything.

Most of the paperwork was routine, until he came to the last drawer. Here, the files revealed personal details, not about employees, but seemingly ordinary people.

He placed the file on top of the cabinet and glanced outside the office, still nervous of being caught. He returned to continue reading: The Teeth Park were keeping files on people who had died; victims of car crashes, fatal industrial accidents. Gerald then came across a file on someone he knew well, Christopher Sinclair, a one-time neighbour of his who had died in a road accident two years

before.

If he remembered correctly, Christopher's widow had been extremely upset at the time because of the condition of the body; he never did find out what it was. But why should the company have files on Christopher? Gerald racked his brains as he tried unsuccessfully to remember the mystery surrounding his neighbour's death.

He was about to replace the file when the telephone rang, startling him. He dropped it and ran for cover round the side of the cabinet, his heart missing a few beats ... his breath in short, sharp rasps ... his legs weakening.

Regaining his composure, he found the courage to answer when the phone stopped ringing.

Cautiously, Gerald returned to the files, shooting furtive glances in all directions; he even checked the car park through the office window as an afterthought.

As he read through the last file, his skin prickled. Indistinct colours clouded his vision and he felt faint. He dropped the file, scattering the personal details of a twenty-five year old man named Stephen Fielding across the floor.

Stephen had died in a crash a few miles from his home in Weybridge. He and his girlfriend were crossing a bridge when a white van came out of nowhere, forcing them over the side. Both he and the young lady were killed instantly.

Gerald's name appeared at the bottom of the file. He had been the recipient for Stephen's near perfect set of teeth ... teeth now permanently encased in his own mouth.

Gerald's agonising scream went unheard. The Teeth Park's unrivalled reputation for manufacturing the only false teeth in the world that actually looked and felt real was because they were real – their teeth came from corpses.

The following morning, staff were overcome by the nauseating smell of death as they entered the laboratory.

They found Gerald lying face down in a pool of congealed blood, surrounded by dental instruments. Such was his abhorrence at the evidence he'd unearthed, he had extracted all Stephen Fielding's teeth.

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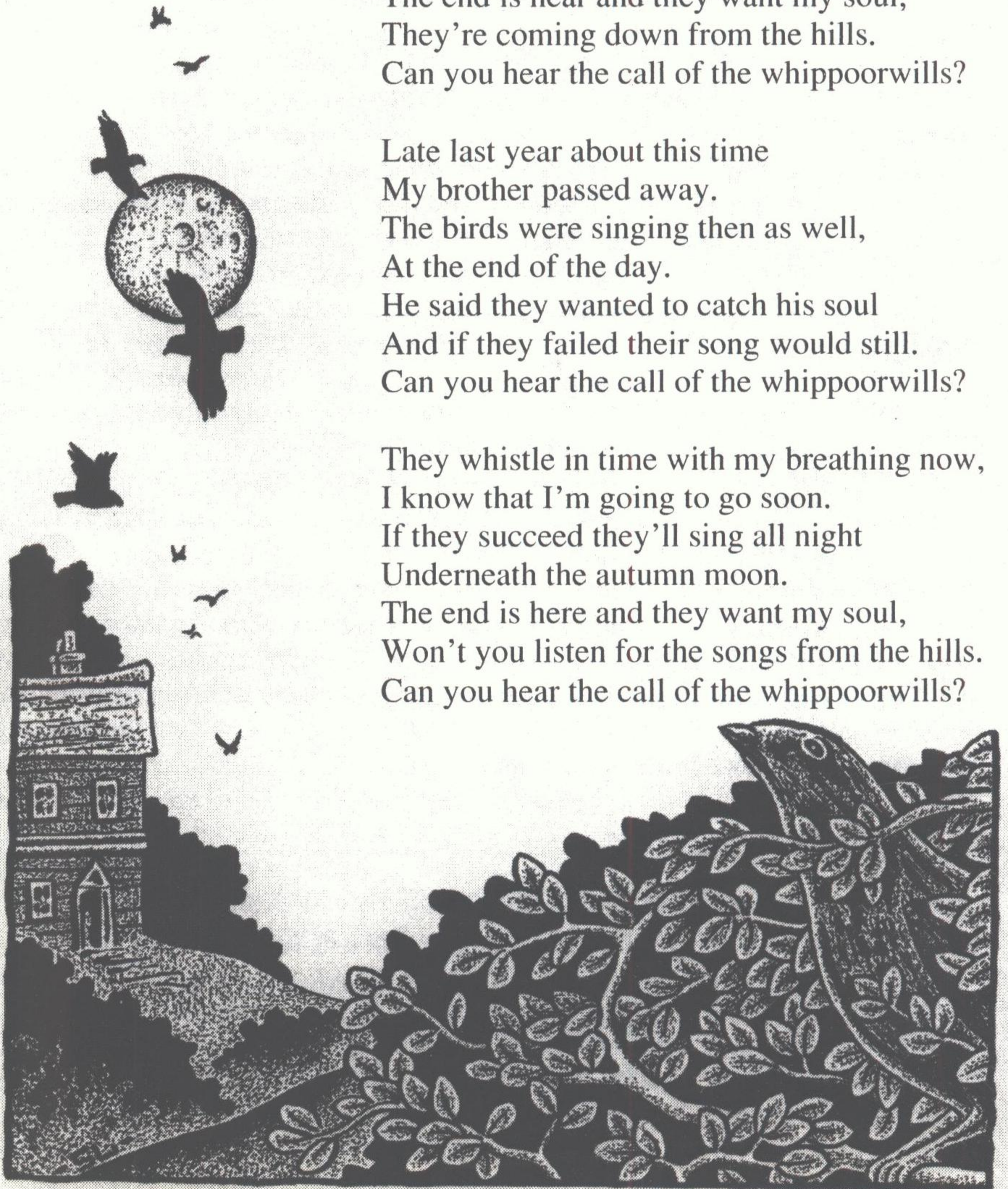


Call of the Whippoorwills

Well I can hear them talking again tonight
From the shadows in the darkened trees,
Singing their song in the pale moonlight,
Carried on the evening breeze.
The end is near and they want my soul,
They're coming down from the hills.
Can you hear the call of the whippoorwills?

Late last year about this time
My brother passed away.
The birds were singing then as well,
At the end of the day.
He said they wanted to catch his soul
And if they failed their song would still.
Can you hear the call of the whippoorwills?

They whistle in time with my breathing now,
I know that I'm going to go soon.
If they succeed they'll sing all night
Underneath the autumn moon.
The end is here and they want my soul,
Won't you listen for the songs from the hills.
Can you hear the call of the whippoorwills?



Written & illustrated by Steve Lines

The Wrathstone

John Hawkhead

There are places in the world where time seems fixed and immutable, where events and actions are apparently unrelated to the continuous flow of humanity outside their immediate environment. I encountered such a place for the first time when I was sixteen.

My mother, exasperated at a tendency to increasing delinquency on my part, decided to remove me from her charge for the final summer holidays of my school years. This would have the dual benefits of distancing me from my more rebellious acquaintances while providing her with the opportunity to get away from her torpid existence, if only for a short while. As a single parent, she was financially limited in her choice of where to send me. Consequently, she had contacted my paternal grandfather who she had somehow coerced into taking me for the three weeks of summer in which she could 'find some space for herself.' Her choice of destination for me was based on the fact that my grandfather lived by the northern coast of Cornwall and that 'it was about time that side of the family took some responsibility for my upbringing.' At least that was the thinking process she used to explain her decision to me. The reality, however, proved less easy to account for.

*

So it was that I found myself later that month outside the St Ives train station waiting for a man I had no memory of and whom my mother could only describe sketchily. However, when I saw the dishevelled figure step from a battered Land Rover with his hands thrust into a scrappy combat jacket, I guessed correctly that this was he. He dragged his boots across the car park tarmac towards me in a half shamle, half stride that I later learned was a product of years spent walking against the wind on lonely coastal pathways.

'Alan,' he said. It was a statement rather than an enquiry and was uttered in a desultory manner to which I responded with a grunt that only adolescent boys can successfully deliver. He motioned with his shoulder to the vehicle and we set off into the dusk out of town. Neither of us spoke throughout the journey, which took just less than an hour, during which we encountered ever thinner and rougher roadways until we stopped outside the rude, whitewashed cottage he called home. Although low and thick-walled it looked about to collapse under the weight of its thatch, a haphazard morass that seemed to mirror his own bedraggled bush of hair, both in colour and consistency.

'You can swear,' he said, catching my breathed utterance, 'but it's warm and dry – and best of all,' he added, putting his face close to mine,

‘there’s no television.’ He almost chuckled as he turned to the door and, after a minute of sullen contemplation, I hefted my haversack to follow him inside.

That evening I decided not to come down from my room, preferring instead to curse my mother with every imprecation I had at my disposal while I looked out over the bleak, windblown landscape beyond my window. I had just about had enough of staring into the darkness outside when my grandfather’s unmistakable gait moving off up the hillside brought me sharply to attention. It was gone ten, so I supposed he might be heading for a late pint in a pub across the fields. Faced with the prospect of spending three weeks of solitary confinement in the cottage, I jumped at the chance of anything to prevent boredom and so, hastily pulling my puffer jacket on, I followed him into the night.

He set up quite a pace, and I stumbled on more than one occasion as I moved on, muddying my hands and knees in the soft earth. Luckily I could follow him at a distance, as he seemed to be cursing as he went, hard words occasionally billowing back towards me, interspersed with what seemed like low moans of despair, but I could only make out one word with any clarity – ‘bitch.’ I assumed he aimed his venom at my mother for landing him with me, and I took some pleasure in the fact that he was as unhappy with my presence at the cottage as I was.

The pursuit continued for perhaps

ten more minutes until his silhouette stood on the brow of a coastal hill, framed against the night sky. At first I thought he was accompanied, that this was some shadowy assignation, as he now stood next to a tall, black figure. It was only when I had crept somewhat closer did I see that he had come to face a standing stone that leaned slightly to the north, and that he continued to utter low words of anger and despair towards it. As the seconds passed his apparent anger quickly increased. He became more animated, gesticulating wildly and flailing his mane of iron-grey hair about as he ranted, until he started to pummel the object with his bare fists, sending the sickening echo of flesh and bone smacking against unyielding stone down to me.

He continued for what seemed like minutes, but it would have been impossible for his hands to suffer such sustained punishment for so long. I almost ran up to stop him, but he pre-empted me by sinking heavily to his knees, great renting sobs heaving from his lips as he bent over in his pain.

Horried as I was, I knew enough to slip silently away and hurry back to the cottage before he could return. As soon as I was in my room I took the precaution of moving the chair from the window to wedge it behind the door. It was not inconceivable that a man in his state of mind could do me harm in the night.

He stood above me in the clarity of dawn, a tin mug of tea steaming in one gloved hand. I had not heard him enter or any scrape of the wedged chair.

‘Here’s some tea Alan... there’s bread and butter downstairs if you want it.’

I took the mug and studiously looked into it to avoid his gaze, but he continued to stand above me until I looked up at him.

‘You saw me didn’t you Alan, up on Fesh Hill last night.’

I nodded, there seemed no point in lying, particularly as he appeared now to be calm and strangely focused. To lie would have shut a communicative door between us, and I sincerely wanted to know what drove the searing intensity of the previous night. He turned the chair around and sat facing me, his gloved hands resting on his thighs. Catching me looking at them, he effected a smile.

‘They’re not a pretty sight, they haven’t been for some time now.’ He paused for a while as if gathering his thoughts while he contemplated the back of the gloves.

‘I wasn’t pleased when your mother foisted you onto me at this time, but she was right, you did need to come down here. She recognised the change your age had brought about in you and I needed to speak to you about your hard path.’ He looked at me for a while as if gauging me. ‘What has she told you of your father? How much of his time with her has she let you know?’

‘Not much, only that he died in an accident not long after I was born. They had already split up hadn’t they.’

‘Yes they were already apart,’ he replied, ‘irredeemably apart. It could be said they were never really together; he was already taken you

see.’ He again stopped to study me, to fathom how I might be affected by what he was telling me.

‘Alan, the male line in this family carries a severe weight, a burden of weakness that expresses itself as an elemental manifestation. You are of the line and you have now reached an age when you are subject to its temptations and tribulations. Thus, you must be prepared for a life where even the simplest choices can have intense, perhaps agonising ramifications for you.’

His words were beginning to disturb me. For a few seconds I entertained the chance of writing him off as a raving lunatic, a delusional old man prone to self-injury, but something in my core was awakening to a new reality, a truth about myself that my subconscious had always recognised as intrinsic to my life. Only now was the awareness becoming vivid.

‘Your father’s death was no accident. He threw himself from the cliffs not a mile from the stone. I was at sea when it happened. By the time I got back here to he was already in the ground. For weeks I had terrible dreams of his fevered jump from the cliffs, his body broken, smashed into pulp; all exacerbated by my own culpability. Worse, each time I woke I felt almost jealous of that “eternal rest” he now had. You see he had taken a heavy weight from my shoulders two years previously and now its irresistible power had returned to work against me. Although I was happy he could rest in peace, his death had transferred the weight firmly back

onto my shoulders.

‘Although your father carried the same burden as myself, he was far more sensitive to its power. My own father had steeled me, he taught me about pain, schooled me to fight the cold arms of despair. Your father was raised by his mother; a barmaid in Tregarnant. I thought he would never need to know about his bloodline’s curse if I continued with it myself alone. I hoped if he never knew about it, that the curse would end with me. Perhaps it was merely a mistake of judgement, a fear for an innocent life, but I was also greedy Alan, greedy to keep my horror to myself and in this I was a fool. He arrived at the stone without notice, without preparation and found himself caught in a maelstrom he could neither withstand nor fathom. And fate worked against me too; the night he made his own way up to the stone I was in a fever that is part of this condition. If I had known he was heading for the stone I would have taken steps to prevent him until he was ready.

‘When I woke from the fever’s delirium I knew immediately that my life had been changed; your father had taken the burden from me and I felt an immeasurable sense of release. Regrettably, I grasped the opportunity for freedom and left him with the cottage as soon as I could, travelling the world where before I had been rooted in this solitary place. The paradoxical greed that had previously made me keep the burden was gone; I thought forever.

‘However, when your father took his life I was forced to take up the

burden again. I cannot describe to you how that felt. To know despair is one thing; to know freedom and then have it snatched away again is something else. I only have myself to blame; if I had been patient and helped him, he would still be alive today and would be standing here in front of you now instead of me. But now the wheel has come full circle and I have the chance to help you as he cannot. Tonight we’ll go up to the stone together and you will come of age.’

He shook me at four the following morning and I dressed hurriedly, still groggy from a fitful sleep. Fifteen minutes later we were hurrying up the fields towards Fesh Hill. My grandfather pulled me to a halt less than fifteen feet from the stone and told me to wait.

‘Look at it Alan, tell me what you see. Run your eyes along the shape of the hills from the north and back to the stone.’ He stepped back and I did as he instructed, but I could see nothing and looked back at him. ‘Look again... look harder,’ he said. I sighed and turned once more to the stone, letting my eyes travel along the hill ridges and suddenly I saw it. The topography was of a man’s lying body, the head to the north. I continued to follow the land’s silhouette until I reached the stone, the optical illusion’s erection.

‘See it now Alan?’ His voice came from behind me. I nodded but continued to look at the stone phallus. ‘Good,’ he said ‘now prepare yourself for the dawn.’

Slowly, behind me, the sun’s rays burned across the Earth, casting my

shadow across the hill until it fell on the stone and the phallus seemed to be my own. The stone appeared blood red, almost artificially coloured, and the night's dew started to rise and curl as mist around it to form a sinuous female shape that solidified into flesh.

'Behold the Nevermaid.' My grandfather's voice seemed hard and distant, as if echoing down a long pipeline from the surface to a subterranean cave.

Her legs and arms encircled the stone, her grip on it flattening her hips and breasts to it. She had clasped her lips to its pocked surface and was gyrating to a vibration that I could feel reverberating throughout my bones. She was the most exquisite creature I had ever seen, blue-black hair spooling down over shoulders smooth as marble, naked except for a single, gleaming silver chain hung loosely about her waist and now I took one almost involuntary step towards her. My movement somehow alerted her and she turned her face to me, her lips now spotted with blood from the rough contact with the stone. Her eyes were bottomless, black as the night, and as she stepped away from the stone her tongue ran between her lips, flicking the blood back into her mouth. I seemed to step out of time and then she was undressing me, pulling me down on top of her, her eyes closing as she drew me into her. We lay coupled for an eternity, but she led every movement, controlled exactly how I would respond to her rhythms and tides, and although we seemed out of time I sensed a growing frustration in myself. She continued to

take all my energies, yet was completely closed to me, while I moved further and further from the promise of ecstasy. This creature that I now adored remained in absolute mystery. It seemed as if I was conjoined with the earth itself in a cold embrace that touched my every fibre and now cloyed like the grave.

Somewhere a voice was telling me to stand away from her, to let her go, but as I tried to stand away she increased her tempo and clasped her legs behind me, her lips limpet-like at my neck and I fell into the abyss with her, a terrible spiralling descent that I believed could not end.

I knew he was shaking me but I did not want to open my eyes. All I wanted was to fall again, to spiral ever deeper in her arms and gain the ecstasy she had so perfectly denied me. But he was resolute and I eventually unstuck my eyes to see him grimly searching me for any sign of madness. And finally he cried as he held me, tears of sadness for my future, and joy for his.

My grandfather and I went up to the stone each morning for eight more days, he supporting my increasing weariness with a seemingly indefatigable strength for a man of his age. On the tenth day she did not return and I thought I would die from the loss, the searing pain of losing her and of never achieving the ecstasy she promised. I felt as if I had entered a darkness from which there could be no return, a black despair where a promised fulfilment that would open the gates to paradise could never be

achieved.

Later my grandfather kept me as strong as he could, talked me back from the wild, staring insanity that threatened me each hour. He spoke through my delirium, told me of his own pain, of his father's and my father's, and how the generations told the same tale back to when the stone was first cut from the cliffs below. How a priest of a forgotten people had tried to achieve immortality by joining in corporeal communion with the Nevermaid and how she had responded by holding his entire male line to account for his impudence. For eternity. And he held me while I sobbed into the night, until the days gradually wore down the razored edges of my loss, our loss, to something that I could hope to bear.

That was eight years ago. My mother was not surprised that I chose to stay at the cottage, she seemed to have expected such a thing would occur and when I put down the receiver in the phone box it was the last time I ever heard from her. My grandfather's hands healed although the scars always remained in a vivid cicatrice across his knuckles right up to his last breath. When he died he stared at me with absolute clarity, a man at peace. He knew I could carry the burden.

I took a job as a labourer, did some repair work on the cottage and one night met a pretty girl in Tregarnant. I see her now very infrequently, but she carries you my

son, although she does not know this yet herself. There is even talk she will move away. I will make it my business to know of your whereabouts and in time I will send you this account of our line. But now I must put down my pen and take the walk to the stone and give my blood and rage to the earth, to prepare myself for this year's nine summer nights' ritual and the shallow living grave that is the embrace of the 'Nevermaid'.

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The Beachcomber

Nina Allen

illustrated by Sarah Zama

Mel walked along the promenade, meditatively kicking a stray pebble that had worked its way up from the beach to the very borders of town. The pebble was striped grey and white, the colours of a seagull. It was hot, the first really hot day of the Summer. Looking down at herself she noticed that her arms had already begun to turn the sugar-shrimp pink of mid July, clashing rather horribly with the red running vest she wore. Had she been at home, her mother would doubtless be bothering her to put on a proper t-shirt. Gran didn't seem to notice things like that. Or at least if she did she didn't go on about them.

The beach, known to her in her mind always as Gran's Beach, was a place she loved, with which she had fallen in love at first sight. That had been when she was three, although she supposed that she must have been taken there even before that, when she was a baby. At high tide the beach was little more than a broadish bar of unprepossessing shingle, shunned by the young families who tended to frequent the sandier coves further along the coast. It was only in high Summer that young men played Frisbee here, while their girlfriends, spread blankets out on the rose and dove pebbles to compare suntans and root through the latest pile of gossip from work. Mostly, though, the beach remained the domain of pensioners who came there for their daily bout of exercise. Usually they kept to the Promenade, which was probably why Mel's eyes were drawn immediately to the figure out on the strandline.

The tide was right out, adding a two hundred yard stretch of damp and uninviting sand to the mat of shingle. There were rocks, too, a field of boulders half buried in the sand, which would be completely covered by the sea when the tide returned. Mel knew that the rocks were slippery with seaweed and dangerous to climb about on unless one took extreme care. There were rock pools among them which harboured a fascinating variety of sea creatures. The man was standing next to the rock field, almost at the sea's edge. Even at this distance, there was something about him which told her that he wasn't old. Something about his posture, maybe, which was starkly upright. He had what looked like a plastic carrier bag in his hand, and wore the same kind of dull dark grey suit worn by her maths teacher, Mr Michaels. He was staring out towards the horizon as if he expected to see something appear there.

'Pervert,' her best friend Cass would most likely have said. 'Definitely on the lookout.' Mel laughed to herself at the so clearly imagined tone of Cass's voice, but it seemed to her more that the man was interested in nothing at that moment save the distant murmur of the sea and the inner hum of his own

thoughts. It made her feel a little uncomfortable, seeing him there, if only because she had rather intended going down to the rocks herself. She wanted to examine the rock pools. She didn't like the idea of becoming a spectacle. Reluctantly she decided to return to her grandmother's house. It would most likely be more pleasant later in the evening, anyway. Cooler.

Gran had tea waiting for her when she got in. Whatever the weather outside was doing, there was always tea. That was one of Gran's laws of nature, like the fact that she was always in when you called or came round. Mel had discovered that Gran was one of the few things you could stake your life on. She drank down two cups of tea and took a couple of cherry bakewells from the tin with the beefeaters on it. She lay back in one of Gran's repulsively ugly but death-defyingly comfortable armchairs and munched, savouring the sweetness, while she leafed nonchalantly through a recently issued library book dealing with the flora and fauna of the British seashore. It was very close to heaven.

'Your mother called, dear,' said Gran coming through from the loggia with a pile of freshly ironed washing. She liked to work out there, where the sun shone in for most of the day, even during the Winter. 'She wanted to know how you were getting on with your project.'

Mel sighed inwardly. It wouldn't have been so bad if her mother had really been interested in the assessment. She wasn't, though; she just wanted to show her father how brilliantly she was able to manage without him. That include making sure that his daughter continued to do well in school. 'I'm going out to do some more on it later, actually,' she said, not wanting to know what the upshot of the telephone call had been. 'Is that OK?'

'Just as long as you enjoy yourself, my love,' said her grandmother. 'Only take this, won't you. It can get cold really quickly when the skies are clear.' She was holding out a bottle green cardigan, newly ironed and still warm. It had belonged to her grandfather. Granddad had been dead for five years, but Gran's house still contained a multitude of things that had been his. Mel could see how this helped to keep him alive. There wasn't anything morbid in it, the way he still kept Gran company. She thought that was probably because all the things her grandmother had held on to were things that could be used. She wrapped the cardigan around her like a cloak. The wool was gently soft against her sunburn. She decided to go out again straight away, partly because she wanted to and partly to avoid being around if her mother should decide to phone back. There had been too many arguments already.

Although the tide had turned, the greater part of the rock field was still uncovered and apparently deserted. There was a freshly dug hillock of sand down closer to the water's edge, a sign that a fisherman had been there before her, turning it over for worms. But there was no sign that he intended to return. Mel took off her trainers and headed for the rock pools, tying the shoes together and then loosely

around her left wrist. The sand was still warm from the exorbitant heat of the day. She could feel tiny ridges beneath her bare feet, the ghost-waves left by the retreating tide. Brown branches of seaweed lay stranded here and there, sucked dry and brittle as bone by the midday sun. It was a scene that excited her and left her incomparably peaceful at the same time. She guessed she loved it so much because she knew so perfectly what she wanted to do with it, what it meant.

There had never been any doubt for her as to what she wanted to make of her life. When she had been a tiny child paddling after shrimps in the shallows she had expressed it as ‘wanting to catch the sea monsters.’ Now that she was a little older she knew that that was called becoming a marine biologist. For her mother this was a source of simultaneous pride and pain; her father was a crop scientist with the British Forestry Commission and it was all just a little too close to home. Cass, in a typically less complicated but more accurate manner, simply classified Mel as being ‘bug mad.’

With the familiar sense of anticipation that never seemed to go away, Mel squatted down on her haunches and set about lifting the first rock. The warm salt water lapped around its base as if the stone were a tiny island, a miniature version of the space on earth they all happened to be occupying. The best thing about it was that you never knew what you were going to find. Sometimes, of course, there would be nothing at all, just a sludgy hollow brimful of the sea. It didn’t matter, it just meant moving on to another rock. This time, though, she was lucky first time out; it was a great rock pool. Two large shrimps dived for cover, disappearing into a thumb-sized crevasse as the unexpected light from above fell down upon their multi-jointed, silvery backs. It must feel like the wrath of God, thought Mel as she chased them half-heartedly with the tip of her finger. Or else a glimpse through the doorway into another universe.

The crabs had always been her favourites because each one seemed to be an individual. Some of them, the great mossy green ones, were like dinosaurs, or earth-movers. They had about them a comic sense of purposeful self-importance; places to go, people to see. The pair sheltering under this rock was not like that at all. Each was less than a full centimetre across, its pale pink shells refined and translucent, like mother of pearl. They circled the rock pool in a complicated and graceful sarabande, the idle, spoilt daughters of their green-suited, tycoon fathers. Mel left them to it, gently replacing the rock and stepping carefully backwards onto a bare patch of sand. The sky above her was high and nearly colourless, the air empty of sound save for the distant, jubilant shouts of gulls cheering the sea on to victory and home. I never want to leave, thought Mel, bending down towards another rock, a large one, covered in barnacles and algae. Before she could lift it, her eye was caught by something brightly white against the green. She recognised it almost at once as a large whelk shell, and reached out to take it, unable to resist. Both her bedrooms – the one here at Gran’s as well as her room at home – were already repositories for her considerable inventory of beachcombings, but as far as Mel was concerned there would always be room for something else. The whelk

shell looked to be a good one, and as soon as she had got it all the way into her hand she could see that it was actually perfect. It was much rarer than many people would suppose, to find a perfect seashell. Once their owners had died, the barren little houses would be thrown carelessly into the lap of the gods, taking their fragile chances with the debris on the seabed or the rocks along the shore. This vessel had survived intact, its creamy paleness shading to pink at the tip, the indented notches on its three concentric whorls almost as sharply defined as on the day they came into being. Mel held the shell to her ear and listened to the distant roar within. She wondered who it was that had first discovered the sound that a shell makes, that sound that really was so very much like the sea.

‘I expect you’ve already been told that that’s just the sound inside your own head.’

Mel started backwards and almost fell over. She closed her hand over the whelk shell as if it were something she ought to hide, and then looked upwards into the face of the man. His eyes were a watery grey, like the sea on the dullest day of Winter, and she found that it was impossible to tell how old he was. Thirty, maybe, or fifty.

He spoke again then, turning slightly away from her and looking out towards the returning waves.

‘They’re wrong, of course. It is the sea’s music, heard only by those who have the wit to hear it. They are always the richest of gifts, those that are cast aside by men as worthless pranks.’

His voice was almost uninflected, monotonous and dry. He spoke like a worn out professor, a learned aesthete weary of talking to fools. She was reminded once more of Mr Michaels, although she had always considered him to be one of the nicer teachers. The sound the man made caused Mel to feel light-headed and a little breathless, distanced from herself as she had been by the sea’s motion in the shell. He wore the same dark grey suit, grown old and shabby with the passage of many washings, and a pair of scuffed, worn down black shoes that glittered with the mica in the sand that caked them. The plastic bag he carried glistened with drops of moisture. She stared back at him, keeping herself crouched low over the rock pools. Her closed hand still held the whelk shell, and she found herself relaxing her fingers and exposing it once more to the light, holding it out towards the man as if it were an offering.

‘*Buccinum Undatum*,’ he said. ‘The Common Whelk.’ He reached out towards her suddenly and she took a step back, thinking that he meant to take the shell. His hand brushed lightly against her shoulder and she saw that he had removed a stray strand of her hair from the bunched up sleeve of the green cardigan. He twisted it in his fingers, holding it up to the diminishing light of the setting sun. ‘The colour of beach barley,’ he said, and she supposed he meant the wheat-like grasses that grew all along the edge of the shore, over by the beach huts and the yacht club fence. She and Cass had always called them wild oats. ‘It’s a fine specimen,’ he continued. ‘But I think you would agree that this goes

one better.'

She felt unnerved and a little cold, wondering how the things he was saying could possibly relate to the colour of her hair, but then she saw him reaching into the carrier bag and she realised that he was only talking about the shell. He rummaged around in the bag, moving invisible somethings aside as he searched for whatever it was that he wanted. After a moment or two his hand re-emerged. In it was a pure white whelk shell a good inch longer and almost twice the girth of her own find. It looked unnatural somehow, as if it might perhaps be made of plastic. Mel felt herself thwarted, as if she had suddenly been put up against a new and hitherto unknown opponent in a game she had previously been confident of winning. She stood up then, putting out her hand in an instinctive gesture of denial, wanting to confirm at least that she had been cheated of her prize. But the shell was matte and slightly warm to the touch, as all shells are. She let her arm fall back to its place at her side, disappointed.

'You have to know where to look,' said the man. 'Won't you take this one? It might give you some clues.' His right hand, the hand not holding onto the bag, proffered the monstrous whelk shell, and Mel found that she was reaching out to take it. She wanted to touch it again, to get a better look at it. The man's hand was dry and rough, almost a working man's hand. She looked directly into his face for the first time and saw that he was smiling. It should have been a nice smile, despite the lines of tiredness that ringed his eyes, but Mel couldn't get rid of the idea that he was simply amusing himself with her in some unknowable game that educated adults might sometimes like to play.

'Are you a teacher?' she asked him suddenly, almost as if it were an accusation. It seemed to fit. It would certainly explain the way he talked. The man's laugh was like his smile, sardonic and probably derisive. The sound grated on her nerves, bringing her to the edge of anger. She supposed this might be the way her mother felt about her father these days.

'Styling oneself a teacher would be nothing but foolishness and vanity, when one has so much more to learn than he will ever have to pass on. What you see is nothing worse than age, and habit, and perhaps a little selfish joy in the things that the earth surrenders up to us free, gratis, and for nothing.' He took a step or two away from her, retreating from the rocks and onto the sandy plateau of the main beach. His eyes were downcast, seemingly hypnotised by the regular rhythm of the ridges there, the ghost waves printed in the earth by the retreating tide. He's just trying to be friendly, thought Mel, her irritation dissipating into something that was like embarrassment. It's just the way people like him talk. She followed him onto the sand, feeling that she might have offended him. She could hear Cass's voice inside her head, telling her that the man was just a boring, mad beach-fool and that she should stay away from strangers. She glanced quickly up the beach, vaguely hoping that the man had not seen her do it. There was nobody about, but light were beginning to come on in the properties that skirted the Promenade. You could see for miles in every direction. There was nothing that

could happen. She would go back anyway, in a minute or two.

‘Do you live by the sea?’ she asked hopefully, as if to clear air that might be sullied. She fell into step beside him and they walked, at a parallel with the Promenade, their slow progress taking them along the beach in the direction of the large breakwater. The sky above them had relinquished its final traces of blue and had turned to the silvery grey that immediately precedes the soft charcoal of a fine Summer night. ‘I love the sea. I want to work with it.’

‘I think it might even let you,’ he said, and then, as if in belated answer to her question, ‘The sea is my home.’ They walked on, in silence. The large patch pockets of the green cardigan bumped against Mel’s hips, each of them heavy with its own whelk shell. She put her hand into the right hand pocket where the larger shell rested, gently tracing her fingers along the upward thrust of the spiral staircase that made up its substance. She desperately wanted to keep it now, and was a little afraid that the man might have a mind to ask for it back. The great breakwater loomed up ahead of them, the pools of water about its barnacle-encrusted feet the rank green of stagnant marshland. You could dive from it at high tide, when the ancient, weathered wooden posts protruded a mere six inches above the sea’s surface. Now, at dusk, with the homeward-bound tide only nibbling as yet at its furthest extremity, it reared above them like the last remnants of a great wall protecting the long deceased populace of a ruined city. The smell that arose from it was sharp and salty, a seawatery smell that was fresh and at the same time so old and so ingrown that it was almost foul. It was impossible to breach this garrison without considerable effort, an undignified scramble that Mel was certain the man would hesitate to undertake. To get around the breakwater they would have to go up the beach to the Promenade and then down the other side. She stood still, untying the shoes from around her wrist and bending down to put them on. She didn’t like to walk barefoot on the Promenade; it was always pleasantly warm, but liable to be contaminated with dogs’ mess and broken glass. It was almost time for her to be going back, in any case.

She finished tying her laces and straightened up. The breakwater was still in front of her but the man was gone. Mel sprinted up the beach, her footfalls rattling against the pebbles. When she reached the top of the small slope she cast her eyes around in all directions but found that she was quite alone. The Promenade stood out in the grey dusk like the silver waters of a river, the beach huts were a bulky mass of pseudo-settlement against the sky. It was almost dark and she found herself wanting to run. The night felt wrong. She turned and walked quickly away, back in the familiar direction of her grandmother’s house. After a minute or two her panic started to ease, and the inexplicable nature of the man’s disappearance seemed to matter less as she drew further away from where it had happened. There was a light on in the porch, and as she mounted the shallow, green-painted step to the front door she patted her right hand pocket in satisfaction. She still had the shell, after all.

The next day was brutally hot, like a sledgehammer beating itself repeatedly

into the newly fired ground. Her mother telephoned early this time, before breakfast, not wanting to give her another chance to get away.

‘I have started it,’ said Mel, knowing that whatever she said she would not be believed. ‘I’ve got three whole weeks left.’ There was an agitated fluttering on the line, the voice of Catherine Cunningham telling her that she would only have herself to blame if she missed scoring an ‘A’ because she preferred loafing around on the beach all day to getting any work done.

‘It’s all down to your father,’ she said, apropos of nothing. She carried on in the same vein for a minute or two more, before stating bluntly that she’d wasted enough time and that she had to go. ‘I’ll call again this evening,’ she said. ‘Or else tomorrow. We’ve got a meeting.’ The broken connection hummed in Mel’s ear and she replaced the receiver in its cradle. ‘We’ was a local women’s group that her mother had joined and now helped to lead. She had told Mel on more than one occasion that it had made her a new person, but Mel hadn’t noticed any overt signs of transformation. Cass called them The Weird Sisters and Mel thought that that was a fair summary. She ate her breakfast in near silence and then got dressed. The only thing she blamed her father for, really, was not being around to take more of the flak. ‘It’s not fair,’ she muttered at the telephone as she passed it on the way to her bedroom, luxuriating in the token stirrings of teenage revolution. The project was the beach, after all, or at least the things that lived in it and on it, but that was obviously a detail that her mother had been determined to ignore.

She had planned her day carefully, meaning to take her books to one of the covered seating booths on the Promenade and spend the morning writing up the data she had already collated. By the time the tide was out again she would have got most of it done. She loaded up her little rucksack with the things she would need, letting her mind savour in advance the crunching slide of the pebble mountain beneath her feet.

Because of the heat, the beach looked like being busy. At the far limit of her vision a taller than average boy in blue and white swimming trunks was diving from the breakwater, while his shorter, fatter companion shouted at him from the shore and tried to score a hit on his upturned feet with a large, bright yellow quoit. It was a clumsy throw, and missed by quite a long way. The target, resurfacing, retrieved it laughingly from the sun spattered water. Nearer to where she was sitting, two elderly ladies in deckchairs quietly discussed the rising cost of SAGA holidays. It was a relatively peaceful scene, yet Mel felt restless. The presence on the beach of more people than she was accustomed to seeing there aggravated her, unnerved her even, and she found that it was impossible to concentrate on her work. She put the books back in her rucksack and headed off along the Promenade, now wanting only to walk, to set herself in motion.

Once she had skirted around the breakwater she became immediately aware that there were fewer people about, and supposed that this was because the road did not adjoin the public footpath at this point. A lot of people seemed to dislike

walking, even when that was what they had come outside to do. Of course there was also the fact that the beach at this end of the Promenade got to the point where it stopped being a real beach at all, but disintegrated instead into an area of coastal scrubland, uneven in texture and even less appealing to the eye the mundane expanse of shingle on the townward side. Mel could see that it wouldn't attract many visitors; indeed, she hardly ever came there herself. It ought to have been rich in wildlife, uncultivated and undisturbed as it was, but she had never found much to it except for sandflies and the occasional, overly intrepid land snail. The sand here was dry and dusty, somehow less dense underfoot than the crystalline softness that ebbed and flowed with the courses of the sea. She supposed that this sand hadn't felt the touch of the water for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years, and realised with a sense of dismay that there was something about the place that she didn't like. It felt barren. Dead, even. The cloudless sky above blared its blue light down on her, casting pitiless aspersions on the dried out, hollow grasses and the myriad clumps of parched samfire, their tenuous hold on the sparse soil eroded by the sun and their fronds burnt from the customary violent green to a dirty, yellow gold. 'The colour of beach barley,' she heard the man say inside her head. But no, the spoiled sea grass was two or three shades darker than that, and there were no wild oats in sight, not here. Like their cultivated brethren, they seemed more accustomed to having people in their immediate vicinity. She felt within her then some of the panic of the evening before, a nameless sense of foreboding which had nothing to do with being alone, but was rather the opposite: an unvoiced suspicion that someone might be watching.

She thought about returning to the place she had come from, but the idea did not attract her; it smacked of defeat. She decided instead to go on, to continue along the Promenade to where she knew the path would emerge at Ferrers Green. There was a small café there, where she would be able to buy an ice cream.

There was no breeze to move the grasses, and she became aware that the sea made a different noise when it was here, the hiss and smack of a solid mass being thrown repeatedly against a wall rather than the soothing, sucking roar of a million pebbles gently rocking in a watery cradle. The cliff top had been built on earlier in the century, but the people who had lived there had moved away; the local council had been forced to buy back their houses, which were being made dangerous by the sea's gradual reclamation of the land. Most of them had been pulled down, but here and there you would see the lower storey of a house, windowless and crumbling, or the remnants of a timber garage, invaded by weeds and the tumbled corrugated iron of its roof. Such sights only added to the sense of abandonment and ruin, the feeling that this place had already lived its life and was merely waiting, now, for a chance to transform itself into something else.

When she saw the Iverson bungalow off to her right, Mel knew that she was now only a matter of a minute's walk from Ferrers Green. The thought of this made her feel easier in her mind and she slowed her pace a little, wanting to take

in more of the things that surrounded her. The grass had become greener; there was inland water at Ferrers Green., a duckpond, fed by a little stream. The gateposts which marked the entrance to the bungalow were empty of anything save one rusty hinge and a dulled and peeling coat of royal blue paint, but the building itself was still intact. It was known to the locals by the name of its final inhabitants, a Colonel and Mrs Iverson who had supposedly retired here from India. She wondered briefly what the Iversons themselves had called it; there was no nameplate left to tell her. Sea View, she thought, or most likely The Retreat. She had never taken much notice of it before; it had simply always been there as part of the scenery.

It was curious, though, that nobody lived in it now. It was hard for Mel to imagine anyone that owned it being able to resist such an unrestricted view of the sea. Perhaps the Iversons had had no living relatives. Suddenly curious, she stepped onto the overgrown flagstones that still marked the path to the front door. The windows were filthy from decades of neglect, grimy with gull droppings and a buildup of the greenish residue left by the salty rain of many Winters. There were curtains, too, limp and faded colourless rags that had been pulled closed one afternoon or evening and never opened again. There was nothing to see. Mel went around to the back of the building, not knowing what she might be looking for, probably nothing. What had once been the garden was now an impenetrable jangle of weeds, one lonely apple tree thrusting itself desperately skywards from the middle of it all like a drowning hand waving for help. Apart from that there was a lean-to with an outside toilet, a concrete bike stand up against the kitchen wall, and two more windows that gave onto the back rooms. Mel saw at once that one of the windows was without a curtain and that the glass, although dirty and stained, was still transparent enough to see through.

The room behind it seemed at first to be empty, and even when she saw that it was not, there still appeared to be little to see. The small amount of light that filtered through from the shrouded spaces of the rooms at the front illuminated a bald pinewood floor, a squarish, heavy-looking table without any chairs, and a gigantically ugly Victorian sideboard pushed up against the back wall. It was stacked high with old biscuit tins and empty glass bottles, the sort of things that nobody can find a place for, that are always left behind when somebody dies. There was a long, low buzzing coming from somewhere, as of a large, fat bluebottle on the lookout for rotting meat, and a sudden, tiny burst of movement inside one of the piled up sauce bottles. A moth, thought Mel. A moth or a wasp. There was a pungent, plaintive stillness both in the room and outside of it, and a sense in Mel's heart that the world beyond the gate might have disappeared entirely, leaving her marooned in a segment of the past that was now entirely without other inhabitants.

There is nothing to be done with any of it, she said to herself, without knowing to any degree of certainty what she was talking about. She felt now that it would be quite impossible for anyone to ever live here, and she wanted more

than anything to get away.

The light on the path outside the gate had a buttery quality, the light of late afternoon rather than mid morning. Instead of carrying on to Ferrers Green, Mel jog-trotted back along the path that would return her to Gran's Beach. Her calves shimmered pinkly between the sun's rays and the shadows thrown across the day by the slowly baking samfire. She had forgotten all about the ice cream. She found a place to study in, one of the Promenade seating booths that had always reminded her of bus stops, bus stops made useless by having no access for buses, and found that the sundry tide of people that ebbed and flowed around her seemed now to be acting as an anchor rather than a goad.

She worked on, checking her findings in the library reference book and painstakingly transferring the figures from the sea-stained, pale pink notebook to the tables she had drawn up on A4 paper in the black project folder. She ate the sandwiches Gran had made her, tunafish and mayonnaise, and drank from the bottle of mineral water in her rucksack. She lost count of the time and it got to be late. She realised gradually that the people that had driven her away were now all gone, and that the most intense part of the day's heat had disappeared, leaving in its place a warmth that was soothing to the skin and to the heart. The tide was out again.

Mel looked down over the expanse of newly washed sand towards the strandline and caught sight of a lugwormer, probably the fisherman from the day before, turning over the sand with a trowel. He worked where the ground was still wettest, right at the very edge of the retreating water. Further along, over by the rocks, the sand was being discoloured by the dark presence of a moving man and his slavishly concurrent shadow. She could not see his face, for it was turned toward the sea, his eyes following the confident, purposeful motion of a flight of seagulls, bound shorewards for their evening roost. As she watched, he raised his right arm and gestured up at them, though whether in warning or salute she could not tell.

She gathered up her things, knowing that on all other, similar days before today she had left her rucksack in the dubious care of the masquerade bus shelter, stripped off her trainers and run off down the sand in pursuit of the circling, alien denizens of the rock field, hoping only that the light would last long enough for her to see all that she wanted to see. The idea that she might lose the beach was not one that she could allow to grow to the size of possibility. I'm tired tonight, she told herself. And I need a new notebook. He can't be there tomorrow.

When she reached No 74, her grandmother had just opened the door to shake out the back doormat. Seeing Mel, her face was taken over instantly by her special smile, an expression which, in Mel's eyes, exuded a unique brand of sweetness. 'Here's someone who looks as if they could do with a cup of tea,' she said. For the first time since her father had left, Mel felt like crying.

'That's what's happening, Melissa, and I don't want to hear another word from

you about it. I'll see you at the weekend.'

Mel held the receiver in her right hand, clenching her fist tightly against the shiny, cream coloured plastic. Her grandmother still had a dial telephone; Mel couldn't remember when she had last seen one. The use of the hated name, which seemed to transform her instantly from being herself into some spoilt pink and white thing in a puffed up party dress rang in her ears like a violent slap. She put the phone down, belatedly realising that it was dead, that it had nothing more to say to her.

The room she had at her grandmother's was at the back of the house, which was south facing. That meant that it got all the sunshine and was always warm, but on some days, like today, it stopped being pleasant and became oppressive. Gran had left the window open and the crisply white net curtain that covered it moved gently up and down in the hint of an evening breeze, but it still felt as if the cumulative heat generated by eight hours of sunshine had been gathered together and stored within the limited space between the four walls. Mel stripped down to her underwear and sat down on the floor, stroking her hands back and forth against the short, velvety pile of the red and orange carpet. She had been six years old when the room, formerly granddad's study, had been decorated for her, and she had been allowed to choose all the colours herself. She still had a vivid memory of her grandmother taking her to the carpet showroom. She had fallen in love at first sight with the gaudy thing she now sat on because it had reminded her so much of the magic carpet in the cartoon film about Ali Baba and the forty thieves. Her father had laughed aloud when he had seen it. 'Why not let her do the whole house, Lilian?' he had said. 'It'd get you out of bed in the mornings.' She traced her fingers automatically along the swirling arabesques of the black and gold design that she had once believed to form a maze. It was hard to concentrate on anything.

The monster whelk lay on her bedside cabinet alongside its smaller, dirtier cousin, where she had put it on the previous evening. The sight of the shell, which she had not found by herself, filled her with an uneasy sense of guilt. She picked it up and put it to her ear, closing her eyes in anticipation of the soothing hush and roar of the captive ocean, but instead of this she heard nothing but silence, followed by the steady beating of the blood inside her head. She turned the shell over in her hands and looked inside it, coming again to the idea that the thing was false, some kind of unfunny joke on her. The other shell was a joy of sound, its weathered, pinkish grey walls giving back to her everything they had ever learned about their life in the ocean. Sighing, Mel slid her bare back down the side of the bed and lay flat on the floor, defeated.

There was a soft knocking at the door and her grandmother entered, carrying a blue tin tray upon which there was a tall frosted glass of milk and a plate of Danish butter cookies. 'Try not to fret, love,' she said, putting down the tray on a nearby chair. 'You'll be with us again soon.'

Mel held the shell, the smaller one, her own, in both hands against her chest

and looked up at her. She talks as if Granddad were still here, and he probably is, she thought, desperately wanting to say something that would make them both feel better. She sat up, laid the shell aside and wrapped both arms around her grandmother's legs, pressing her face tightly against the old lady's heavily stockinged knees. After a moment she untangled herself and reached for a cookie.

'Sometimes I hate her,' she said, scraping the loose sugar granules from the top of the biscuit with the bottom edge of her top front teeth.

'She misses your dad, Mellie. It won't always be like this.'

'She hates him. She hates it when I talk to him.'

Her grandmother sighed gently and sat down on the edge of the bed. The primrose yellow of the candlewick bedspread was an almost exact match for the cotton blouse she wore. 'The only thing she's sure of at the moment is her love for you. She wants you near her. That's why she wants to take you home on Saturday.'

Mel pushed the remains of the biscuit into her mouth and reached for another one. She didn't know whether she wanted to believe her grandmother or not. It seemed a pointless thing to talk about, something that would only serve to bring the weekend closer. 'Who were the Iversons, Gran?' she asked suddenly, realising that she wanted an answer to this question almost as much as she wanted to change the subject. The older woman frowned slightly and set herself back further on the bed.

'It's not a very good idea for you to be playing about down there, you know. There was a young girl attacked on that path not so long ago.' She took off her spectacle and rubbed gently at the unclouded lenses with a corner of the bedspread. Mel looked down at her tiny feet, clad always in the same chestnut brown court shoes, Winter or Summer. Lilian Beddows put her glasses back on and continued speaking. 'But I suppose that was after dark. It's just that there aren't many people use that way to the Green now. It's all cars.' She sighed. 'The Iversons were a tragic family, Mellie. They came back here in the fifties, when Con Iverson – Conrad, his name was – retired from the army. Of course there will be those who say that he didn't actually retire, that he was sacked, but most likely that was all just talk. You know what people can be like.'

'Why might he have been sacked?' asked Mel, thinking that it had probably been one of the officer's wives, some boringly predictable barrack room scandal.

'A load of superstitious nonsense.' She cleared her throat and removed her glasses again. 'I suppose these days they'd call it a nervous breakdown. It was very hard on those men, being away from home the way they were. Part of the trouble was that people just wouldn't talk about things like that then. Not talking about things usually leads to more problems than it solves.' She looked hard at Mel, who glanced away, concentrating on the half empty glass of milk. 'It probably wasn't the best place for them, anyway, stuck in that funny house like that with nobody for miles.'

'Didn't they have children?' Even as she asked the question, Mel found it

impossible to imagine that anybody's child had ever occupied that dusty, airless back room, the room with the bottles and the horrible brown sideboard. But maybe any child of the Iversons had loved their little palace by the sea, and had noticed nothing odd about it. She wondered what her grandmother had meant by 'superstitious nonsense.'

'Just the one daughter. Amelie, she was called. The terrible thing was that both she and her mother went missing and Con was arrested. They had to let him go in the end, of course, because they never found any bodies. He hadn't been back in the house a week before he went out on his boat and never came back. It suited the police to have a suicide. But you know, Myra Clegg knew Helen Iverson quite well and she reckons they just walked out on him. Couldn't stand it any more, she said. I didn't have much to do with them myself because Chas and I had only just moved here when it all happened, but the way I remember her she looked a bit like you.' She studied her granddaughter as if she hadn't looked at her properly in a while, her head inclined in a half nod.

'Who? Helen Iverson?'

'Oh no, Helen was dark. It was Amelie that took more after her father. But it's probably just the hair.' She gathered together the empty plate and glass, putting them together on the tray and getting to her feet. 'Are you coming in to watch some television?'

'I think I'll read for a bit, Gran,' said Mel, touching the older woman's hand as she straightened up. 'See you in the morning.'

'Your mother's proud of you, you know,' said her grandmother, putting out her free hand for the door. Mel smiled, but did not reply.

The man came to Mel in her dreams. He was standing behind the dirty glass of the Iversons' rotting back window and smiling his sarcastic headmaster's smile. On the heavy, squarish table in front of him was a yellow wicker basket full of the impossibly enormous, white whelk shells. Further back in the room sunlight danced inside the rows of empty bottles, making it look as if they were full of something. There was nowhere for the sunlight to have come from.

'Won't you take these?' said the man, pointing at the yellow basket. 'After all, fair exchange is no robbery.'

Mel wanted to protest that she hadn't given him anything in return, but then she saw that he had something in his hands, something twisted between his fingers and thumbs. It looked like a piece of fishing wire until Mel suddenly realised that it was a strand of her own yellow hair. She raised her hands to her head, her fingers slipping through nothing. She noticed that the floor beneath her feet was wet and slightly ridged, like sand after the tide has gone out.

'She shouldn't have let her go off the path,' said the man sadly, turning his head away. 'I needed to know where she was.' The room behind him had got darker, making the sideboard invisible. She could hear the tinkling sound of glass being struck tirelessly from within, as if someone were using a bottle as a bell.

Mel woke up coughing, as if there were dust caught in her throat, for a moment convinced that she was still inside the Iverson bungalow. But when she opened her eyes it was to the same curtains and bedspread she had seen before going to sleep. The bedspread was the same colour as the man's yellow basket. Slowly she curled her arms up around her head, tugging her fingers through the mass of hair that came close to forming a second pillow. From the white light on the other side of the curtains she could already tell that it was going to be another blue-skied day.

She took the shell with her, packing it underneath the cardigan at the bottom of her rucksack so that it did not have to spoil her afternoon. The thought that had possessed her on waking, that she had to find a way to give the whelk back, made her feel obscurely foolish, but she held on to it nonetheless. It didn't make a noise, she thought. Fair exchange is no robbery.

The beach was hot and empty. There was nowhere for anybody to swim. The rock field was greenly dark against the wheat coloured sand, unblemished by any signs of human activity. Mel took off her shoes and hid them, pushing them in between the greying wall of a beach hut and a prickly thicket of nameless undergrowth. She started down towards the transplanted sea, leaning backwards to keep her balance as the steep bank of shingle cascaded beneath her feet.

She made notes as she searched, balancing her notebook on the tops of the flatter rocks. The empty egg sacs of the whelk were commonplace; there were times when they littered the beach in profusion, like the yellow excrescences of sun-dried toadspawn. The egg cases of the dogfish were a good deal rarer, and it was something of a surprise for her to have found a mermaid's purse within the first fifteen minutes of her hunt. It was long and smooth, the shiny fake leather of an unbroken black. There was still a tassel at each of the four corners. Mel shook it free of seawater and put it into her rucksack, tying the top tight again afterwards. The sun was burning her back; she could imagine the raw crimson she would see in the bathroom mirror later that evening, but with only another two days left to her it didn't seem to matter all that much.

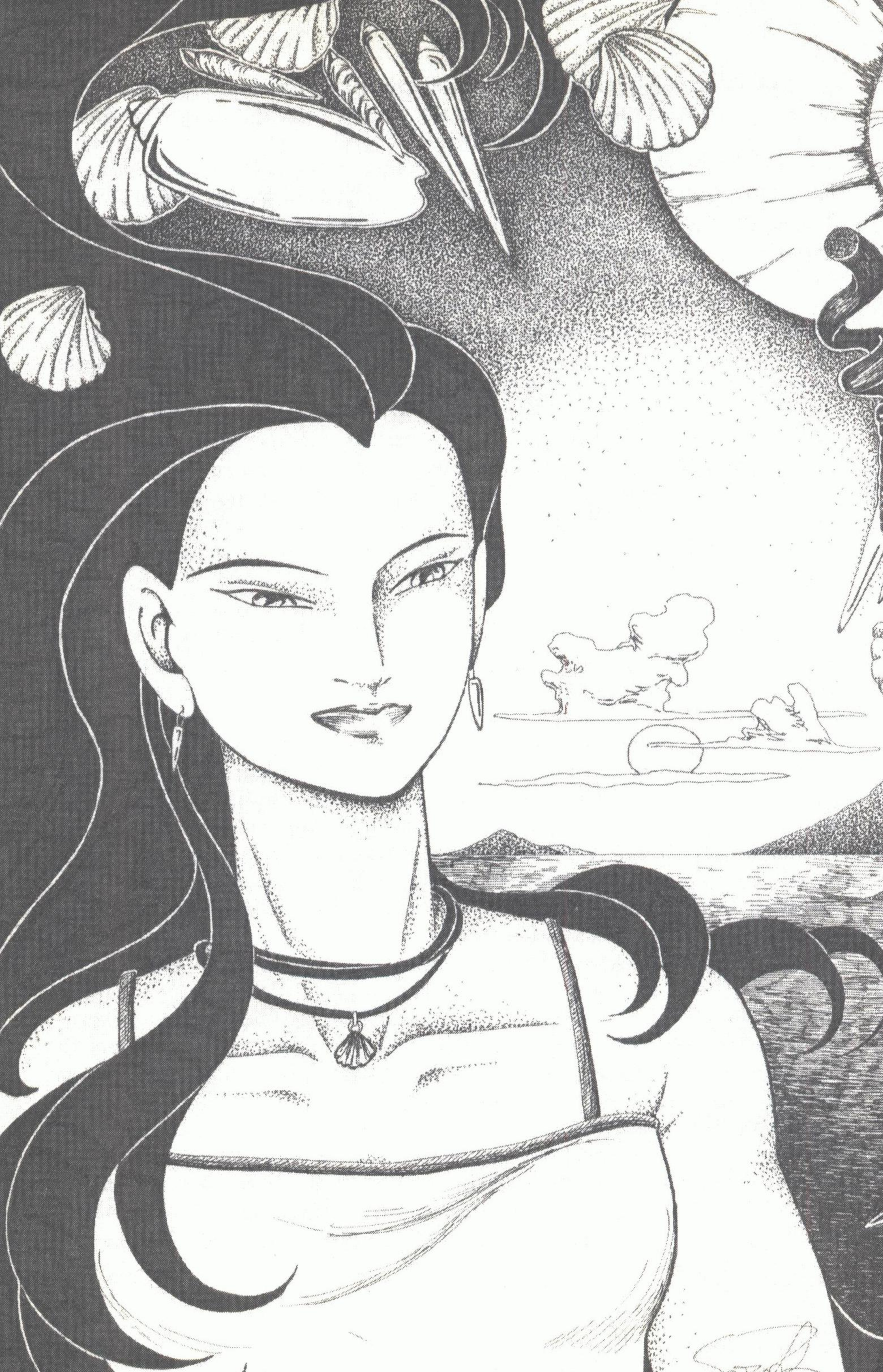
She lifted rocks until she had worked her way right across to the seaward side of the outcrop. Stepping down to the level of the sand, she shielded her eyes against the glare of the sun against the water and looked out to sea. From this distance its surface appeared almost still, as if it might be waiting for something. There was no wind, and therefore no sails. Her grandmother hadn't said what time of year it was that Conrad Iverson had taken his boat and driven it out onto the ocean. It was natural to imagine such things happening in the dying part of the year, in the violent storms of late October or November, but there was nothing to say that it hadn't taken place on just such a day as this. It was painful to consider what a man would do out there, becalmed in his own despair like the Ancient Mariner. Mel looked away from the sea and back along the shore, wondering if it were worth examining the rocks on this side of the tidepool.

She thought at first that the long black shape sprawled across the sand was a refugee dustbin liner, blown down upon the rocks from somewhere in the borderland of beach huts, but as she came a little closer she began to realise that it was the body of a man. Without being aware of it she slowed her pace almost to a standstill, unwilling yet to look for words that might describe her fear. When she was near enough to see that his clothes were dry she began to relax again. Sleeping, she thought, noticing how his left arm had been curled under to support his head. She stepped in towards him, still hoping for the reassuring sight of his breathing. She wondered if he knew that the tide would soon be coming in. She almost tripped over the bulging carrier bag hiding in the shadow of one of the larger rocks. There was a piece of honey coloured driftwood lying across it, stopping its mouth and holding it fast to the sand.

The man remained immobile. Mel knelt down by the bag and lifted the softly gnarled stick away from the plastic. The bag was identical to the hundreds of 'spares' her grandmother kept folded away in one of the kitchen drawers, white, and bearing the orange logo of the local supermarket. Its contents could have been collected by Mel herself on any one of her innumerable beachcombing expeditions, but, as in the case of the giant whelk shell, the man's finds were all one bigger, one better. He had three mermaid's purses, a razor shell with both of its valves intact, a perfect yellow periwinkle. He had even managed to come by a cowrie shell, tiny, shiny, and crowned with a band of gold. Mel had never been able to find one, at least not on this beach. There was something almost unpleasant about the man's luck, something that was not pure enough to even be called luck.

But there were other things, too, things that didn't look as if they had come from the beach. Almost at the bottom of the bag she came upon a St Christopher's medal on a fine silver chain. It was tarnished almost black, like the single dirty foreign coin you might find buried at the bottom of your suitcase at the end of a Summer holiday. Salt must do that, she thought. Dad would know. On the back of the pendant there was an engraving in cursive italics: 'A.M.I 10.5.56' The metal felt somehow oily in her hands. The chain ran, quick as a lizard, over her fingers and back into the darker recesses of the bag.

The other thing was an old powder compact, its silver dulled down to the same lustreless black. On the front was a raised design showing exotic birds among improbable foliage. Art Nouveau or Art Deco; she could never remember which was supposed to be which. Mel felt for the catch and pressed it, letting the case spring open. The hinge was stiff, moving with a high-pitched creaking that was like a tiny door moving in an ancient house. The powder caked in one half of the case was grey as dust and stuck together in a solid, immovable wad. Its original perfume had been replaced by an absence of smell, tinged by the scent of the sea. The round mirror that would have originally lined the lid was gone and had probably been gone for a long time. The blackening surface beneath it had acquired its own patina, against which the spiral made from a single strand of



corn-coloured, sun-bleached hair stood out like a piece of white thread sticking to a newly-pressed, dark grey suit. Mel took the hair, her stomach clutching in against itself in a mixture of triumph and quiet horror that was utterly new to her. She raised the strand quickly to the light, as if checking its provenance, and then wound it carefully around the upper joint of her left hand little finger. The skin above it tightened and went red.

She unbent her legs and stood up, wincing with pins and needles. The man appeared not to have moved at all. She took off her rucksack and worked her hand in under the cardigan at the bottom, her fingers closing with the sureness of a blind man over the great white shell that lay beneath it. Out in the light it looked even brighter than before, the fragile white of a piece of ancient, sun-bleached bone. Mel held it out at arm's length, her hand hovering above the open mouth of the white and orange plastic bag, and then drew back, clutching the shell protectively against her chest. The thing had been hers, too, after all, even if only for a little while. She moved a few steps away towards the rocks, laid the shell beside her on the sand, and began to dig with her hands. The sand was soft and damp, like brown sugar. It was easy to move. She wanted the hole to be at least a foot deep.

There had been a programme once, part of their geography course, about the mountain tribes of New Guinea. Some of the people living in the most remote areas had never seen a white man before; they spoke of the film crew as devils, or gods – in the minds of these people devils and gods seemed to be interchangeable. Mel remembered how the elders of the tribe had not allowed the cameramen to take any souvenir photographs. They believed that their souls would be held captive within the picture, that the white man would be able to wield power over them, even from the great distance of his freezing homeland. One very old woman had been filmed cutting her toenails. When she had finished she gathered up the parings from the ground, being scrupulously careful not to leave any behind, and then buried them at the foot of a great tree that she worshipped as the spirit of her grandfather. She had wanted to avoid the toenails being used as part of any black magic that might be tried against her. Her people held such personal relics as the most powerful and dangerous of medicines, or weaponry. For once, even Cass had enjoyed the geography lesson. She said the documentary had reminded her of some horror film or other. Mel finished burying the shell and patted down the sand on top. Once she had placed a rock on top of the spot she had dug in, nothing showed. 'Superstitious nonsense,' she muttered, thinking about what her grandmother had said. She wondered how many years it would take for the shell to work itself free of the sand, and whether, in all that time, the sea would be able to teach it to sing again.

Straightening up, she looked across at the man, and then at the approaching sea. The tide was much closer in now, near enough for her to see the individual crests of the shore-bound waves. Without wanting to, Mel bent over the man, searching vainly for the signs of his breathing, the movement of air about his face,

the steady rise and fall of his dark suited chest. There was nothing. Her mind fixed for a moment on the silver powder compact, thinking that if it had still had its mirror then she could have held it beneath the man's nose, like they did in the crime programmes, to see if it would begin to mist up.

It was then that she became aware that the man was moving, turning within his jacket like a toad inside its skin. He rolled slowly onto his back, folded his arms loosely across his chest, and opened his eyes. Although his clothes still appeared to be dry, the man gave off a steady reek of the sea, a smell that might have belonged to something that had been steeped for days, perhaps weeks, in a greenish, stagnant pool of salty water.

'Stay on the path, Amelie,' he said. 'I don't want to tell you again.' His voice was low and steady, but he appeared to be looking out at nothing. Mel ran, hitching her rucksack up over one shoulder as she went. It bumped against her back, slowing her down, but she couldn't bring herself to let it go. There were so many things of hers inside it, after all. The saliva drying at the back of her throat tasted of seawater. There was a pounding in her head that felt like the onward, angry rush of a red-waved, poisoned ocean. She wondered how many times the man had lain there on the sand, hoping that this time, when the tide came in, he might finally be washed away. When she eventually gained the promenade, she looked back and saw that the sea was already covering the first line of rocks, and that, other than the sea, the sand appeared to be empty.

On the evening of the next day the Promenade was fleet with walkers. It always became pleasantly cooler after six. Mel was glad that she'd told Gran that she'd be fine going over to Ferrers Green by herself. Her father could have picked her up from the house, of course, but Mel didn't want her grandmother to have to admit to letting Matthew Cunningham over the threshold. They would never have heard the end of it.

'It's only twenty minutes' walk,' she had said. 'There'll be tons of people over there.'

At least that was turning out to be true.

She concentrated her mind on what she could remember of the menu at Chez Veronique, and on the shouts and screams coming from the beach. Once she got past the thickets of samfire and back onto the Promenade proper at the Green she would be able to see them, a motley crew of eleven and twelve year olds spread out across the sands in attitudes of comradely combat reminiscent of a scene from the Boy's Own Paper.

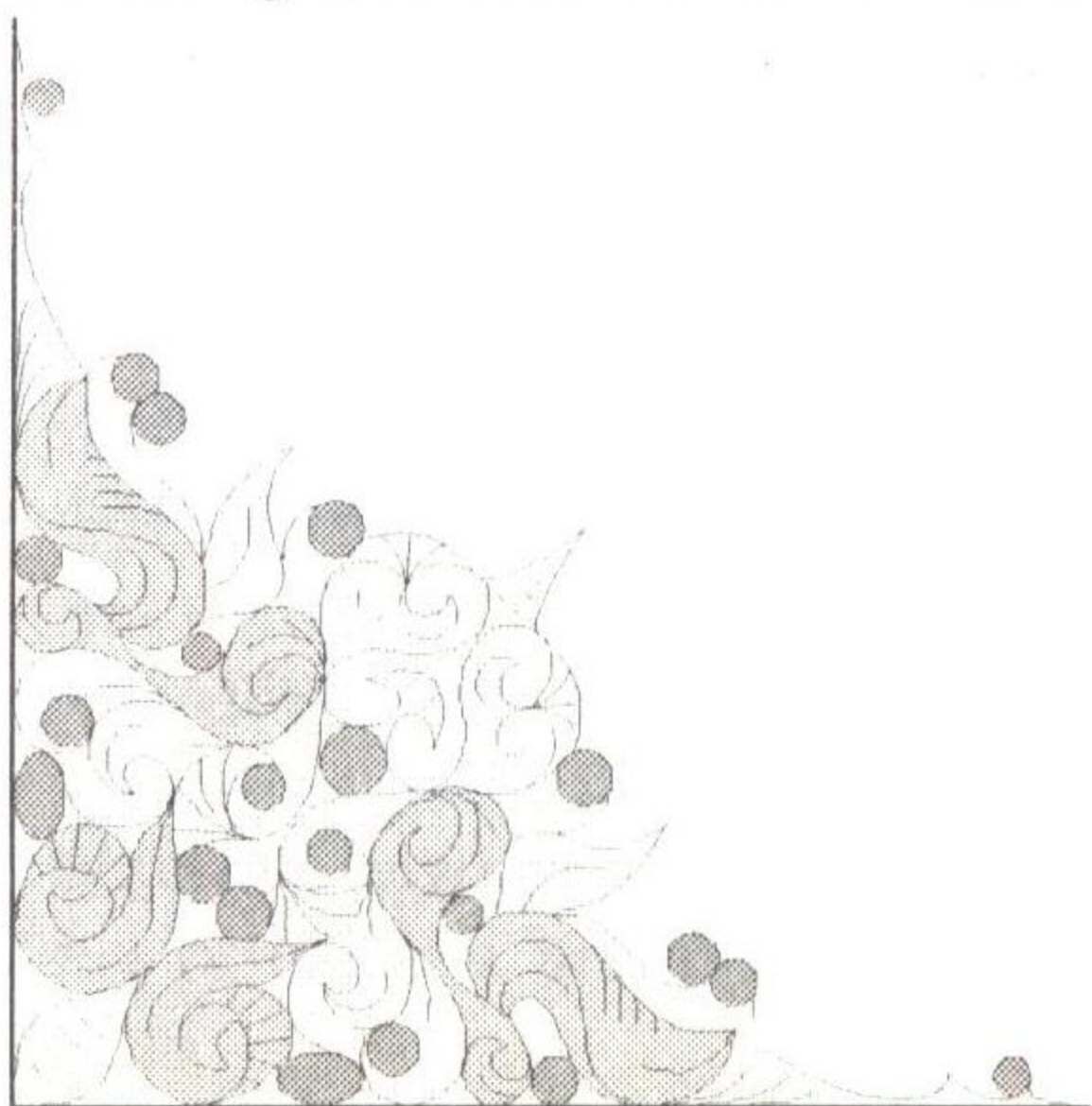
'Fat Willie's out!' crowed someone, each word distinct on a sudden shore-borne eddy of air before being dragged under in a rising tide of catcalls and guffaws. Just don't look at it, Mel said to herself. It can't do anything. No-one will be there. There had been people on the path directly in front of her, but they must have been walking exceptionally quickly. In any case, there was no sign of them now.

It was really just a run-down old shack, and she was surprised that the locals hadn't clubbed together to get the council to knock it down. It was the sort of thing that normally got people going around here. She stole furtive glances at the bungalow from under her lowered eyelids as she approached the loose gap in the bushes where it stood, noting how ordinary it was, how boringly ugly. An eyesore, her mother would have said. An invitation to squatters. Nobody could live there, though, she thought, looking quite openly now at the peeling, dry-as-dust, once white walls, at the scarred blue paint on the decisively closed front door. It's damp.

The hunched black thing crouched in the long grass to one side of the absent gate made her heart lurch violently in the split second before she realised what it was. Just a dustbin bag full of household refuse. It was tied shut at the top, but had split down one side, spilling part of its contents out onto the verge. She could see crumpled up balls of paper, an apple core, and a squashed silver tin that looked like one of those that usually contained sardines. Mel frowned in disgust. Dumping rubbish was the worst kind of laziness. Then her lips pressed themselves together in a short grimace of a smile as she realised how like her grandmother she was already beginning to sound. She spied a long glass bottle rolling in the dirt, a brown sauce bottle, perhaps, or maybe one of the old fashioned coca colas. She kicked it along for a while as if it were a pebble, listening to the dry scuttering sound it made on the sandy gravel of the ground. Then, with the Green almost in sight, a sudden whim made her turn and kick it with all her force out over the scrawny bushes towards the sea.

It spun upwards and outwards, seeming at first as if it might indeed carry as far as the ocean. Mel watched it flash against the sky, wondering why it was that the most ordinary things could sometimes turn out to be the most entrancing. It reached its zenith and began the inevitable fall to earth, far short of the sea but set free, at least, of the bin bag and out into the wild. For one brief moment it seemed that the whole glory of the setting sun was held captive within that one frail vessel, transforming it, as it flew, into a miraculous thing of almost alien beauty, an enchanted lamp set ablaze by someone somewhere in the land of faerie. The yellow-orange glare illuminated the dusty, pallid green of the stale grass below, turning it to cricket baize. The interior of the bottle was filthy with grime, but this

seemed hardly to impede the passage of light at all; rather it served to enrich its jewel-like glowing. All the same, anyone would have been bound to admit that the sun's rays burned brightest and most fiercely when they fell upon the one patch of glass in the curvature that had remained clean. Clean, and, were it to be seen up close, bearing the unmistakable, asymmetrical form of a tiny but nonetheless perfect human handprint.



Oozehooks

Ian Hunter

illustrated by Chris Leaper

There was a crash.

Ted Clayton looked across the office. His supervisor, Gary French had stood up, knocking over the chair behind him. He started lumbering across the room, a vacant expression on his face. Is he angry, Clayton thought, feeling slightly nervous.

There was something in French's eyes, or rather, the lack of something – anything – which disturbed him. He tried to smile, but it withered on his lips and he looked away, aware that French was getting closer, looming over him, and there was hardly anyone in the office at lunchtime.

‘Something up, Gary?’

French's arm moved and Clayton felt himself moving back, trying to sink into the deepest recesses of his work station, but his supervisor's hand held only a piece of paper

‘Job ... opportunity,’ French said in a slow, deep voice.

Clayton took the paper and glanced at the web address on it. ‘Thanks.’

French turned away slowly and stopped. Clayton looked at him, and shuddered. Is he just going to stand there, he wondered, but eventually his supervisor lurched down the office towards his own desk.

He looked at the note again:

LIVE SLIME SEEKS A WEB DESIGNER.

REMUNERATION PACKAGE INCLUDES HOUSE AND CAR

www.liveslime.oozehooks.com

Worth a look, he thought and logged on.

The screen was dark, and then he could see something like bubbles floating upwards. Fish tank? He peered at the screen. Even though the picture became clearer, there didn't seem to be much in the way of slime, although he could see tentacles, and an eye. Giant, staring, dead-like. He thought of the look on French's face and shuddered.

Words swam into focus. Strange words. He read them with difficulty, lips moving, voice barely audible.

Pain, like an ice-pick twisting into his skull, erupted in his head, straight through his right eye. He put a hand to his head, and everything seemed to get

dark, blurring in from the edges of his sight, then it cleared again. Slowly it dawned on him that his nose was running. He raised his fingers to his face.

‘What the—?’

His nose seemed to be running in reverse, upwards, away from his fingers.

He stood up, feeling slightly dizzy and noticed that French was across the office, handing something to Marcia and Sharlene, who were just back from lunch. He opened his mouth, about to tell French he was going to grab some fresh air when the phone rang.

‘It’s you, isn’t it?’

‘What?’

‘You are the one,’ the man’s voice said.

‘Who is this?’

‘Joe Sentinel. Get your ass up here. I need help.’

‘Where?’

‘The house.’

‘What house?’

‘Close your eyes,’ the voice told him.

He did.

He opened his eyes. The house was there. 194 Angell Street, Providence, Rhode Island. He closed his eyes to make sure. Yes, it was the same house he could see in his mind, but there was something strange going on. Just when he closed his eyes, the real house seemed to waver and vanish, as if he had a blank spot in his vision.

The front garden was a disaster. A veritable jungle. He didn’t like the look of the tall grass. It swayed from side to side, like a moving pendulum, or a beating heart, or – he swallowed – like the writhing tentacles on the web site. There was a FOR SALE sign lying to the side. The gate shrieked when he opened it. Large insects scuttled across the path and into the overgrown undergrowth.

He walked down the path, aware of the swaying grass. Then, suddenly, the grass stopped moving and Clayton wanted to stop moving himself. Just long enough to turn and run, jump over the gate if he couldn’t open it. Leave his suitcase behind. Pain blossomed in his head. His nose started running again, and he knew what he had to do. He ran for the door and began to pound on it, certain that the grass had started to move again, but only enough to let something through, something that was coming for him.

The door opened. A thin old, bald, man with a red face smiled at him. ‘You got here. Good. I’m Joe Sentinel.’

Clayton quickly shook the old man’s dry, parchment-like hand and stepped inside. He pushed the door behind him. Something struck it from outside.

Joe Sentinel smiled. ‘They’re only having fun with you. You, of all the people in the world, are perfectly safe here.’

Clayton shrugged. ‘I wasn’t sure this was the right place. When I closed my

eyes the house seemed to fade away.'

The old man grinned. 'It's done that since 1961 when everyone thought it was torn down.'

Clayton frowned. 'I don't understand.'

Sentinel tapped the side of his head. 'Protection.'

There was another suitcase on the floor, Clayton dropped his own beside it. 'I saw a FOR SALE sign.'

The old man looked surprised. 'Did you really? I thought it had blown down years ago, or been obliterated by the strangely vociferous plants that grow in the garden. The vines, in particular. Thick, they are, like tentacles. I take no responsibility for the number of household pets that have gone missing over the years. The neighbours should know the risks. And as for the children—' Sentinel shook his head. 'These are dangerous times. Anything could have happened to those little ones, but even I am not so hard-hearted to agree that the loss to the parents is tragic.'

Clayton looked around. The house was silent, tomb-like. 'What is this place.'

'This house once belonged to Howard Phillips Lovecraft who died back in the 1930s. He wrote horror fiction. Ground-breaking stuff it was in his day. No-one realised that the reason it was so original was because it wasn't so original after all.'

'What, you mean he plagiarised it?'

The old man chuckled. 'Oh, no, far from it. He didn't invent these monstrous beings from beyond the veil who were desperate to take over our world. He lived with them. Right here in this house. All of his stories included code words which created a programme in the brain of the reader. Oozehooks, is the technical term. When the majority of the people on earth have been programmed, the Slimy Ones will step forth from the shadows and rule the planet.'

Clayton touched his head. 'I've been getting these headaches.'

'And a runny nose, I'll bet,' said Sentinel. 'That's the Oozehooks at work. But you're special. Useful. You have talents that can bring about the end of the world.'

'Uh, huh,' muttered Clayton with a nod of his head as if he recognised that being alone with a madman in a strange house wasn't such a good idea after all. The old man was obviously the front man for some sort of cult which had been brainwashing him, probably by beaming messages straight into his brain. 'I think it's time I was going.'

The old man shook his head. 'That's no longer an option, I'm afraid. Try if you like.'

You bet I will, Clayton thought. His suitcase was right next to the door. In a few seconds he would be sprinting down the path and away from this crazy place. He turned. Or at least, his top half turned, but his legs were rooted to the spot. Pain erupted all over his head, and his nose was streaming. He swung his arms and twisted at the waist.

And fell over.

He looked up. There was something across the room. Glistening. Slimy. Horrible.

‘Speaking of Slimy Ones. There’s one over there,’ Sentinel said helpfully. ‘He, She, or It – well, can you tell? – is called Densar, the Immovable. Call me sexist, but I refer to them all as male. I think it’s the glistening sheen that covers them which makes them male in my mind. Anyway, Densar does move, although it is barely perceptible. For weeks now he has wanted to watch a programme on the Discovery Channel about Lost Civilisations, so it will be interesting to see what happens when he finally gets to the sofa. Even those from beyond the deep and the dark with immense cosmic powers have to learn that it’s one thing to be sitting in front of the television, it’s another thing entirely if you don’t have control of the remote.’

Sentinel reached down and helped Clayton to his feet. ‘Come into the lounge. That ... thing on the sofa is Multilops, the All-Seeing.’

Clayton peered at the collection of giant, glistening eyes, bobbing up and down on the sofa, like the biggest collection of balloons he had ever seen.

‘I CAN’T SEE THE TELEVISION!’ a voice boomed.

Sentinel turned to Clayton. ‘Can you believe that?’ the old man whispered. ‘He can’t see. He has a thousand eyes and he can’t see the television.’ Sentinel turned round. ‘Why can’t you see?’

‘YOU ARE IN THE WAY!’

‘Tell me. How many eyes do you have trained on the television right now?’

‘EIGHT HUNDRED AND SEVENTY FOUR!’

‘That’s a lot of eyes,’ said Clayton.

Sentinel nodded. ‘So that must mean one hundred and twenty six of your eyes are not looking at the television, am I right?’

‘CORRECT, BECAUSE YOU ARE IN THE WAY!’

‘No, it’s because you are sitting on those eyes.’

‘I AM NOT!’

‘Ignore him,’ said Sentinel. ‘He does this all the time. Once he had a chance of getting into the Guinness Book of Records for owning the biggest and oddest looking pair of spectacles in the world, but the verifier who visited the house met with a – uh – tragic accident. I try not to think about that day. I had dreams of appearing on television, perhaps going on tour with the famous spectacles and getting out of this dammed house. Now he wears contact lenses. If you buy the house, one of your duties will be to make sure he does not fall asleep at night with any in his eyes.’

‘HAVE YOU PHONED THE LASER PEOPLE YET?’

‘Not yet, but I will, I promise. Let’s go,’ said Sentinel. ‘He wants laser treatment on his eyes, corrective surgery, but it would cost a fortune. Let’s visit the bathroom. I have some poodles handy. That is the whining you hear, nothing sinister. At least, not in this part of the house.’

Clayton followed the old man, but glanced round at his suitcase sitting invitingly beside the front door. Pain spasmed through his head like a muscle flexing.

Sentinel pointed across the room. 'I sit over there mostly by the computer. I'm supposed to be writing new stories set in Lovecraft's world of the Cthulhu Mythos. Keeping the programming going, and what's my reward going to be? Zombie-slavedom, like the rest of humanity. That's why I've been slowing things down, writing other things. Stories for women's magazines. That sort of thing. *Holiday Romance Nearly Ruined My Marriage. I Fell For The Bank Robber Who Held Me Hostage*. I've got my sights set on an agony aunt's slot. I know it looks a mess with all those boxes lying around. The current plan is to improve the website and linking it to cameras placed throughout the house. *Slime on Live*, I think we'll call it. Of course, the grand plan is to create a virus which will spread the Oozehooks much faster, but I have to confess that the technology is a bit beyond me. I suppose that's why you are here.'

Clayton shrugged. 'Looks like it.'

The old man started to go upstairs. 'You have to be careful when you go upstairs. See those marks? That's Yuk-Poo, the Fungi from Stenchar. It's blasphemous, bubbling luminosity shudders with a fearsome and unnatural malevolency which will gnaw hungrily at—' The old man rolled his eyes upwards and grinned. 'Sorry about that. Lapsed into some Lovecraft there. Anyway keep away from it. It stains. I've ruined some good jackets brushing against that stuff.'

Clayton frowned, tilting his head. He could hear something upstairs.

The old man laughed, a noise like bones rattling. 'Hear that? Burping, yes. That's the Slobboths.'

'It sounds—' Clayton shook his head slightly. 'Creepy.'

'Listen, you're lucky. These guys have many different way to pass wind and none of them are pleasant. I rarely see them. Just leave their beer and donuts at the doors. It costs me a fortune to keep them going in beer, but I get a bulk supply of frozen donuts and put them in the microwave. I'm not too choosy about the donuts, and neither are they. As long as they contain the correct mixture of fat, additives, preservatives and colouring, the Slobboths are quite happy. That's all they'll eat. Some of the Slobboths are so big they can't get through the door anymore and I've had to have all their beds reinforced.'

There were poodles upstairs. Chained to the wall. They were clearly terrified.

'Now this is what you have to do if you need the toilet. First, release one of the poodles from that chain on the wall over there. Second, pick it up. Third, enter the toilet and throw the poodle in the bath. I'll demonstrate. Here, boy. It's okay. That's right. You really have to hold them tight once they get a whiff of what's behind this door. Could you turn the handle for me?'

Clayton looked at the trembling poodle in Sentinel's arms.

'Is this a good idea?'

'Hey, you need to know these things. Thank you. Ready? Open. Go! Now



you throw the poodle into the path. Quick, pull the shower curtain or there will be blood everywhere.'

Clayton stood hypnotised. The bath was eating the poodle.

'Now you pee,' Sentinel said calmly as if he was reciting from a manual.

'Take two poodles, one under each arm, if you want to do anything else. Okay? Got it? You have to hurry when the poodle stops making agonising sounds and you really have to move it when there are no more feeding noises.'

Clayton wasn't listening. He was watching the blood drip down the shower curtain.

'Like now.'

'W-w-what?' he said dully.

Sentinel glared at him. 'Don't stand there. Move!'

They charged outside. Sentinel pulled the door shut.

‘That bath had teeth.’

‘Yes, yes, I know the bath is lined with teeth. It’s a giant mouth. Those teeth go on forever so they say and the tongue isn’t so great either. I’ve heard stories that if you jump into a bath with teeth and don’t touch the sides then you will come out of a similar bath somewhere else in the universe. Think that’s true? Crock of shit, I say.’

‘That bath had teeth,’ Clayton said again.

Sentinel slapped him on the arm. ‘You’ll get over it. Still, there are stories that Lovecraft didn’t die tragically young, but he braved the bath with teeth and is elsewhere. Lucky bugger, if that’s what happened to him. Need I add, never, ever, call a plumber out. You do do DIY, I suppose?’

‘Not really,’ Clayton was about to say, but he felt something pulling him. Not the Oozehooks, he realised. There was no headache. No runny nose.

‘I want to go in that room,’ he said, pointing at a door. Slime oozed out from beneath it.

‘I’ll bet you do,’ said Sentinel, chuckling. ‘See my feet. Slippers. No socks. I never wear them. Want to know why? Sock-Yoghurt. He’s part sock, part amphibian. Ever lost a sock? Then it’s here. They always end up here. Every missing sock in the world comes to this house, this room, adding to the bulk of Sock-Yoghurt. He’s getting so big, I might need to move him down to the basement. You wouldn’t believe it, but socks are heavy things, especially when they are filled with dripping slime. Come on, we’ll miss the rest of this floor out, unless you want to donate your socks? No, I didn’t think so.’ Sentinel pointed. ‘Nigofarlytotipe—’

Clayton frowned. ‘Did you just say something there?’

The old man shook his head. ‘You don’t understand? I don’t blame you. It is the hardest Slimy Ones name to pronounce. Let me see. I’ll lick my lips. Deep breath. Here goes. Nigofarltot—’

Clayton shook his head.

‘No, no,’ said Sentinel. ‘I’ll take my teeth out, that might make it easier.’ He put his hand to his mouth and his false teeth popped out. For a terrible second or two, Clayton thought he might be asked to hold them. Sentinel took a deep breath. ‘Nigofa—’

Clayton jumped back.

Sentinel looked embarrassed. ‘Sorry. I do have a tendency to spray when my teeth are out. Let’s just call it N. If you look into the shadows up there you’ll see N.’

More slime, thought Clayton, although this one could be a slime bat, hanging from the ceiling.

‘See the glistening eyes?’ Sentinel said proudly. ‘The glint of sharp teeth? N is a flying muscle. A giant, flapping tongue. Sort of like a manta ray that lives out of water. We better not linger. N barely tolerates me, but you, an outsider – look

out!’

Clayton looked back. Something dark was descending on him, scything through the air.

A hand grabbed his arm. ‘Run! Duck!’

He tried to do both and something grabbed him, strong and barbed. He looked up and slime coated his cheek. He looked down and saw Sentinel waving a fist in the air.

‘Put him down this instant! Do you hear me?’ the old man cried. ‘Don’t eat him!’

Clayton moved his legs as if kicking, hoping he could jerk himself free. Hot, foul air blasted in his direction. A glance upwards showed him mouths within mouths. This was a flying version of the bath, and he was the poodle.

‘He’s my replacement!’ Sentinel shouted. ‘He’s here to speed up the programming, the Oozehooks!’

Clayton nodded vigorously in agreement and slime coated his hair. Despite his predicament he was disturbed to realise that he was noting prime sites for webcams.

Then he was falling, about to slam right into the old man who stepped aside at the last moment. Dust rose in a cloud all around him.

‘Owff!’ he moaned.

Sentinel’s hands were clasped together. ‘Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, oh great and mighty, Nigo, uh, Nigo ... ah, whatever.’ The old man crouched down. ‘Are you okay, kid? Nothing broken? Don’t worry I’m sure N will get used to you.’

‘I can’t wait,’ Clayton groaned as he got to his feet.

‘Look, you’ve had a tough day. Let’s go down to the computer.’

Clayton nodded and followed the old man downstairs, keeping his eyes open for slime and fungi or anything else that might melt his body and leave just a smouldering pair of shoes. Sentinel steered him to the computer and eased the seat under him. There were boxes everywhere. Clayton picked one up.

‘I know how this works,’ he said.

Sentinel reached into his jacket. ‘Good. Good. I thought you might. Take this. It’s my A to Z of everything in this house. Don’t go near anything marked in red capitals and exclamation marks and you should be okay.’

‘You’re going?’

The old man nodded. ‘Places to go, things to do.’

Clayton looked over his shoulder. Looked longingly at his suitcase. He flinched as pain lanced his head. He didn’t even bother to try and wipe his nose this time.

‘Will you make it?’

‘Sure. I’m no use to them now.’

The old man squeezed his shoulder. ‘Take care kid, and put a few gremlins in the system, huh? I’ve got a lot of living to catch up on.’

Clayton nodded and didn't look round to watch the old man leave, but he listened, half-expecting to hear a scream from outside, but there was nothing. Cradling his hands together, he stretched out his arms and cracked his fingers. There was ooze in his head and it was talking to him, talking him through the end of the world.

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The Lonely Sea and the Sky

Paul Garside

I met her on a bright, sharp autumn afternoon. I think I fell in love almost at once, though I had never believed in such things before. I was intoxicated by my feelings for her – in those first few days I was happier than I had ever been before.

And after that, everything happened so quickly – we were married before the new year was a month old. My friends were amazed – and, I think, amused – by the speed of it all, and by the change in my normally reserved demeanour.

Our life in the city settled to a routine surprisingly quickly. We had our jobs – though I never managed to find time to visit the gallery where she worked; we had our circle of friends – my friends, really, I suppose; we had all of the other diversions a city has to offer. We were content, but I think we had lost something of the excitement of those first few days. I know it seemed so to me.

So, to mark the first anniversary of our meeting, we decided to abandon the bustle of the city and spend a week in leisurely seclusion, with only ourselves for company. We found a cottage for rent in a small village on the coast, certain that the last tourists of the season would have long since departed and that we would be untroubled by the normal holiday clamour.

We saw few enough people when we arrived. I collected the keys from a woman in the village shop and bought a few essential supplies whilst I was there. After that, we retired to the only pub in the place to wash away the thirst of travel, and found that all but empty too. Then on to the cottage itself, weather-worn and snug, perched at the edge of the dunes overlooking the sea, and perfectly suited to our needs.

After that first day, we hardly ventured into the village at all. I made brief forays, once or twice, to bolster out diminishing supplies, but that was all really. We were content to keep our own company, to walk along the beach and across the moors behind, or simply to stay in the cottage, basking in the unfamiliar and delightfully simple pleasure of an open fire.

We were as happy and as oblivious to the world as we had been in those earliest days together.

On our fifth day there, the storm struck. The first hint of it came in the afternoon, as the wind steadily built and a few heavy drops of rain spattered against the windows. The clouds gathered as day slipped into dusk, blurring the sunset to a ruddy gloom. Distant thunder growled across the bay.

We welcomed the storm. It emphasised our isolation and made it seem as if we were the only people in the world. We built up the driftwood fire in the hearth and pulled the threadbare sofa close by it. As the final light of the day faded, we nestled together in its warmth and watched the shadows dance with the flames.

The rain beat down more and more heavily, until the sound of it became a constant beat. It was joined by the howl of the wind as it coiled about the cottage.

Every so often the darkness was rent by lightning, bright enough to be seen even through the heavy curtains; on its heels the thunder rolled, growing ever closer.

I barely heard the voices at first, lost as they were in the fury of the storm. But as I gradually became aware of them, they seemed to twine about my thoughts and began to inspire a vague sense of apprehension. I glanced across at her, but I found no echo of my own fears in her face. She seemed perfectly at ease.

My alarm grew as the voices swelled from the roar of the sea and the storm, until they all but drowned out the tempest. It seemed as if a great crowd surrounded the cottage. I hurried to the window and peered out into the darkness, but my eyes, accustomed to the brightness of the interior, could make out no more than the fleeting suggestions of shadows.

Then, for a moment, the night was bleached by an actinic brightness. There was nothing there. Nothing. An instant after the flash, and before I could even consider whether the voices had disappeared along with the crowd, the thunder came. It was so close and loud that I barely heard it at all, more sensed it as a blow as the pane leapt against my touch and the boards shifted underfoot.

Half-deafened and with an indelible afterimage etched into my vision, I turned back to the room. She still sat by the fire, apparently unperturbed by it all. She caught my eye and smiled, a unfeigned and guileless gesture. Almost reassured I returned to sit beside her, but as I sat I became aware of that burgeoning sound again – the voices returned from the crash of the waves and the howl of the wind, and behind them a new noise, the heartbeat regular pulse of a great drum.

I turned back to her, my fear real now, but she was still smiling. Her gaze passed through me, though, fixed on some distant and unknowable point. A plummeting chill clutched at my innards. I rose again, my attention torn between her and the throng that surged around the cottage.

Then she started to laugh, the happy and contented laughter of a child. The sound was so incongruous that I simply stopped where I was, suddenly unable to bring my thoughts to bear at all. Her laughter rose, untroubled and without the least hint of my own fear. A turmoil of emotions rose within me, panic and confusion and a kind of strange euphoria. I began to laugh, too, with a hysteria that threatened at any moment to tumble over into pure terror.

Then she gripped my hand, her eyes bright with a fervour I could not explain.

‘Come on.’

I hesitated.

‘Come on.’

And, not waiting for my response, she dragged me towards the door and then out into the night. The rain plastered cloth to skin in an instant, and the wind scoured any last warmth from flesh.

She led me down through the dunes, sure of her path despite the darkness and the storm. I was left to stumble in her wake. It was not until we reached the hard, flat sands that I realised that I could see no sign of the crowds who had gathered about the cottage, and nor could I hear them. I looked up and around, somehow more fearful of their absence than their presence, but she pulled me against her, drawing me away from my anxieties, and began to move to an instinctive rhythm. As we moved faster and faster, I realised that one sound remained, the beat to which we danced, the sound

of that great drum. I could do nothing but submit to it.

The dance became ever more frantic, until it seemed that I was simply an echo of the beat, not a conscious thing in my own right. It filled my mind, pushing out everything but the knowledge of her presence as she danced in my arms.

And then I realised that we were not both slaves to the dance. Her motions directed the rhythm; her pulse. I was swept along by it, by her, and I could do nothing to escape.

Then rational thought left me. I was simply an observer. I watched, I remembered, I danced – I could do nothing more. She twisted, turned, swept around me. She was no longer a thing of hampering flesh. She danced with flayed skin, with bone, with nerves opened up to the world, burning with sensation. The dead rose up from the sea and the sands, and danced around us, snatching her away from me in shreds and tatters. The roar of the sea that rose up to fill my ears was her laughter.

I danced until my limbs burnt and breath tore through me like fire. Though a terrible exhaustion crushed me, though fatigue and darkness blinded me and my fingers were too numb to feel her, still I held her, still I danced.

I fell. The sand was damp against my face and heavy with the stench of decay. My senses slipped away from me, and so too did the dead, sinking back into their untroubled slumber.

My last awareness was of the drumbeat, but it grew faint and distant, and then I could hear it no more.

I woke to the chill of dawn, soaked and freezing. My whole body ached and, for a moment, that pain was everything. And then – then – I remembered. I leapt to my feet, momentarily oblivious to my body's protests. I was alone. One set of footprints led from the dunes towards me, a single, straight trail. There was nothing more.

Panic forced any rational thought from my mind. I ran along the beach and up through the dunes, slowing with each step as my limbs filled with a liquid pain. I all but fell the final few steps to the cottage.

She was not there. The remnants of the fire still smouldered in the hearth and the sofa was pulled up close before it, just as we had left it, but she was not there. I called out for her and was answered with silence. I stumbled from room to room, vainly searching for some sign of her, finding nothing. I called again, but still there was no reply. After that, my memories become hazy. I think I must have fallen, for I next remember finding myself sprawled on the gravel path outside. The sun's height attested to the passage of hours rather than minutes.

Once more panic pushed me onwards. I ran down into the village, certain she must be there somewhere. The place was as quiet as it had ever been.

The woman in the shop denied seeing her. I arrived alone, she said. The landlord of the pub said the same. I refused to believe him. We had sat over there, by the bay window. We were the only people in the place! He must remember. He did not. He had only seen me, he said. I became incoherent. I began to shout at him, and then to weep. I barely recall him ushering me back out into the street.

Days passed. I could find no trace of her at all. There was nothing I could do but return to the city.

My so-called friends denied ever having met her. They remembered a succession of occasional girlfriends, they said, but no lasting relationships. As for a marriage, they just laughed when I mentioned that. They seemed convinced that I was playing some sort of elaborate game. I fled from their laughter. I could not abide to keep the company of people so mocking, and so fleeting in their loyalties.

The whole world colluded against me in her absence – there were no photographs, no letters, no single thing that even gave a hint that she had been here. I could find nothing of her at all. I could not quite recall the name of the gallery where she worked, and all those that I tried disavowed any knowledge of her. Even the registry office had no record of our marriage. The police had no interest, either – searching for someone who didn't exist? – and all but threw me out.

And, then, with the most profound grief of all, I realised that I could no longer even remember her name. Her face, too, had slipped from memory, leaving an impression of her presence, but no image, no certainty.

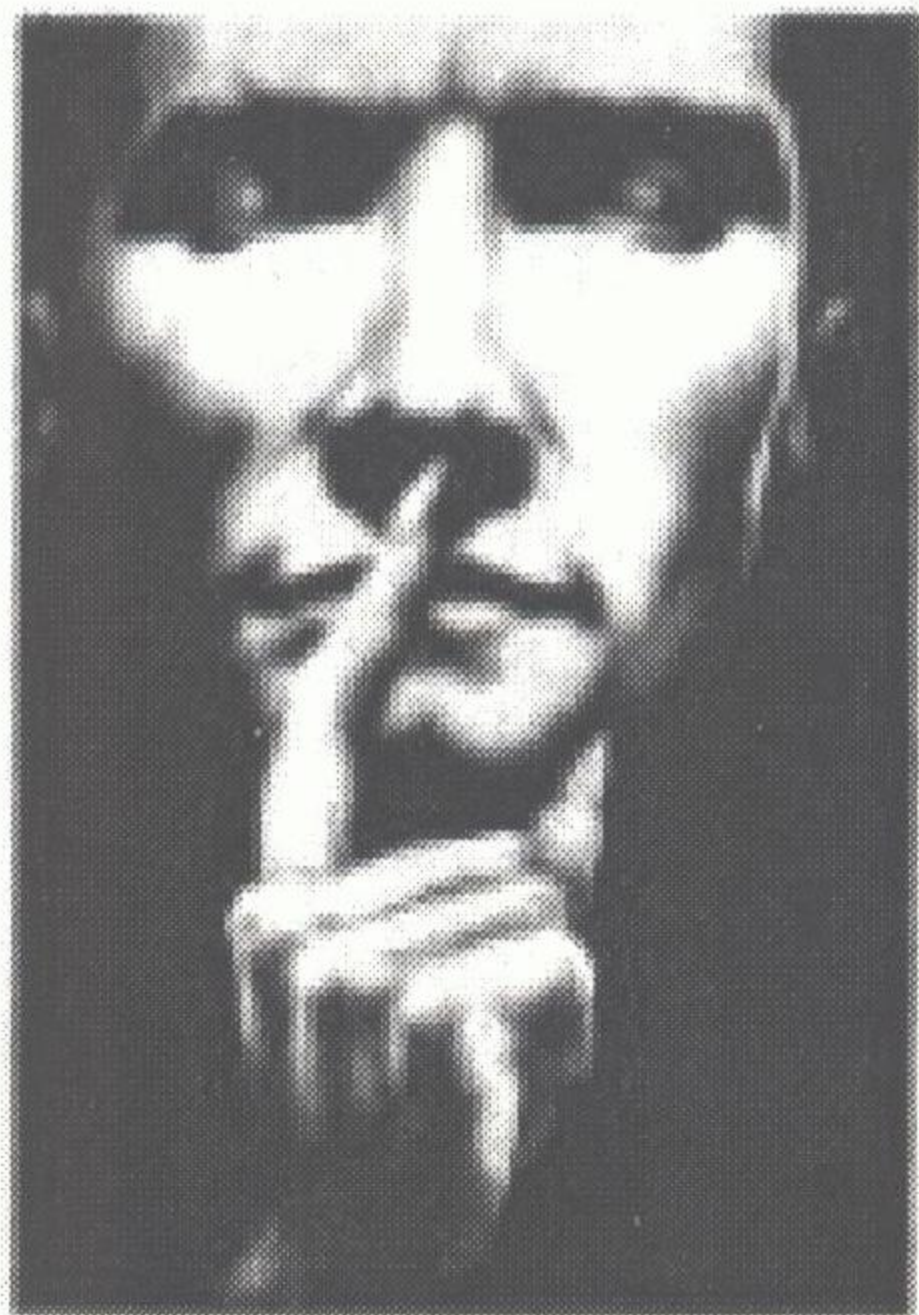
I began to wonder – and then to pray – that madness had taken me. In madness there would be a respite from pain; I would be able to forget. I hope for it still, but I am trapped with my pain and my memories. I can find no solace in alcohol, or prayer, or the prospect of death, for I know I must find her again. I must.

So I have returned to the sea. Not to the village – that place isn't important – but to the sea, where she was lost to me. I no longer know where I am, but it doesn't matter any more. I must eat, I suppose, and sleep, but these things are of no great importance, either. There is food to be found, if hunger drives me, and places to sleep.

This is my life now, the sea and the sand. I walk, unmindful of my path, or sit and simply stare out over the depths, waiting.

I see her in the elegant curve of a length of driftwood. I feel her bones in the ridged sand beneath my feet. Her voice carries to me in the crash of the waves and the raucous cries of the gulls. I taste her in the salt spray that dewes my lips. I know she is here. She must be.

I can do nothing but wait.



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Autumn Leaves

Alison Davies

illustrated by Lara Bandilla

The sky looks like a melon today; all soft and juicy round the edges, with the first golden flush of Autumn. And whilst we're on the subject can somebody tell me about the leaves? Yes, the falling rain of Autumn leaves, crimson, copper, feather plume array, good enough to eat. Their conciliatory hiss as I crush them under old leather. And yet they don't mind, one could assume they invite you to the ultimate decision; a carpet, waiting to be sullied, and I, the perfect villain for the piece.

I've had my share of Autumn leaves, of strange goodbyes and even stranger faces. I've sat through the veil of September mist, the sludge that clings to hands and fingers, and furs your tongue until you want to gag or spit it out. And I've listened to the tiny discord playing in my head, the twisted strings of discontent that spread into the vibrant melody of love once lost. And was it really love in the first place? And always it comes back to this. They keep on falling. Nothing changes.

It was how he found me in the first place. Sitting numb-fingered, in the lap of the great oak. Arms fused in a protective embrace, I was in no mind for idle conversation. And would have told him so, had it not been for the colour of his infinite eyes, the holy grail of his smile. Meadow green they were, and suddenly the Autumn leaves went right out of my mind. I would not be left this time.

'Did you think I would not come?' he says. Says without words, the question darting across burnt ochre features, caramel soft. And I don't answer because he doesn't really want one. But he places a hand on my shoulder, icy cold gust of wind, and I shiver.

'I've been feeling awful low,' I say. 'Been feeling like it's time for me.'

But I know that its not my decision to make, and if I had the guts, then maybe... but even so the seasons change and I jump on board, again. And still it stays the same, more goodbyes, more ways to lose.

'Will I always feel this way?'

And the emptiness swallows a lump of remorse that's been festering some place dark. And he moves closer, smiles, easy cherry blossom smile and nods to the breeze. I watch, my body aching for release. He always knows the perfect way to lift me. Time can't change that.

September 1990, hot sticky neon, and tight denims, parading through club land and music to rock your socks off. Hair, masses of it puffed out candyfloss hair and of course plenty of lip gloss, yes that was me. Having the time of my life,



except I didn't realise it. And still afraid to kiss, afraid that I might get it wrong and so I kept the boys at arm's length. Guess I was a bit of a tease, but who cares? I wriggled through many a dicey fence with my pride intact. And then he came, *from out of nowhere* as the song would say, heavy, throbbing rock made to be remembered. Just like him. And he walked me to the door, begged a parting kiss and that was it, my fate was sealed. And all around me Autumn danced its playful jig. I was unaware of Winter's calling, in those days. Now that's not to say that we were the perfect match. Oh yes, it becomes too easy to romanticise, and bathe in rosy petals when the truth is very different. Some days we fought like cat and dog, claws, teeth and some sneaky game plans. I was fickle in my youth and he was sullen, but the passion carried us through at least for a while.

'They're pulling it down. Did you know?'

The oak of ages, as I liked to call it. Great sentinel of our times, great destroyer.

'I suppose you'll be glad,' I say.

And he looks at me then, something like anger burning his features. 'Why? Why would that make me happy now?'

And I feel guilty. That's not what I meant. Not how it sounded.

'Sorry, I feel strange, my words aren't coming out right.'

And he reaches for my hand, skin so soft and air in an intimate exchange. And suddenly the sky is alight with a thousand fires, my head swims, bobs through the sea of colour and I'm back to beyond the goodbyes. To the day I was told. Me of little importance, secretly wondering if time would let our paths cross again. For hadn't he said I was the love of his life? Even when he was with her. But it didn't matter anyway because the Autumn came and took him away. Like everything else. And I'm alone in the cold and the dark.

I can't remember much about when they found me. Think that maybe someone shouted, words submersed with urgency, pounding at some door in my head. And I couldn't open my eyes, couldn't *do* anything. I was floundering in the void. And then there were hands, octopus like hands and fingers, pushing and prodding until the darkness gobbled me whole. I imagine death is like that.

But when I came round, a filthy germ in the sterile whiteness, the numbness had gone. And the hollow pain, before they arrived was only memory, everything, only memories. And I realised something, that life goes on, with a string of memories merely interchangeable, that's all it is; a fragile canvas that we create by our perspective. And hadn't mine always been so narrow, so lost, when really I had all the chances and the very gift of life which I could use. Of course I was berated, with words of steel from stern-faced doctors. 'Your state of mind is in question,' and other pitiful glances at my bandaged wrists. And the favourite was the Autumn miracle, how I'd laid there, bleeding to death with a cloak of leaves to sheath me from the cold. And wasn't that amazing? But my thoughts were

sailing to the breeze, to a long lost love, a ghost who kept me company as I slipped into my private Winter.

Today I watched them tear down the Oak, with huge mechanical arms and levers, metal rods and giant saws. I wondered at the power, at the sheer bloody will of nature as she clung on to her child right to the end. They'd talked about it for months. And it was agreed that on such as perilous bend, in such a spot the tree could only bring disaster as it had done. And I only had to think of him, my ghost, and how he met his fate, skidding wheels and crunch of bone and bark. But what about the Autumn Leaves? I longed to ask. Would they never fall again? Protecting, comforting, reaching out with mottled fingers, was this the end of all goodbyes? I pondered for a moment. Winter is not so bad, and with it comes the promise of spring, of new life and dreams. In the distance *he* catches my eye, just a silent kiss from those glassy lips, or is it the breeze, the rustle of leaves left behind as a mark where the tree used to stand.

I smile. Time to lay my ghosts to rest.

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Fat Chance

Molly Howard

FAT.

Graceless, wobbly, useless blobs of flesh.

Mavis was a fat slob. There was no denying it. And she was convinced that it was putting men off.

Up to now, this hadn't worried her. Living alone quite happily, she had been able to do what she wished, when she wanted to and where it suited her. Maps spread out on the floor could be left there with impunity. An absorbing book could be read until finished, with no one to demand she turn the light out. But as Mavis grew older – her 'indeterminate age' slot would soon slip into 'elderly' – she began to feel the need for companionship.

Male, preferably.

There were no regrets for those she had turned down in her youth but it had been some time since a male had expressed a wish to spend his days with her. She'd not had an offer of marriage, or even co-habiting, to refuse, for longer than she liked to contemplate.

It must be all that weight she'd put on.

It could have been that she wasn't prepared to have 'any' man. Or perhaps it was the friendly way she treated her male contemporaries, (not knowing how to flirt).

No matter, Mavis was convinced it was fat.

During moments of depression, she would stand naked in front of her mirror and grab handfuls of the surplus stuff, trying to see what she would look like without it. The result would depress her even more. To combat that she would dig out the packet of chocolate biscuits with the marshmallow on top that she had 'hidden' from herself at the back of the fridge. Swearing she would only have one, she would sit there and scoff the lot. But then, the sun would shine, or friends would drop in for a cuppa and the lows would fade away.

Periodically, she would go on a diet and be immensely cheered at the end of a week to see a loss of two or three pounds. The trouble was that she would always celebrate such a loss with a treat. No prizes for guessing what the treat was.

Then one day her weight problem became urgent. A new male appeared, joining the drama group where she spent a great deal of her time.

She had never been so attracted!

It wasn't just his appearance, though he was good-looking enough, being slightly taller than herself, with most of his hair and only the merest suggestion of a beer paunch. It was his sense of humour, which matched her own, plus the fact that he still seemed to have a sense of curiosity about life's vagaries. And he was

friendly, talking to her with evident pleasure every time they met.

But that was all.

How could she get him to take the next step?

How did other women lure men into asking them out?

She decided that it must be her shape which was putting him off. She would go on a diet and this time she would really keep to it. The prize was too attractive to give up for a chocolate biscuit.

For the first couple of weeks Mavis did very well. The lettuce and tomatoes, the sugarless tea, the coffee breaks without the chocolate biscuits, were adhered to religiously. Three pounds were lost the first week, two pounds the next. It was the third week that was the crunch point.

Stepping on the scales she was dismayed to see that she had lost nothing. In fact if she looked properly at the figures, she would have to admit that the needle was ever so slightly higher than the same time last week.

It was not fair!

To have gone two weeks, no, three, on such a strict regime, for one who enjoyed eating as much as she did, had only been possible through the anticipation of seeing the needle heading steadily down toward her goal, that goal of sylph-like slenderness that would be sure to entice him into her arms.

And now, instead of creeping down, it was actually creeping up!

She slumped onto the floor ready to weep with frustration and despair. What else could she do to ensure that that needle stopped earlier each week? Was it really worth going without all those lovely-tasting things if the reward was going to be weight ON instead of weight OFF?

As Mavis sat there, despondent, a spider dangling from a long thread dropped in front of her nose.

‘Aggh!’ she said and blew it away. Something else to add to her depression, reminding her that no matter how often she cleared away the cobwebs, they reappeared as if by magic, sometimes within the space of a couple of hours.

As the spider swung back, the thread broke and it landed on her knee. Normally, she would have flicked it off in disgust, but she was too low after what the scales had told her to do even that. She felt it was one more blow from an unfeeling fate.

The spider moved to a drop-off point and continued on its way down to the floor. At that moment, she rebelled. It hurt that a spider should attain its goal when she couldn’t.

With a finger, she detached the thread from where it stuck to her knee and brought the spider back up, depositing it where it had first landed. The spider promptly repeated its original movement, as did she.

The third time, she didn’t drop it back on her knee. Instead she hung it so they were face-to-face.

‘Look, spider,’ she glared at it. ‘Who do you think I am? Robert Bruce of Scotland? This is not a cave, it’s a bathroom. I don’t want a kingdom, I only

want to lose weight.'

She stared fiercely at the tiny creature, who hung motionless in front of her. For a timeless moment they were eye to eye, the tiny spider on the end of its thread, the woman with rolls of fat bulging out as she slumped naked on the floor.

Whispering fiercely she said, 'You want to help, you take every pound I don't want and I'll let you make webs wherever and whenever you like! And that's a promise!'

Suddenly, the spider reeled out the longest thread yet, hitting the ground and scurrying away before she could stop it.

Watching where it had gone, she whisper-shouted after it, 'I mean it. Make the pounds drop off and my house is yours for webs!'

After that outburst, she found the strength of will to keep on with her diet. Every time she was tempted by an 'only this once' chocolate biscuit or cream cake she would think of the spider, then laugh and put the thought of the tempting goodie out of her mind. And every time the thought of the spider strengthened her resolve, a few more cobwebs appeared unnoticed in discrete corners of her house.

Keeping her house spotless was not Mavis' first choice of activity. Each week, resisting temptation got easier and easier as the needle stopped earlier and earlier.

Absolutely delighted, Mavis hid the loss from her friends. She continued to wear the loose sloppy clothes which had hidden how fat she was but now concealed how slim she was becoming. Biding her time, she waited for a suitable occasion to reveal, to the world in general and one male in particular, what a ravishing creature she had become.

When two members of their drama group decided to get married, the 'suitable' occasion arrived in the form of the wedding and reception to which they were both invited.

What could be better?

A beautiful new Mavis, people in love getting married, the whole idea of two becoming one filling the atmosphere – if that didn't work, she didn't know what would.

The day came, two months after her vow to the spider. Dressed in new clothes, a truly elegant figure, she set off to the church. The disbelieving expressions on the faces of all her friends were deeply satisfying. She could see the question 'How did you do it?' bursting to get out of them but church was not quite the place for an animated discussion on weight loss. Elated by their reactions, she felt sure that 'he' would be bowled off his feet.

In the church she only saw him at a distance but consoled herself with the effect she was bound to make on him at the reception.

It was while she was having a pre-dinner sherry with others from the drama group, that she caught his eye. Smiling what she hoped was a seductive smile, she motioned with her head that he should come and join them.

As he nodded that he would, she thought to herself that surely now he would ask her out. He would be so impressed with the new Mavis that he wouldn't be able to resist the desire to have her for his own. She began to run through places they could go to, where they could be by themselves.

He arrived, bringing with him a tiny round butter-ball of a woman with a huge smile.

'I haven't seen you for ages, Mavis. Where have you been keeping yourself? Here, I would like you to meet my fiancée, Bella.'

And he put his arm round the fat little woman, drawing her forward that she might meet Mavis.

Devastated, Mavis experienced the rest of the reception in a freezing blank. As soon as it was polite to do so, she said her good-byes and disappeared.

Truly disappeared.

A little over a week later, some of her friends realised with surprise that none of them had seen her since the wedding. Discreet checking revealed that none of the shopkeepers had seen her either. She hadn't come in for a paper at the newsagent's nor for milk at the grocer's.

Had she *starved* herself to lose so much weight? Could she be desperately ill now as a result?

Two of her friends decided forthwith to pay her a call. When ringing the bell produced no reaction, one of them tried the handle of the front door.

It was open.

Stepping inside, they were taken aback by the number of cobwebs which greeted them. Each room was the same, a scene from 'Great Expectations'. Webs hung from the ceiling, the lights, the pictures on the walls. Tenuous threads connected table legs, chair legs and the plants on the window sills.

Opening the door of the bathroom, after a search of the rest of the house had proved fruitless, gave the two friends nightmares for weeks.

The small room was full, thick with criss-crossed cobwebs. Hanging in the densest part of the webs, over a dimly discernible set of bathroom scales, was a mummy-like figure. A closer look revealed that it was Mavis, totally encased in a heavy covering of cobwebs with a small spider busily applying the finishing touches to the new shoes last seen at the wedding.

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Harry Pothole

Allen Ashley

It was all very well winning a scholarship to attend Hogwash Magic Academy, young Harry Pothole reflected, but it was quite another thing actually getting there. The Aladdin Sane Fan Club lightning tattoo on his forehead ached more than ever. (His parents were huge David Bowie fans in the 1970s. I should have told you this before but I'm in such a rush to get on with this rattling good yarn). So now the grizzled guard at Kings Cross Station was offering him a wet handkerchief for the bump on his head whereas before the guard had simply said, 'Platform Four And Three-Quarters? Are you having a laugh, sonny?'

Luckily for Harry, help was at hand. But not before a nasty little bunch of inner city kids had made further fun of him.

'Oi, four eyes!' one of them shouted (and he was no picture portrait himself, being overweight like Harry's horrible spoilt cousin Dudley Vernon). 'Oi, Merlin! It ain't 'Alloween for two months yet!'

How cruel Normal people were! But Harry was special. Fate had chosen him for great things – like casting spells on frogs and showing up the stuffy teachers at boarding school, so there!

'Having problems catching the Hogwash Express, dear?' a red-headed, motherly woman asked him. She was mother to four boys in wizards' gowns pushing luggage trolleys like they were already on the playing fields of Eton. Or Waitrose at any rate.

'Yes, I can't find Platform Four And Three-Quarters,' Harry answered politely.

Mrs Squeezely answered kindly, 'Haven't you heard of decimalisation, ducks?' You want Four Point Seven Five. Here, my son Ginger will help you.'

What fun it was riding a steam train! (Ask your parents or grandparents, I'm sure they'll still have a few specks of sentimental soot in the corner of their eyes at the thought. Or do I mean sentimental specks of soot? Gosh, I'm in such a rush to churn this stuff out, you know, there's no room for editing. I know how Stephen Donaldson must feel). And what fun it was making new friends with Ginger Squeezely and the local long-haired know-it-all, Herman Danger. Although, to be truthful, Harry wasn't entirely sure about this young boy who had chosen to wear the girls' version of the uniform. Herman claimed it was part of his heritage as a transvestite. Harry had some inkling that Transvestia was where Dracula came from. He'd better keep his collar buttoned up just in case.

'Have you seen these?' Ginger asked.

'What are they?' Harry responded.

‘Magic trading cards. Tuppence ha’penny a go. There’s a vending machine in the corridor. Look, this one’s Professor Stead. Rumoured to be the most evil and all-seeing magician in Britain. Although some folks say he’s just a jumped-up Normal with too much administrative power. Don’t believe that myself.’

Harry had some old-fashioned coins of the realm inside his trouser pocket so he made his excuses and exited the carriage. In truth, he was finding it hard to walk, what with the motion of the train and the fact that he’d pulled his boots on over his slippers that morning. Having acquired new chums so quickly and successfully, he felt fully vindicated in his decision to become a goody-two shoes.

Back in his seat, Harry ripped open the packets.

‘Wow, you lucky blighter!’ Ginger exclaimed. ‘You’ve got a Mirror Of The Future there. ‘One must wait and see – what will be.’ The mirror’s kept in an annexe in the Headmaster’s study at Hogwash. Only he’s got the key.’

‘Do you think we’ll ever get to see it?’ Herman inquired.

‘No chance,’ Ginger answered.

‘I bet I do,’ Harry countered.

Herman made a ‘big head’ gesture with his surprisingly delicate hands. The excitement briefly over, they all settled down to await their arrival at Hogwash Academy For Boys, Girls And Foundlings.

Hogwash had seemed a strange name for a fee-paying school. Looking out of the begrimed window as the train pulled in, Harry and his pals were thrilled that the centre of excellence was a creaky old castle perched precariously atop a grey cliff. Maybe if they banged their desk lids hard enough the whole structure would topple into the sea and they could follow the seniors into town and check out the talent in the local Rec.

‘I bet it’s as cold as Antarctica,’ Herman suggested.

‘How would you know?’ Harry asked. ‘You ever been there?’

‘Sure. Went skinny-dipping with penguins last summer. Beats swimming with dolphins by a mile. Or should I say about one point six kilometres?’

‘Hey, you guys!’ Ginger called, manoeuvring open the window. ‘Never mind the view, catch the pong!’

‘Phwoorh, you’re right!’ Harry agreed, struggling not to spew up the half kilo of Doctor Merlin’s Pick And Mix Chewies he’d surreptitiously scoffed during the journey.

‘Now I know why they call it Hogwash,’ Herman added, covering his / her mouth with the folds of his / her floaty black dress and displaying more than a hint of smooth calf and succulent thigh., the sight of which was to keep the other two boys thoughtfully awake for many a night during the coming months.

Professor Grumblebore was your regular public school Headmaster – grey-haired, posh speaking, a little obtuse at times – with one key difference: he could perform magic. Beyond the regular secondary school miracles of averting gang warfare on

a daily basis whilst ensuring he had sufficient staff to supervise lessons and, of course, somehow manipulating the fiscal budget into subsistence manageability.

‘His main talent seems to be that of sending even sharks to sleep,’ Ginger commented. And he was right: this was a dreadfully long welcoming speech.

‘Imagine being married to that!’ Herman / Hermione opined. It was a concept neither of the two boys could quite get their heads round.

‘Still, good grub, though,’ suggested Harry.

‘Wait till you eat it,’ Hermy warned.

‘Why? You think because I’m poor I’m not used to decent food?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘Well, maybe you’re right. When I lived in the cellar conversion under the stairs with my aunt and uncle, I sometimes had to make my own breakfast because they worked on a night shift at the local Costcutter.’

‘How terrible for you!’ Herman sympathised, rubbing his painted nails over Harry’s bony left arm and shoulder.

‘That’s right. I had to heat up my own hot milk for my Weetabix. And some days I even had to eat muesli.’

‘Yuk!’ chorused the whole table in unison.

The lottery machine – Guinevere by name – had placed Harry in the rather uncool Speccy House. Oh to be in The Black Shades Of Night where you could wear mere fashion accessory sunglasses rather than the medically necessary myopia correctives he currently sported. And speaking of sport:

‘We ain’t got a chance at football or rugger,’ Ginger wheezed.

‘Don’t say ‘ain’t’,’ Herman / Hermione corrected. The correct conjugation is ‘have not’.

‘Yeah, I’m certainly one of those,’ Ginger agreed.

Herman was using the girls’ changing rooms lately. The threepenny hairdrier did a better job on his / her long blonde ringlets. Actually, most people accepted his appellation as ‘Hermione’ these days. But still the surname ‘Danger’ because... well, you never could be sure around him. Or her.

‘You were saying...?’ Hermione prompted.

‘Well,’ Ginger continued, ‘Speccy House is the



cleverest one, yeah?’

‘And soon to be the most numerous,’ Hermione interrupted, ‘what with you boys getting all familiar with yourselves and your teenage habits. It’ll make you go blind, you know.’

‘Don’t interrupt,’ Harry ordered.

‘Or?’

‘Or we’ll burn down your Barbie House and give My Little Pony a skunk haircut. Now, Ginger...?’

‘Well, I was thinking we need a game where the rules are so complicated that no one fully understands them. We can quote some obscure law to our advantage whenever necessary.’

‘May I interject?’ asked Hermione timidly.

‘Go on,’ said Ginger.

‘You’re thinking of Kwikkit, aren’t you?’

‘Absolutely. Harry’s a natural.’

‘Brilliant! Wicked!’ they all agreed.

Hermione planted a red-lipped kiss on both the boys’ left cheeks. Harry went to high-five his two friends but missed on each occasion. The ancient combat of Kwikkit? He was a natural!

To succeed at Hogwash School you needed the right equipment. Better still, lots of money in the Ginko Bank. Better even more than that was a family connection – maybe your Dad was ex chief fag to the Head Boy. Better still even more than all these was to have the whole bloody lot. Like Harry’s arch-enemy, the smarmy blond boy from Nasty Aryan House, Archie N. Emmy. Teacher’s pet, he was. Not literally, of course... unless Harry could get that latest spell to work. Most of the masters kept lizards, tarantulas and the like. Apart from Professor Knee-Keep who kept a little Filipino lad no bigger than a penny farthing but with a mouth the size of the Channel Tunnel. Reputedly.

Which left Harry as one of the poorest pupils ever to rub two pennies together. But some mysterious benefactor was certainly looking after him. But who? Maybe the Irish witchly threesome, the Sisters of Jill Murphy. Or else the Famous Blyton Five? They were an adventuresome sort who liked to look after the underdog. Or was it simply that one of their number was an actual dog?

So Harry was at breakfast one morning when a sustained cooing above his head alerted him to an imminent delivery from the Northern-trained pigeons. (His breakfast was boiled toad and carrots, by the way, and for all his hard studying he couldn’t figure the spell to turn the horrible orange things into nice flavoursome sweets or something. Maybe they were too genetically modified).

He was wondering how a heroic but unathletic nerd was going to succeed at house sports when suddenly it hit him. Right on the birthmark scar. Ouch! A shiny golden-brown Cumulo-Nimbus 2000 flying broomstick. A present from a ‘benefactor’. Harry could hardly believe it.

‘I can hardly believe it,’ he stated.

‘Wow,’ agreed Hermione, stroking the shaft the way he hoped she might one day stroke his... er, arm. ‘What a woody!’ she exclaimed.

‘I’m glad you noticed,’ Ginger whispered. ‘I think I’d better excuse myself for a few minutes...’

‘Come on,’ Hermione pestered, ‘who’s it from?’

‘I don’t know. Oh, hang on, there’s a label. Now what do you make of that: Ben E. Factor? Who he?’

‘*Who’s* he, Harold! Grammar... honestly! Maybe a distant cousin of Ben E. King?’ she pondered.

‘And who might he be when he’s at home?’

‘Probably the same person he is when he’s not at home. You’re such a blank slate sometimes, Harold.’

‘All right, Miss Clever Clogs, if you’re such a know-it-all, perhaps you can tell me why this broomstick is called a Cumulo-Nimbus?’

‘Easy. It takes you up to the clouds... and then leaves you there.’

Harry had at last become used to the moving staircases of voluminous Hogwash School. ‘Escalators’, his friends called them. Poor sheltered Pothole had only ever seen one flight of stairs prior to school – and that was the flight he was forced to live beneath! A ‘roomy conversion’, the estate agent had called it; a ‘bloody broom cupboard’ and ‘a hundred and fifty grand for this poxy box!’ had been his uncle’s more realistic assessment.

It was nine o’clock on a Sunday evening and Harry was hoping to get some shut-eye (so that he could wake up for the ubiquitous midnight feast that happens every night in our wonderful British boarding schools) when he was stirred from slumber by voices from the courtyard outside. It couldn’t be... surely not this early? But it was – carol singers! *O Little Town Of Bethlehem*. How nostalgic that made him feel! And next up was:

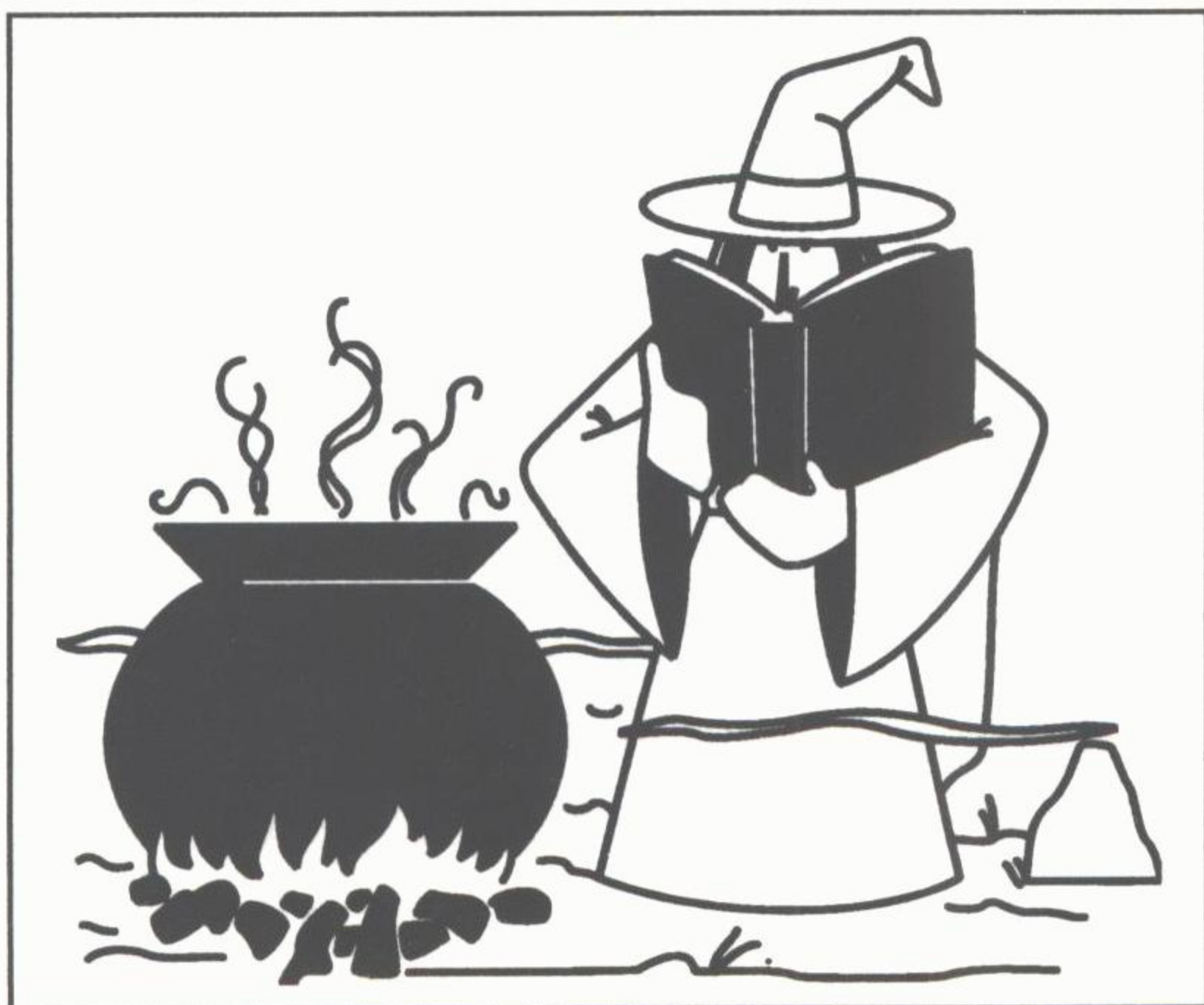
‘We three kings of holly and tart!’ he yelled in his best off-key warble. Singing was one of the few things Harry wasn’t brilliant at. Sports, magic, schoolwork – he was wicked at all those. He could even change gears on an old Ford Anglia.

The choir suddenly ceased. One of their number pointed at Harry’s pentagram shaped window.

‘Don’t you call my sister a tart!’ he shouted, shaking a fist.

‘Yeah, waddya looking at, wizard boy?’ called another.

‘I was just enjoying the



singing,' Harry answered meekly.

'Taking the Saint Michael, eh?' the first chorister suggested. 'Think the devil's got all the best tunes, I bet. Come on, boys, give him the Holy Trinity medley.'

Harry listened politely to their over-ambitious *Ode To George Dubya. Here's To The Holy Ghost* was a minimalist piece of repetitive trancey trip hop. A bit like Massive Attack with no attack or Tricky with no tricks. However, he really enjoyed their final number, *The Jesus And Mary Rap*, for which they summoned up a powerful breakbeat percussive accompaniment by slapping their palms against the weighty tomes each carried. Harry supposed that this was what was meant by Bible-bashing.

'Er, thanks, Yanks,' he called out as they prepared to leave.

'We'll be back, devil spawn demon boy!' their leader screeched in reply.

'I look forward to it,' Harry responded with more confidence than he really felt.

In the morning, he asked his friends if they'd also heard the impromptu concert.

'Yes, it was quite pleasant,' Hermione agreed, 'but one couldn't really dance to it, could one? Not even if one was off one's face on magic mushrooms... as one was last night.'

'I heard 'em,' Ginger concurred. 'Heard 'em before. Shame they didn't do *Wonderwall*, I like that one.'

'*Wonderwall*!' Hermione sniffed. 'I can magic you one up in two flashes of a dog's tic.'

And she could. And did.

The great day came at last: the Inter-House Kwikkitt Competition, Speccy versus Sly Eating. Harry secretly called this rival house 'Pies R Us' and reckoned their issues with dieting were worth a 20 point head start to anyone they competed against. Also, he had a cunning plan: his broomstick was to double as his bat so that when he (hopefully) connected with the golden ball he could hop aboard the Cumulo-Nimbus and complete his runs in double-quick time. Assuming he didn't accidentally spiral up into the stratosphere.

Everything was going tickety-boo as Speccy House lined up to bat first, observed by a small but noisy crowd of fellow first formers and fluffy or feathered familiars. Suddenly the third umpire – Master Haggis – strode onto the pitch, resplendent in bat wing cape and stormtrooper boots. He mouthed one word at the other officials and without so much as a by-your-leave the trio hurried back towards the main building.

'We can referee the match ourselves,' said Ginger to general agreement.

Hermione was known to be an expert lip reader so Harry asked her, 'What did old Haggis say?'

'Inspection,' she replied curtly.

Harry screwed up his brow so that his lightning streak now resembled an arrow. 'What's that mean?' he inquired.

Hermione brushed a stray lock of luscious blonde hair away from her face and muttered, 'Something medical I hope.'

Their deliberations were interrupted by another of Harry's bitter enemies: Simon 'Toady' Carmichael, Head Boy of Sly Eating House, who slithered up to the debating threesome and smirked, 'Can we just get on with the game, please?'

Things went well for a while and it will come as no surprise to any reader that Harry was the undoubted star of the sporting occasion. Just a couple of runs away from his maiden century, however, the field echoed to the cries of 'Owzat!' as Harry carelessly failed to wave the wand and despatch the ball towards the boundary. Instead it hit him rather sneakily and painfully on the shin.

'Ow's what?' Harry inquired.

'Grammar, please!' Hermione yelled from the other end.

'You're out, mate,' Toady Simon replied with a smirk. 'Leg before wicket.'

'Well, of course I've got my leg before the wicket,' bright young Harry answered. 'What do you think I am – an amoeba?'

'More like a blank slate,' Carmichael muttered cryptically. 'Come on, you're out and it's the turn of that Paul Scholes look-alike.'

'Who? Oh, Ginger. So be it,' Harry assented gracefully. But on his way back to the pavilion he mumbled a stern curse against Simon the Pieman which would make his 'Toady' nickname more appropriate than ever, so there!

Changed from his whites back into his blacks, Harry continued his desultory stroll back towards Hogwash Academy itself. At the main entrance he was surprised to see a printed sign proclaiming, 'School Closed Indefinitely'. Probably some prank, he assumed, and ignored its interdiction. Within, however, the grounds and the buildings were spookily deserted. Even the teachers' quarters. What joy, what opportunity! He could pass an idle hour wittering to himself in the staff room, try out the Headmaster's dragon hide swivel chair and salamander scented cigars and even – thrill of thrills – snatch a brief glimpse into the tantalising world of The Mirror Of The Future. If he could find the key to the locked chamber in Grumblebore's study.

He did find the key and – still coughing from his over-enthusiastic drags on the hand-rolled fags – trepidatiously unlocked the door to the secret of secrets. Ginger's words from the train echoed in his head: 'One must wait and see – what will be.'

He waited to see what would be.

Nothing at all in the glass silvery.

But wait – what was this? Yes, he half recognised the objects revealed and now coming into sharper focus. Cabbage Patch dolls, Tracy Island, Buzz Lightyear – a whole host of playthings and fads of yesteryear. Discarded toys, fashions – wow, look at that girl in the halter top and hot pants! – and literary

phenomena. Cash tills slowly ceasing to ring. What did it all mean? And why was the last thing he espied before the mirror returned to matt black his own sour reflection?

Maybe he should have kept his nose out of such forbidden knowledge. Curiosity killed the cat and all that. If only Hermione were here, she'd know what to do, being such a know-it-all and all.

Harry found himself back at the school gates. Master Haggis was on patrol and looked thunder at him. Hermione was there also, perhaps hoping her high-cut gymslip might attract the attention of some Ferrari driving sugar daddy. But she was first and foremost Harry's friend and ally.

'Hey, laddie!' Haggis shouted. 'Get ye this side of the fence at once. Did ye nae read tha notice?'

'Sorry, sir,' Harry concurred.

'Call yourself a teacher,' Hermione began but the boy wizard impatiently shushed her.

'What's happened, sir?' Harry asked meekly.

'Only what I half suspected, sonny,' Haggis answered. 'I told old Grumblebore weeks ago we ought to fit in a bit of trigonometry here and there, some Elizabethan history, a Shakespeare play and a module on social migration in Runcorn.'

'Sir?'

'School's been closed down, boy. We completely failed our inspection. Prof Stead said none of our subjects are on the National Curriculum.'

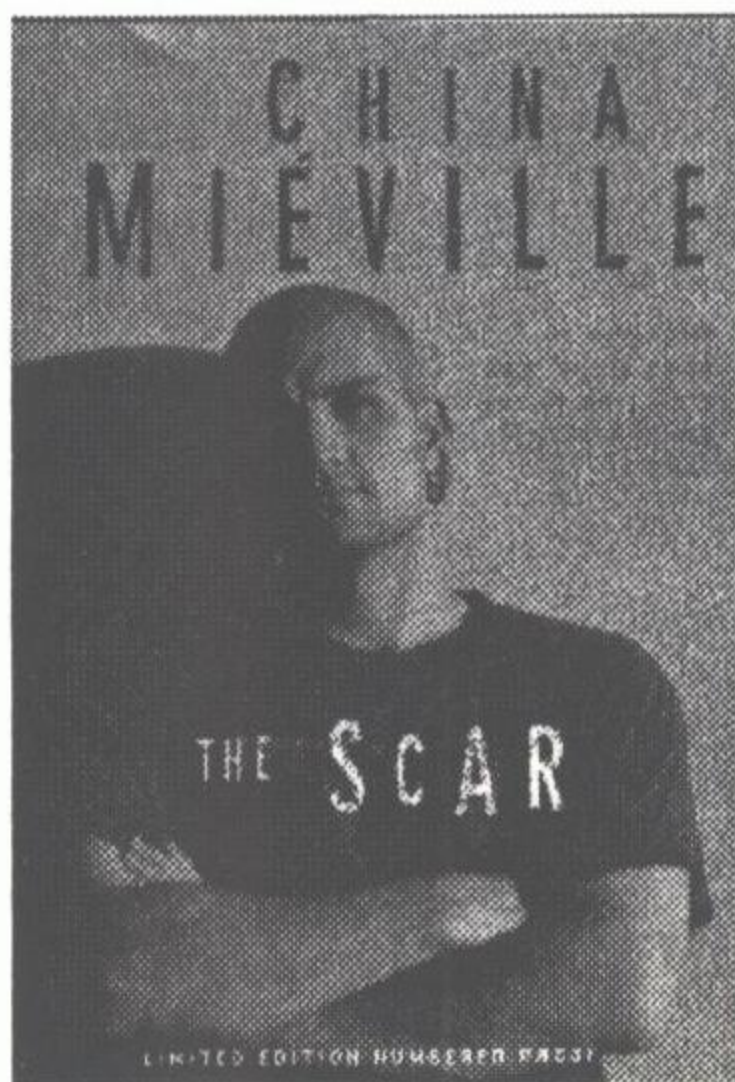
'Is,' corrected Hermione. 'Singular contraction. None is.'

'Aye, whatever, lassie,' Haggis continued. 'It's back to the land of Normals for all of ye. No one in education dares argue with Prof Stead.'

And he was right. And the mirror was right. No one in education dared argue with Prof Stead.

The Scar

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