

The Imaginal Veil



H. M. Forester

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By H. M. Forester

Genre: Psi-Fi.

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Dedication

Many thanks to all my dear friends and co-contributors
(or is that co-conspirators?) at the online communities of
The Caravanserai and the ishraqi institute.



“All the books – both my own mystical adventure and H. M. Forester’s soft sci-fi – have this one surprising thing in common: the largely unsuspected presence of the Hidden World and of the “Secret Friends” who are here to help us in our hour of need.”

~ Etienne de L’Amour.



PART 1: By Way of an Introduction

Imaginatively Thinking Hearts

“Our hearts cannot apprehend that they are
imaginatively thinking hearts because we have so long
been told that the mind thinks and the heart feels and that
imagination leads us astray from both.”

~ James Hillman,
The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World.

1.

Ahead of him, after a long and arduous trek through the foothills, Alex could see an expansive rock face, far too steep and high for him to scale, and reaching out to left and right as far as the eye could see.

Then, as he came closer, he noticed a cleft in the rock and a large, round-topped gate set into a granite wall, beyond which lay some kind of narrow ravine. As he approached the gate out of curiosity, he saw that the door was made of some sturdy hardwood. It had a reddish sheen to it, so it wasn't oaken. It was possibly rosewood.

There was a stylish silver door knocker about shoulder height, fashioned in the shape of a fox with a long bushy tail, with a piece of white card attached to it by a length of green ribbon tied in a neat bow. Alex couldn't quite make out the letterhead, but he did note what appeared to be a motto: "Get in Touch. Keep in Touch", below which a handwritten note read "To book an appointment, contact Gwyndolin, Eugenie or Angelo."

There was no obvious lock on the door, though of course it could have been bolted or barred on the inside. When he turned the ornate silvery door knob and alternately pushed and pulled on the door, the door began to open.

Just then, a hand clapped over his own and he recoiled in fear, suddenly seeing a dark figure looming over him.

"Best not do that, friend," a voice advised him, though not severely. "You're not yet ready for the delights and terrors that lay beyond."

Alex turned to face the figure, and caught a glimpse of a tall man wearing a long black coat, black trousers, and a leather trilby hat. What he noticed most, though, were the man's sparkling, penetrating blue eyes. In that instant – just as he had his mouth open ready to ask impertinently "And who the hell are *you*?" – he jumped up in bed and awoke, his chest heaving with the shock of the sudden and unexpected encounter.

He flopped back down in bed and drew several slow, deep breaths. Hah, vivid and real as the experience had seemed, it had just been a dream after all.

Of course, had it been real life, he'd have been cowering before the man, wringing his hands, and offering abject apologies for his foolish intrusion.

°Just a dream? Just – a – dream, you say?° a voice echoed, with a laugh, in his head. °Oh, ye of little faith and understanding.°

2.

Father helped himself to an extra roast potato and mint sauce, then pushed the serving bowl down the table. “Help yourselves,” he offered unnecessarily.

“Not for me, thanks. I’m trying to keep my weight down,” Mother replied. “What about you, Alex? You’re a big, growing lad. They’ll only go to waste if they’re not eaten.” Leftover boiled potatoes and veg went into the weekly bubble and squeak,¹ but not roasties.

Alex smiled and took the two remaining roast potatoes. “Thanks.”

“Job centre tomorrow, isn’t it?” piped up his father.

Oh, please don’t remind me, Alex thought to himself, but knew better than to blurt out these words. He nodded.

Father raised his eyebrows. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Sorry, yes,” he replied, with a sigh. He always felt uncomfortable dealing with the machinations of the job centre. “Tomorrow at ten.”

Mother carefully placed her knife and fork on the plate before her, signalling that she had finished eating, and smiled. “I thought that’s what you said, so I ironed a nice, clean white shirt for you.”

“It’s just the job centre, not an interview,” he replied. Then, belatedly: “Anyhow, thanks all the same.”

“Job interview or not, you should always make a good impression,” Father countered, waving his fork in Alex’s direction. “And who’s to say they won’t send you along to see about a job?”

Alex sighed. “I’ve been along two months in a row now, and they’ve nothing on their books that would interest me.”

Father was not going to back down. “Well, maybe third time lucky, eh? Like wearing a shirt, jacket and tie, you need to approach these things with the right attitude, Sonny Jim. And that,

¹ A mixture of leftover mashed potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables that have been fried until browned.

in turn, will increase your chances of success.”

Alex didn't feel much like a luck or money magnet. If anything, he was more of a shit magnet.

“And as for not having any jobs you'd be interested in, young man, you should gladly take whatever is on offer, to bring in some money, and on the understanding that, given time, better things will come along.

“That's how I first got started, working for old Sawbridge in his fish shop,” Father added. “Do you know, I've worked over forty years and there's only one hard winter that I ever had to sign on the dole. You youngsters have no idea how lucky and pampered you are. Did you know, your grandad Jones had to leave school when he was fourteen and went straight down the mines, and he and your mother turned out all right.”

Mother dabbed her lips with a paper serviette and cast her eyes down.

“Shirt and tie tomorrow, right?” his father requested, dropping his cutlery down on his empty plate to attract Alex's attention as his mind began to drift off.

He flinched.

“Right?” It was more of a command than a question, and there was only one acceptable answer.

“Right, dad.”

“Damn right that's right.”

Alex finished the remains of his meal and rose to help Mother take away the used crockery and utensils and bring in home-made dessert while Father scanned through the television guide to see if there was anything worth watching that evening. Father refused to watch any soap operas, reality TV, game shows or comedy, but he could always find a crime drama, nature programme or sport to watch on the “goggle box” as Father referred to it, as had his father before him. Alex was hard pushed to find anything on the telly to interest him and would much rather be online, surfing the Internet. He could only do so much of that, though, without being accused of treating the family home as a hotel. It wasn't a matter of being antisocial: computing was one of the few things that Alex was halfway decent at, and he needed to improve on his

skills, and besides he had little or no interest in either the mundane lifestyle that his parents and others lived, nor in the supposedly “glamorous” lifestyles promoted on television. Okay, so maybe that did make him an outsider. Yes, truth be told, from the earliest age he’d felt something like a round peg in a square hole and had to make a conscious effort to at least appear as if he were fitting in.

After helping Mother with the washing up after dinner, and sitting with them for a while in the front room, drinking coffee, Alex wandered upstairs to his room and had a flick through the pile of DVDs on his desk.

It would have to be *The Matrix* again. He’d watched that film numerous times – so often that he knew much of the dialogue word for word – and yet it wasn’t until somebody pointed it out in a magazine review he read online that he noticed that all the scenes shot in the matrix, rather than the real world, had a subtle green tinge to them.

Alex watched the scene where Neo first meets Morpheus, twice, to savour Morpheus’s words:

“The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.”

The truth that he was a slave.

It was at this point in the film – or more precisely at the point where Neo is offered the choice between the blue pill and the red pill – when Alex yet again tried to convince himself that he should quit smoking. Of course, his father would simply put this failing down to a lack of willpower, but this went a whole lot deeper than that. It felt like some kind of grotesque mental or emotional entanglement.

°You see, Alex, you *do* know. You *do* know, deep down inside.°

The movie finally over, he glanced at the clock. Almost time to go to bed if he was to be up bright and early the next day. All the same, there was still time to check through Facebook to see if anyone had posted anything decent.

And lo! and behold! What should he discover right at the top of his feed? A quotation from Carl Jung and an illustration from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, under the heading "Something's Not Right":

Something's Not Right

Observance of customs and laws can very easily be a cloak for a lie so subtle that our fellow human beings are unable to detect it. It may help us to escape all criticism, we may even be able to deceive ourselves in the belief of our obvious righteousness. But deep down, below the surface of the average man's conscience, he hears a voice whispering, "There is something not right," no matter how much his rightness is supported by public opinion or by the moral code. ~ C. G. Jung.²

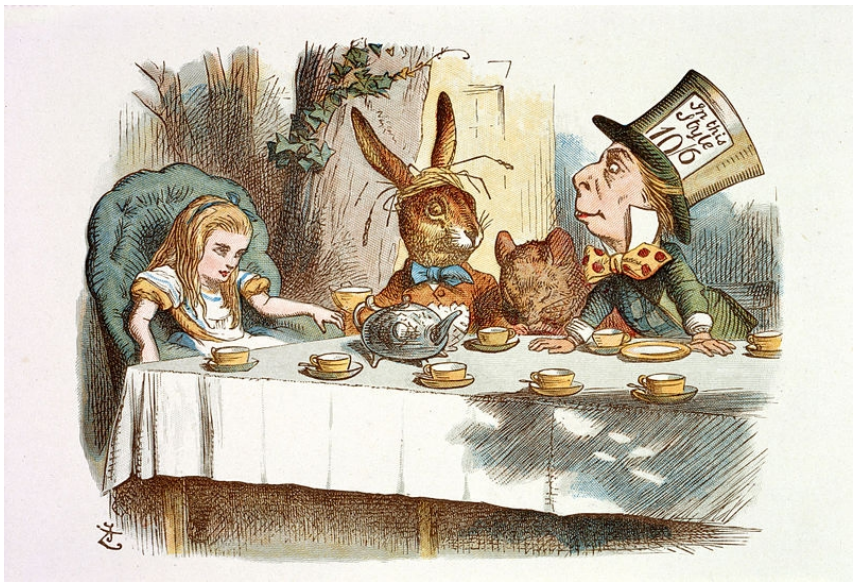


Figure 1: Illustration from *The Nursery Alice* (1890) - c03757 07 / John Tenniel (1820–1914) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.

“Ha-ha!” he laughed out loud. “Tell me about it. That is the story of my life.” That, and also so very *à propos*.

Of course, he was reminded of Agent Smith’s observation in

² C. G. Jung, Introduction to Frances G. Wickes, *Analysis der Kinderseele* (*The Inner World of Childhood*).

the film, as he looked out of the window of the skyscraper at the traffic and scurrying pedestrians down below:

“Have you ever stood and stared at it, marveled at its beauty, its genius? Billions of people just living out their lives, oblivious.”

Well, that post was certainly worth sharing, though his family and friends might think him a little odd for doing so. Ha! Let them think what they like: that says more about them than it does about me.

°Now, now. Don’t exaggerate,° came an inner prompting.
Okay: maybe not more, but certainly as much.

3.

Alex checked his watch as he entered the job centre. He was only just in time, and he didn't want to give them any excuse to sanction him for being late, so he made straight for the touch screen near the waiting area and tapped through the on-screen prompts to sign in, before taking a seat. Well, at least they had comfy couches now, and you didn't have to stand in line, carrying a ball and chain, like a bunch of incarcerated penitents.

Five minutes passed; then ten. By now, he suspected that he'd been overlooked and was wondering whether he should go across and speak with one of the receptionists, when he saw his case worker, Ms Edith Fairfax heading his way, and he got up to meet her. When the woman saw him approach, she spun round on her heels and briskly headed back toward her desk without so much as a wave of acknowledgement or a polite "Good morning". So he trotted along behind like a good little dog.

Ms Fairfax tapped away on her keyboard and, judging by her mouse movements, spent some time scrolling through his record. Then she finally looked up.

"Well, I see that you applied for five job vacancies this week," she began. "And you do understand that five is the bare minimum, Mr ... er ... Knowles."

He swallowed hard, bowed his head and grunted affirmatively.

She peered at him over the top of her horn-rimmed spectacles. "Any results to report?"

"Well, Yates wanted some paper bag packers," he replied, "but unfortunately they insisted that they could only take on experienced paper bag packers, and would not consider offering basic training. Go figure."

"I see."

"Corbet's wanted a trainee assistant for one of their shoe shops. But they turned me down." He didn't tell her that they'd offered him a job, since he perhaps had management potential,

conditional on him shaving off his goaty beard and moustache.

“And do you have the rejection letter?” the woman wanted to know.

“No, they just told me verbally at the interview.”

“I see.” The woman tapped away at her keyboard, presumably updating his record.

Yikes. That was very nearly a gotcha moment. By now, beads of sweat were beginning to form on his hairline.

“And the other three?”

The woman wasn’t going let this go.

“Still in the air,” he shrugged.

There was a pause, then she tapped the screen and remarked: “You have an interest in computing, I see.”

He nodded. “Yes, I grew up with computers. I only use two fingers, but I’m a pretty fast typist, and I’ve written several programs.” And an unpublished novel, he remembered, probably still rotting away in the local landfill.³

Ms Fairfax turned her chair round and flipped through a pile of papers on her desk. “Ah yes, here we are. I thought I’d seen something yesterday,” she said, and she got up and headed for the photocopier.

When the woman returned, she reached across her desk and handed him a sheet of paper. “This may be up your street,” she announced. “They said applicants could either make an appointment or simply drop by their office, with a CV,⁴ for an informal chat, prior to an interview.”

Alex took the sheet and quickly scanned through it, but to be honest, the words were all a blur. “I see. Thank you, I’ll look into that, Ms Fairfax.”

“Well, I think that about covers it, Mr Knowles. So, unless you have any questions, I’ll see you next week. Or rather, one of my colleagues, Mr Henshaw, will see you, as I’ll be on a training course.”

The woman peered to left and right, leant forward and said under her breath: “Some nonsense about human relations, would

³ An area where waste is buried between layers of earth.

⁴ A Curriculum Vitae; a résumé.

you believe,” then immediately straightened up and waved him away with the words “Get in touch any time, if you have any queries.”

There was that phrase again, he noted – “Get in touch” – but quickly dismissed it as a mere coincidence.

Alex carefully folded the sheet and thrust it into his satchel, then rose and thanked the woman, before turning away and heading for the door. Only now did he get the chance to wipe away the beads of sweat, as they began to trickle down his face.

4.

Alex had already begun walking toward home, but stopped mid stride and fished the sheet of paper out of his satchel. Smith & Wetherall Communications. Some kind of publicity-oriented company, not that that mattered much, since the vacancy was for a junior data entry clerk. Words are words, wherever you go.

Well, as he had multiple copies of his CV in his satchel, he might as well go along and find out what they had to offer and whether they'd take him on.

As it turned out, the job didn't involve typing words, but numbers. Lots and lots and lots of numbers. When the office administrator, Mrs Wetherall sat him in front of a keyboard and presented him with a long list of random numbers to type into the machine using the numeric keypad, emphasising the need for both speed and accuracy, it was painfully obvious to them both that he clearly wasn't up to the job.

At that very moment, just as Mrs Wetherall was about to show him off the premises, the office door burst open and a young lady hurried in unannounced.

"I simply can't take any more," the lady blurted out, She tossed an envelope on the administrator's desk, and scurried back out, wiping tears from her eyes, before Mrs Wetherall could respond to the intrusion.

Mrs Wetherall drew a deep breath, opened the envelope, and sighed. "I'm sorry, I won't be long," she explained, already heading for the door, but returned shortly after, apparently unable to catch the young lady and speak to her before she left the building.

"Well, now we appear to be short of two office clerks," she lamented, throwing her hands in the air.

Hmm. That sounds ominous, he thought.

Then a light came on behind the woman's eyes and she turned to Alex. "Tell me, Mr Knowles: would you consider a less demanding role in our mail room? We deal with communications

from the public for a wide range of clients.

“The job mostly entails receiving post on a morning and distributing it, collecting outgoing post in the late afternoon, franking the envelopes, and taking it along to the sub post office. You’d spend the bulk of the day mailing out routine details and brochures according to scheduled campaigns or in response to requests, and logging details in our database. Mostly words, not numbers, you’ll be glad to hear. And you’d also act as Head Gopher.”

What that meant, of course, was “go fer this, go fer that”. An errand boy by any other name.

°That would give you some variety,° he was prompted.

Alex wasn’t overly enamoured by the idea, but did remember his father’s advice about taking whatever was on offer, in order to get one’s foot in the door, so to speak.

If there was one thing that he had serious difficulty with in this world, it was politely saying “no” to people. Here he was, barely turned twenty and he already had maybe seventeen years experience as a ruddy “yes man”.

Mrs Wetherall noted his hesitancy. “If you need a little time to come to a decision, go home and think over the offer, and get in touch sometime this afternoon. Or tomorrow – Friday morning – if needs be. I won’t advertise the job until Monday morning. And you have first refusal.”

Alex thanked the lady and was on the point of leaving. There was that phrase again: “Get in touch”. He turned back. “Sure. If you’re willing to give me a chance, I’d like to take the job. And I won’t let you down.”

He said that, when in actual fact he was already thinking up a thousand and one things that might go wrong. What if he wasn’t up to the task?

Mrs Wetherall smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “Oh, I’m so glad. When would it be convenient for you to start?”

“Whenever’s best for you,” he replied.

“How’s about Monday at 8am, then?”

“That sounds good to me, thanks,” he lied. 8am did not sound at all good to him.

“Wonderful. I’ll tell you more about our work on Monday, then; show you around; introduce you to your colleagues; and explain your tasks. Don’t worry, though: I won’t throw you in the deep end. We’ll leave that until Tuesday,” she laughed impishly.

Mrs Wetherall shook his hand and guided him to the door. “And do call me Gwyn.”

Another coincidence, he noted.

°Jung might call it synchronicity: a meaningful acausal connecting principle,° the inner voice prompted.

Indeed.

“Alex,” he responded. “And thanks once again ... Gwyn.”

~~~~oOo~~~~

The first week was a steep learning curve, and taxing. He was so scared of making a mess of things.

The first month was quite fun. But day after day, week after week, the novelty had largely worn off, and Alex was left bewailing his foolishness: he should have tried harder at school, got better exam results, and a real career. Instead, he’d ended up with a life of humdrum toil for the statutory minimum wage. And that, in turn, would make it next to impossible for him to save up, move out of his parents’ home and rent an apartment, let alone buy a house, even a starter house.

As he idly scrolled through his Facebook timeline he came across an old comic strip from the veteran neuronaut, Timothy Leary, that spoke to him:

## Admit it. You're not like them

Admit it. You're not like them. You're not even close.

You may occasionally dress yourself up as one of them, watch the same mindless television shows as they do, maybe even eat the same fast food sometimes.

But it seems that the more you try to fit in, the more you feel like an outsider watching the “normal people” as they go about their automatic existences.

For every time you say club passwords like “Have a nice day,” and “Weather’s awful today, eh?” you yearn inside to say forbidden things like “TELL ME SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU CRY,” or “WHAT DO YOU THINK DEJA VU IS FOR?”

Everyone carries a piece of the puzzle.

Nobody comes into your life by mere coincidence.

Trust your instincts. Do the unexpected.

Find the others.



*Figure 2: Avner the Eccentric 33 / Joe Mabel / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0.*

Of course, there was the question – like the chicken or the egg – of which came first: the outsider or the drugs?

°Nobody comes into your life by mere coincidence,° the inner voice reminded him.

Well, that was certainly one way of looking at it. But he was more taken by the direction to “Find the others.” Outsiders just like him – but not just any old bums who were hacked off with life and couldn’t cope. Chance would be a fine thing.

There was a knock on his bedroom door at that very moment, and Alex jerked awake. He’d been dozing off at his desk.

“Alex Robert,” came the voice of his father, using his full, Sunday name, which often meant trouble. “Don’t you think it’s time you packed in for the night? You have work tomorrow, and your mother had a devil of a job waking you up this morning. This is our home, you know, not some cheap and sleazy hotel.”

Jee-zuz. He wasn’t a little schoolboy anymore.

“Sure, Dad,” he dutifully replied. “Just getting undressed now.”

°He’s not wrong, you know,° he was reminded.

Yes, sure. Perhaps that is what is so infuriating. I know he’s right. You know he’s right. But I still don’t like being treated like some errant adolescent.

°Well, that’s easy enough, Alex Robert Knowles. Just stop acting like one.°

Ha, bloody ha-ha,” he grumbled.



Gwyn Wetherall dropped by the mail room the next morning, and his initial reaction was one of dread. What had he done wrong now? And has she come to give me the Order of the Boot?<sup>5</sup>

“I have a favour to ask,” the lady broached, sitting down on a nearby chair. “A friend of mine, a professor of philosophy and religion, has a nationwide lecture tour coming up, and one of the dates is with the Cross-Cultural Studies Institute (the CCSI) at the town library. So as well as sending out a schedule to the mailing

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<sup>5</sup> Sack him; fire him. Not give him a medal.

list they provided, or in response to any individual queries we receive, I'd like to send it out to anyone on the library's own list, the library itself, local churches, parish halls and schools, and also the Institute. So you'll need to search through the database to draw up the full list."

She handed over a sheet of paper with a long list of detailed instructions. "I've jotted down a few additional names, too."

"Sure," he nodded, though this didn't seem like much of a favour: just routine work, albeit worryingly complex. So many things could go wrong. "As soon as I have this latest batch for Charmers out of the way, I'll get straight onto to it."

Gwyn smiled and headed for the door. "Lovely. That's very good of you, Alex. And no need to book it down as a paid campaign: this is *pro bono*."

"Pro bono?"

"*Gratis*; on the house."

"I see. Okay."

On his own initiative, Alex printed off one schedule and checked it through before committing to a full print run. Gemma who worked on the graphics made the odd small mistake, usually in British-English spelling or "greengrocer's apostrophes", and he had a good attention to detail, verging on occasional but not pathological OCD. His father had drummed into him the necessity of making sure all his "i"s were dotted and his "t"s were crossed.

The professor's lecture on "The Imaginal World" actually looked quite interesting, and Alex quite fancied attending the talk at the local library, so he pocketed the first schedule and then printed off the full batch; guillotined the compliment slips that were to accompany them; printed out the address labels; and set to work stuffing the envelopes.

## 5.

Alex stood outside the library, sheltering from the wind to one side of the large doorway, furiously puffing on a second cigarette to stoke the boilers, as his father might say, before making his entry.

“Well, well,” a familiar voice called, and he turned to see Gwyn Wetherall walking toward him.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” they both remarked in near-perfect unison, and laughed.

Gwyn pointed to his roll-up and raised her eyebrows. “I bet you wish we could help you quit the smoking habit, don’t you?”

It was more of a statement than a question, and a strange thing for Gwyn to say, but he nodded in agreement all the same.

Who’s we? he wondered.

“By we, I mean the Resistance,” Gwyn added, as if she had read his mind. “In this particular case, your first act of resistance should be to resist the habit to smoke.”

Why?

“Why, you might ask? Because a habit not resisted becomes a necessity. And as well as harming your physical health and putting a dent in your finances, it clouds the mind – the psyche or soul, if you prefer.”

Gwyn looked at her watch. “Well, it’s nearly time for the meeting to begin, and I have to speak to one or two people and introduce the speaker.

“Shall we?” The lady motioned toward the door. He stubbed out his cigarette, popped a mint in his mouth to cleanse his breath, and they went inside.

As Gwyn went off to chat, Alex slipped into one of the seats further back in the hall. Not so far back that he would have difficulty hearing the speaker or making out the slides projected on the screen on stage, but not so far forward that he would feel everyone’s eyeballs burrowing into the back of his neck. Certainly, the last place he wanted to be was on the front row,

with all that discomfoting empty space before him. Of a somewhat nervous and introverted disposition, he'd already made up his mind that he'd spend his life at work or leisure well away from the public limelight. He'd decided that he would be a "backroom boy". Had he performed better at school, he might have become a mad scientist, one day.

°As Morpheus points out in *The Matrix Resurrections*, "Limits are the domain of the limited,"° the inner voice reminded him.

That's easy for him to say, as an alpha male, he huffed.

After a few minutes, Gwyn took to the stage and called the audience to order with a little tinkling bell, before making a brief public service announcement and introducing Professor Trelawney. No, not Sybill Trelawney, professor of divination at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but Sheila Trelawney, who had a private practice as a psychiatrist, and who was now, after retraining, professor of philosophy and religion. Thankfully, the two bore little physical, idiosyncratic, or auditory resemblance.

After an initial greeting and thanks, the professor had just launched straight into her lecture when disaster struck. The title slide of her talk had shown for a few seconds on the large screen to her left, and then the screen had gone blank and Professor Trelawney had looked aghast.

"Oh, my sainted aunts," the professor apologised at length. "I'm afraid the gremlins have struck and my laptop has died."

Gwyn Wetherall, who had just taken her seat in the front row of the audience, grabbed her own bag and dashed back on stage to see if she could help. "Well, you can use my laptop, Sheila," she offered. "But that's no use to you unless you have a backup of your presentation."

"I do, thank goodness. Two, in fact," the professor replied, rummaging in her shoulder bag and producing a USB memory stick as Gwyn quickly booted up her own laptop and plugged in the projector cable.

Shortly afterwards, the title slide appeared on the screen again and, with a sigh of relief from Professor Trelawney and

profuse thanks to Gwyn for saving her professional reputation, the professor resumed her talk.

“I’m sorry for that hiccup, ladies and gentlemen,” she briefly acknowledged. “A minor bump in my car yesterday; a puncture in one of my tyres this morning; and now a dead laptop: perhaps the nature of my talk tonight has tempted the fates?”

What was that line in *Goldfinger*, Alex queried?

Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time it’s enemy action.<sup>6</sup>

Professor Trelawney took a deep breath and drew herself up straight. “Anyhow, let’s proceed, and not give the gremlins any perverse satisfaction.”

“The imaginal world, also known as the *mundus imaginalis*, and not to be confused with mere fantasy or the imaginary, is a concept developed by the philosopher and theologian Henry Corbin. It refers to a realm that exists alongside the physical and mental realms, and is accessed through the imagination. It is a real intermediate realm, a meeting place, between the everyday material world and the spiritual.

“Corbin believed that this realm is the source of true knowledge and understanding, and that it is only through accessing it that one can truly understand the spiritual nature of reality.

“To quote Corbin:

[B]etween the universe that can be apprehended by pure intellectual perception (the universe of the Cherubic<sup>7</sup> Intelligences) and the universe perceptible to the senses, there is an intermediate world, the world of Idea-Images, of archetypal figures, of subtle<sup>8</sup> substances, of “immaterial matter.” This world is as real and objective, as consistent and subsistent as the intelligible and sensible worlds; it is an intermediate universe “where the

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger*.

<sup>7</sup> Having a kind personality, befitting an angel or cherub.

<sup>8</sup> An archaic form of the word “subtle”.

spiritual takes body and the body becomes spiritual,” a world consisting of real matter and real extension, though by comparison to sensible, corruptible matter these are subtile and immaterial. The organ of this universe is the active Imagination; it is the place of theophanic<sup>9</sup> visions, the scene on which visionary events and symbolic histories appear in their true reality. Here we shall have a good deal to say of this universe, but the word imaginary will never be used, because with its present ambiguity this word, by prejudging the reality attained or to be attained, betrays an inability to deal with this at once intermediate and intermediary world.<sup>10</sup>

“Corbin's ideas about the imaginal world were heavily influenced by the work of the Persian philosopher and mystic Suhrawardi and his Illuminationist (Ishraqi) school of thought – well, it's said to be a school of thought, but I would prefer to use the term ‘action philosophy’ to emphasise its practical nature.

“Suhrawardi believed that true knowledge could only be attained through direct, mystical experience, and that the imaginal realm was the key to accessing this knowledge. He also believed that the imaginal realm was the source of the material world, and that the physical world was a reflection of the imaginal realm. And, of course, there are some contemporary thinkers and scientists such as Iain McGilchrist, who are open to the idea that ‘consciousness may be prior, ontologically, to matter.’<sup>11</sup>

“In Suhrawardi's Illuminationist philosophy, the role of the imagination was crucial for the ascent of the soul towards the truth and the light. The illuminationist school was concerned with the knowledge of the spiritual realities and the knowledge of the soul. The illuminationist thinkers believed that the soul could have a direct knowledge of the spiritual world and that this

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<sup>9</sup> Theophany: A visible (but not necessarily material) manifestation of a deity to a human person.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*.

<sup>11</sup> Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World*.

knowledge is not mediated by the intellect or the senses. In other words, the illuminationist school proposed that there is a spiritual realm that can be directly accessed by the soul which is not limited by the physical world and is not dependent on the senses.

“Writing about Corbin’s work, the author Tom Cheetham has this to say:

Through the agency of the active imagination we have access to an intermediate realm of subtle bodies, of real presences, situated between the sensible world and the intelligible. This is the realm of the *anima mundi* [the Soul of the World].

Lacking this tripartite cosmology we are left with a poisonous dualism of matter and spirit. “Stuff” is severed from Intellect, and both are incomplete and disoriented because the ground of their contact is gone. On Corbin’s view all the dualisms of the modern world stem from the loss of the *mundus imaginalis*: matter is cut off from spirit, sensation from intellection, subject from object, inner from outer, myth from history, the individual from the divine.<sup>12</sup>

“To put this in a wider, historical context, Tom Cheetham writes:

It was French philosopher and theologian, Henry Corbin’s contention that European civilization experienced a “metaphysical catastrophe” as a result of what we might call the Great Disjunction. This was signaled by the final triumph of the Aristotelianism of Averroes over Platonic and neo-Platonic cosmology championed by Avicenna. To the defeat of that cosmology is coupled the disappearance of the *anima mundi*, the Soul of the World. The catastrophic event that gave rise to modernity is the loss of the soul of the

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<sup>12</sup> Tom Cheetham, *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*.

world ...<sup>13</sup>

As Henry Corbin stated:

Our western philosophy has been the theater of what we may call the “battle for the Soul of the World.” ... Is it a matter of a battle that has finally been lost, the world having lost its soul, a defeat whose consequences weigh upon our modern visions of the world without compensation? If there has been a defeat, a defeat is still not a refutation.<sup>14</sup>

“Remember that overarching theme: the battle for the Soul of the World, no less.

“Yes, dear friends, the world has been disenchanted, and lost its Soul, and we can see where Christians are coming from. However, should this lead to a yearning for a fundamentalist or evangelical theocratic renaissance, rather than a multivalent cultural renaissance, please keep in mind Tom Cheetham's words elsewhere: ‘Perhaps we can think of fundamentalism as a stifling, an asphyxiation, and constipation of the soul.’”<sup>15</sup>

There was a little laughter in the audience at that vernacular turn of phrase.

“Many others have spoken of the turbulent times and interregnum we are going through in the post-modern world.

“Jeremy Naydler, for example, writes:

Today, Western culture is in crisis, but the danger is that we sleep through it. Something is occurring within us, and there are critical moments, all too easily passed by, when we find ourselves coming up against the boundaries of the modern secular worldview, and we

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<sup>13</sup> Tom Cheetham, *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Cheetham, *Imaginal Love: The Meanings of Imagination in Henry Corbin and James Hillman*.

know that it cannot meet what is moving within us. It is then that we may feel the real questions that face us in our current crisis today are on a different level from economics, politics, or anything that technology can fix. There are deeper questions, deeper longings. We are engaged in a battle for soul. There is a battle being waged for the soul of the West, and what is at stake is our whole cultural identity, our whole “Western mentality.”<sup>16</sup>

“And of course, the East has more than enough of its own problems, of late – many of which we have caused or exacerbated, directly or indirectly; deliberately or naively.

“Richard Tarnas, too, writes:

Defined in the end by its disenchanted context, the human self too is inevitably disenchanted. Ultimately it becomes, like everything else, a mere object of material forces and efficient causes: a sociobiological pawn, a selfish gene, a meme machine, a biotechnological artefact, an unwitting tool of its own tools. For the cosmology of a civilization both reflects and influences all human activity, motivation, and self-understanding that take place within its parameters. It is the container for everything else.

This, therefore, has become the looming question of our time: What is the ultimate impact of cosmological disenchantment on a civilization? What does it do to the human self, year after year, century after century, to experience existence as a conscious purposeful being in an unconscious purposeless universe? What is the price of a collective belief in absolute cosmic indifference? What are the consequences of this unprecedented cosmological context for the human experiment, indeed, for the entire planet?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jeremy Naydler, *The Future of the Ancient World: Essays on the History of Consciousness*.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View*.

“The mythologist and storyteller, Michael Meade often speaks of these difficult times, and offers many suggestions about how we might live to fulfil our destiny, ride out the storms, and prosper:

Like the ancient writer, we live in tormented and troubling times, as all of life’s conflicts and uncertainties seem to surface at the same time. Like the anguished scribe, we cannot deny the turmoil of the world. And yet we cannot simply bear the weight of it as frail human beings. As was the case for the ancient scribe, this time of cultural upheaval is also the time of a struggle for the presence of the human soul and a battle for the soul of the living world.

The counterweight to the feeling of having the weight of the world on our shoulders and being subjected to collective fears and anxieties, involves an awakening of the inner soul. For, the soul is always on the verge of some great awareness and on the edge of awakening to more meaningful ways of being. As the underlying and unifying force of life, the human soul carries an inheritance of resiliency, and a capacity for innovation in the face of disaster.

The idea of drawing on our own inner resources and from there contributing to the healing and renewal of the world is essential to avoid feeling powerless, and helpless in the face of the storms of life and the radical changes of the worldwide upheaval at this time.<sup>18</sup>

After that dramatic start, the professor embarked on a long and detailed exposition of Henry Corbin’s elaborate cosmology, of angels and of light, and delved into ancient mythology spanning numerous cultures, but for some reason, the rest of her talk was all a blur to Alex. He knew there and then that it wasn’t the wordcraft or bookmanship that had grabbed his interest, but the practical possibilities that were dangled before him and yet

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Meade, Living Myth Podcast, Episode 302: “Wisdom of the Soul”.

somehow as yet withheld. That's how he mostly learnt: by watching, copying, and doing.



Alex was puffing away on yet another roll-up when he saw Professor Trelawney heading for the exit. Plucking up the courage, he approached her. She smiled and raised her eyebrows, suggesting that she was amenable to a short chat.

"Hi, Professor. I'd just like to say how wonderful your talk was tonight ..."

"And?" she prompted when he hesitated.

"And I'm very interested in finding out more about the imaginal world. I don't mean reading piles of books, but rather engaging at a practical level."

Again, the professor smiled. "Well, dear boy, if you're looking to me to give you a Red Pill to magically transport you to the *mundus imaginalis*, I'm afraid you're out of luck. Red Pills are few and far between."

"Ah ..." Well, that rather confounded him, and for a time he was lost for words. That often happened when he became anxious: his mind blanked out on him. Much to his embarrassment which, in turn, dialled up his anxiety. It was a vicious circle, really. That's one of the reasons he sometimes appeared uncommunicative, when in reality he had lots he wanted to say, but was biting his tongue.

"However," the professor continued after a short pause for thought, "what I *can* suggest is that much the same effect may be obtained by cutting down on one's intake of Blue Pills, which are in far, far more abundant supply, sadly."

Just then, Gwyn Wetherall came trotting outside to join them. "Sorry, Sheila," she apologised: "The Treasurer wanted me to co-sign a couple of cheques."

"Blue pills?" he enquired, though he was familiar with the theme from *The Matrix* and the sequel to the trilogy, *The Matrix Resurrections*.

"Habits, dear boy," the lady replied, pointing to his lit

cigarette. “You could always start with eradicating, or at least moderating, your habits, be they physical, mental or emotional.”

“There, you now have a second opinion, Alex,” Gwyn Wetherall chipped in.

And with that sage advice, the two of them were on their way.

Then the professor turned back momentarily. “But if I may be permitted to suggest one book that might help you there, it would be *Learning How to Learn* by Idries Shah.

“In it, Shah writes:

Habit of mind is at one and the same time one of the most useful and most useless instruments in approaching problems. If you choose the right approach, you may solve the problem. But if you cannot choose it, and only obey it, you may not be using the best habit for the purpose.

“Learning how to learn is all about the preliminary work of clearing the undergrowth, deadwood and detritus, and tilling the soil; preparing the ground for future growth, like a good gardener or farmer. Give that some thought before you decide, quite wrongly, that you can find little practical use in reading piles of mouldy old books. Or that you are beyond such books.

“But don’t get bogged down in such study, all the same. Well, in any study. Remember the big picture as much as paying attention to detail; remember your long-term aims, such as developing a familiarity with the imaginal world. It’s easy to get sidetracked or waylaid.”

And on that note, Professor Trelawney and Gwyn Wetherall were once again on their way.

“Dear me, you’ve had a spate of bad luck, Sheila,” Gwyn remarked, broaching the subject. “I’m so glad I could help: and it was only by chance that I decided at the last minute to bring my own laptop along. Perhaps someone’s looking after us.”

“I’m not much of a believer in luck, Gwyn – good, bad or otherwise. Nor am I the superstitious type. But I can’t help feeling that this new work of ours has attracted adverse

attention.”

“Gremlins?” Gwyn queried, as they reached the car park. “I thought you were being metaphorical.”

“Euphemistic perhaps, Gwyn, but not metaphorical.”

These words gave Alex pause for thought, but alas the professor and Gwyn had by now passed beyond earshot.



Mention of the rarity of a “Red Pill” and cutting down on the far more available Blue Pills got Alex thinking, as he walked home that evening.

Someone should tell that to the right wing who were seeing a major resurgence on the social media site, Twitter since the billionaire entrepreneur, Elon Musk had taken over the helm and reinstated so many accounts that had previously been banned for spreading misinformation and hatred.

He had often used Twitter to catch breaking news, check out free lectures, and quotations, but these days his timeline was filled with so many anti-vax posts by self-proclaimed “purebloods” (a rather perverse choice of label for those who had read Harry Potter or watched the movies and seen the purebloods’ supremacism and bigotry); with hordes of anti-climate change posts from “climate realists” (otherwise known as climate change denialists); and also right wing political posts from those who had hijacked and fraudulently appropriated the terms “Red Pill” and “redpilled” from the *Matrix* franchise. This last group claimed to be “awake, not woke” (woke meaning to him, at least, being alert to prejudice, discrimination, and inequality, which was surely something worth being associated with, if not taken to ridiculous excess). Redpilled and awake these keyboard warriors most certainly were not; far, far from it. The *Matrix* really had pulled the wool over these people’s eyes, and Elon Musk himself was not immune. Musk claimed he was a moderate, but his erratic and foolhardy behaviour and warning cries against the “woke mind virus” of the “far left” suggested otherwise. With these people, anyone to the left of Donald Trump was a socialist, a communist,

a Marxist – even demonic or Satanic – though they clearly had little idea of what these labels actually meant, beyond the knowledge that they were insulting and designed so that they could derive immense perverse pleasure from “triggering” those who leant toward the left.

Anyhow, as Alex swung right and headed off down the last street toward home, he turned his mind to less controversial and heated matters before he really got carried away.

°You are a very fine person, Mr. Knowles, and I am very fond of you;° he was reminded, borrowing Gandalf’s conversation from *The Hobbit*, °but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!

°In other words, Alex, don’t forget that you are still a neophyte, taking your first provisional steps toward the Way. Tonight’s talk was just a brief introduction – a “101”, as they denote this in academic circles – and if you will forgive the vernacular, you are still full of shit. Full and overflowing.°

## 6.

It was quite late by the time Alex got home that evening, but not too late to boot up his computer and see what, if anything, was happening in cyberspace.

He was perhaps a little too impatient to get past the login screen, and for reasons known only to itself, though the system accepted his password, instead of bringing up a “please wait” message, instead he was informed that his desktop was being set up for first time use.

Well, there was nothing he could do but allow the machine to do its thing. That did not sound good to him.

After what seemed like an age, up came the desktop. What few icons there were had been rearranged down the left-hand side of the screen, and all the additional icons he’d added and carefully positioned across the screen had been lost.

Telling himself not to panic, he waited until the taskbar indicated that everything had finished loading, and clicked on the start menu. If in doubt, try rebooting, a slightly more sophisticated version of “Try turning it off and back on again”. Failing that, he’d have to hunt around for the “Desktop OK” app which he used to save his desktop icon positions, and hope that that restored his desktop. Failing that, he’d have to spend far longer patiently rebuilding his desktop layout. And failing all else was “If in doubt, give it a clout,” something he was occasionally tempted to do, in the bitter-sweet relationship he had with writing software for computers.

Thankfully, when he’d next booted up, his old desktop reappeared. The panic was over, but he was more than a little miffed at the time it had taken to resolve the issue.

That wasn’t all, though. When he opened his web browser and clicked on the Facebook icon, the web site failed to load, and only then did he notice that he’d lost his broadband Internet connection. The router was lit up in blue, however, which signalled that he should have had wifi with Internet access.

Ten minutes later, having tried everything else, he hunted in his box of oddments and found an old USB wifi dongle and tried that. It wasn't the best dongle, but it was better than nothing.

Bingo! The gremlins' devious plans had been foiled, and he had Internet access again. He scribbled a note to remind himself to order a new long range wifi dongle with a decent antenna, in case the old one failed as well. Best order a replacement first, because if the dongle did fail, he might have difficulties staying online long enough to place an order. In fact, maybe he should order a long Ethernet cable, too: one long enough to reach from the router to his PC across the other side of the room, without trailing across the open floor, which would drive his parents to distraction.

Of course, he could always use his mobile phone, but he really hated the small screen, couldn't function without a decent full-size qwerty keyboard, and couldn't stand the way the damn phone locked him out after every few seconds' inactivity, even if that did conserve battery power.

Scrolling through Facebook, at length, he found another post that had relevance to the talk earlier that evening, about the many grave issues we face in this difficult post-modern age:

## Societal Dysfunction

The individual presented himself in the therapy room of the nineteenth century, and during the twentieth the patient suffering breakdown is the world itself ... The new symptoms are fragmentation, specialization, expertise, depression, inflation, loss of energy, jargoneze, and violence. Our buildings are anorexic, our business paranoid, our technology manic. ~ Robert Sardello.<sup>19</sup>



*Figure 3: Benxi Steel Industries / Andreas Habich / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0.*

As Jude had pointed out, in *The Matrix Resurrections*: “We are so far down the wrong rabbit hole, here, people.” But, of course, he was arguably wrong in advocating more bullet time, at least as far as Alex was concerned. What turned him on was the deeper philosophy and psychology. He agreed with Dev 2: “People want us up in their grey space, switching their synaptic ‘What the hell

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Sardello, quoted in James Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World*.

is going on here?’ light on.”

What Alex was mainly interested in that evening, however, was to find out more about Professor Trelawney. Well, he couldn’t find her on Facebook or Twitter, though there were a few tweets mentioning her name. The professor did have a profile page at the University of Manchester, featuring a long list of academic papers she’d authored or co-authored. She also had a web site, “Imaginal Explorer: Uncovering the Hidden World of the Imagination”, though again this pretty much confirmed, by the absence of links, that she had no presence in the social media. Still, there was a contact page to send queries, so perhaps at some point he might get in touch with her, and there was a web page with links to a few interesting looking magazine articles, and mention of a recent book on the imaginal world, *Down the Rabbit Hole*.

Ooh, that was welcome, too: across at YouTube there was a recent lecture that she’d delivered for The Weekend University, and an interview with Jeffrey Mishlove on the New Thinking Allowed channel. Deep joy!

If he were to contact the professor, then he really should show some respect and diligence by familiarising himself with her work first. And he should perhaps get hold of her book, rather than thinking he was beyond such things, as she herself had strongly advised him. Yes, itching as he was to engage in practical work, it made sense to get a good grounding in the theory and the lingo first, so as not to appear an ignorant and naïve fool, or clam up altogether. Of course, Gwyn Wetherall had mentioned the book in her introduction, and copies had been made available for purchase after the lecture, but Alex had been keen instead to go outside for another smoke. Well, that in itself was a useful lesson he’d learnt. How’s the song go? “Smoke gets in your eyes.”

°Among many other things, it clouds your judgement,° he was reliably informed.

Indeed. I know that, you know that, but my Inner Addict, idiot that he is, does not.

°Now you’re making excuses, Alex. Don’t do that: you only have yourself to blame.°

Ouch! I felt that.

°I'll tell you what it is and how it came about, Alex: it functions as a smokescreen, so that others can't see the timid and vulnerable adolescent that you once were. You've outgrown that – or, rather, you should have – but you've evidently not outgrown the temptation and urge to smoke.°

Well, that's certainly food for thought.

Glancing at the bedside clock and then at the computer taskbar to make doubly sure, he saw that it was already getting on for 10.30pm, and realised that this task would have to wait for another day. Perhaps he'd make a start over the weekend, when he was less likely to be disturbed. Some things he could multitask, but not serious study.

And, of course, in the meantime he might see if Gwyn Wetherall might shed more light on the subject, since she'd mentioned that Professor Trelawney was a friend, and had introduced her at the lecture on behalf of the Cross-Cultural Studies Institute.

At that moment, the gremlins struck again, and Alex lost his wifi connection. So he was rather pleased with himself for having had the forethought to place an order with Amazon. Is that the worst you can do? Is that the worst that you can do! Stick that where the sun don't shine, varmints, because you're not going to hold me back!

Time for bed, indeed.

## 7.

Three days later, Alex was beaver-ing away when the receptionist buzzed through to the mail room to let him know that two parcels had arrived. So he grabbed a quick coffee from the machine near reception, collected the small packages and went back to the mail room to book the post into the database.

The first parcel was for Gwyn Wetherall and, to his surprise, the second was addressed to him, c/o The Mail Room, Smith & Wetherall Communications.

For reasons he did not at all comprehend, his mind flashed back to the book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which he'd read as a young teenager, and in particular to the scene in which the young Harry receives a letter – addressed to Mr. H. Potter, The Cupboard under the Stairs, 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey – that turned out to be a letter of acceptance to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Cutting the string binding the brown paper covering, he peered inside to find two books. The first was a hardback copy of Idries Shah's *Learning How to Learn*, no less, which was subtitled *Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way*, and the second was a paperback copy of *Down the Rabbit Hole: A Deep Exploration of the Imaginal World* by none other than Professor Sheila Trelawney. Written on the title page inside the book were the words: "To Alex, in the hope that you may get to experience the reality of the imaginal world. Sheila Trelawney."

Well that, as they say, certainly was a turn-up for the books. A provisional acceptance, perhaps?

He could only imagine that Gwyn Wetherall had spoken about him to the professor after they left the lecture hall. How thoughtful, kind and generous. Well, that was his weekend sorted, and he'd have to email his thanks to her. Just as hobbits like Pippin had a second breakfast, so he would have a second birthday.

°A second breakfast is also a traditional meal in Bavaria,

Poland, Slovakia, Spain and Hungary, believe it or believe it not,° he was prompted. °And what's more, as Lewis Carroll wrote: "There are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents, and only one for birthday presents, you know."°

How on earth do you know all these things? he asked himself.

°Well, you must have heard it or read it somewhere, and it's my job to remember all these little things,° came the reply.

I'm not at all convinced, he responded with a shake of his head.

°Most people think that Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web,° the inner voice told him, °but – work of genius and wonderland that it is – that's just a technological adaptation of a natural communications network that's been around since prehistoric times.°

Now you're getting spooky, Alex gasped.

°Take it or leave it,° the voice said. °As you are already aware: there's more to the world than meets the unobservant or untutored eye.°

Did you say "eye" or "I"? he queried.

°Take your pick, my friend. I would say both, wouldn't you?°

Alex placed the books carefully in his satchel, still loosely wrapped in the brown paper, then he picked up the other parcel and took it to Gwyn Wetherall's office.

Gwyn was thrilled at the news when he told her about the gift. "Well, that's your leisure time sorted for the next couple of weeks!" she happened to remark, which took him slightly by surprise. They must be on the same wavelength, he mused.

"Now, I know that you can steam your way through your work in the mail room, Alex," the lady added, "but take my advice and resist the temptation to binge read or gobble up the books, like fast food junk. They contain valuable nutrients, and effect useful changes in your psyche – you might say that they contain 'psychoactive' substance – so please take your time, so as not to suffer from indigestion."

Gwyn placed the package on her desk and stood there with her tongue in her cheek for a few moments, as if weighing him

up.

“So, I guess it goes without saying that the lecture aroused your interest?”

“Absolutely, yes. It opened my eyes to new possibilities,” he nodded.

“Well, I don’t know if I told you, but I’m the Honorary Secretary for the Cross-Cultural Studies Institute (the CCSI). I should add that ‘honorary’ does not denote an elevated rank, merely that I don’t get paid for my work. And I should further add that I really don’t expect to be paid for such work. It’s civic service.

“As well as organising lectures open to the public – in line with our commitments and obligations as a registered charity – we also have several groups for our members, devoted to things like art and crafts, history, dance, guided walks, and the publishing of scholarly monographs. But one that may well interest you is our Silver Circle, dedicated to Boann, Celtic goddess of inspiration, imagination, and creativity.

“We meet every Thursday night in a room at the Spiritualist Church on Gladstone Lane and learn the secrets of the imaginal and the ways in which it interpenetrates our own world; about the history and philosophy of the imaginal, and how it relates to the nature of consciousness, reality, and the human experience.

“And that, in turn, leads on to practical work involving meditation, lucid dreaming, active imagination, and other techniques. That stage, of course, is further down the line, but it’s useful to know where all this is eventually heading. I appreciate that you like to know such things – the *raison d’être* – in advance.

“So, would you be interested in joining the group?”

He nodded vigorously.

“Well, we have a new intake beginning in two weeks’ time. As an aside, don’t be surprised that things like that often work out so well: when you’re ready, the teacher and the work find you.

“Anyhow, the first taster session is free, and after that there’s an annual subscription to the Institute of £10, though many of the old timers donate as much as £100, and there’s a weekly fee of £5 for the group. We have to cover the cost of renting the room, you

see. It's usually £7.50, but since you're not on a high salary and still very much finding your feet financially, we can let you have the concessionary rate. How does that sound?"

"That sounds wonderful," he nodded. "And right up my street, as my father would say."

Actually, having said that, given the metaphysical nature of the group's work, he probably wouldn't. He would class this as "airy-fairy nonsense". Even creativity, other than trade skills like carpentry, was just so much "arty-farty nonsense" to him, bless his cotton socks.

°Still, the world would be a lesser place without such variety of thought and action,° he was politely reminded. °And you watch: once he's retired and he's got his head free of daily toil, and time on his hands – even to the point of restlessly twiddling his thumbs and not wanting to get under your mother's feet – your father may well find a new hobby in a noble art like painting.°

## 8.

On Thursday evening, it would be the first meeting of this year's intake into the Cross-Cultural Studies Institute's Silver Circle, and Alex was both pleased with himself and also disconcerted.

Pleased because he'd finished reading *Learning How to Learn* and was on the last chapter of *Down the Rabbit Hole*. Of course, he realised by now (especially in the case of Shah's work) that he'd probably embarked on a lifetime's continuing education, and would be reading and re-reading portions of the books, and hopefully gleaning more and more from them as time went by. Even more especially in the case of the Sufi teaching-stories, which he was told were like onions, gradually revealing layer upon layer of deeper meanings.

Disconcerted because in spite of his efforts – which he certainly could not, and would not, describe as his best efforts – he had still failed miserably in his avowed intention to quit smoking before the group's first meeting.

He needed little excuse to light up another cigarette, of course, and yet there was more. Every time he made a conscious decision to refrain, or to finally break the habit, some reason to smoke, or anxiety, raised its ugly head. It was almost as if there were conspiratorial elements in the world determined to keep him addicted. Was this, too, the work of gremlins? And, if so, then why?

After work on Wednesday, having finally finished Professor Trelawney's book the night before, Alex had a quick check for emails, only to find that all three had been sent to the spam folder, and a quick scroll through Facebook.

And lo! and behold! What should he find on his timeline but a post with a quote that the professor herself had used in the very last chapter of her book, which he had read only the night before. Well, if that wasn't a meaningful coincidence, then nothing was:

## When Disaster Strikes

When the time comes for the ego to set forth on its journey towards wholeness, strange and paradoxical things happen; fate chooses strange emissaries. But when we grow wiser we learn that the disasters of life are often the genius of the unconscious, forcing our egos into a new experience of the self. ~ Robert A. Johnson.<sup>20</sup>



*Figure 4: The Fool card from the Rider–Waite tarot deck / Pamela Colman Smith (1878–1951) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

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<sup>20</sup> Robert A. Johnson, *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love*.

One thing he could do, Alex decided. He could turn off his computer and instead have a more relaxed evening, so that he was hopefully better prepared for the big night tomorrow.

He took up the plastic pouch of tobacco and stuffed it in his bedside cabinet and thought about heading downstairs to watch a little television with his parents. Halfway out of the room, however, he turned back, retrieved the pouch and rolled one last cigarette.

Without thinking, he spun round on his heel and headed for his bedroom door.

Wham!

In his absent-minded haste, Alex had forgotten that he'd left the bedroom door open halfway and he walked straight into the open edge of the door with such force that he rebounded and fell back on his bed, clutching his battered rib cage.

Still, up he got and went downstairs, through the scullery,<sup>21</sup> and into the back yard to have that one last cigarette.

Only then, as he stood there wincing from the pain of his bruised ribs, which took away all the pleasure of smoking, and finally stubbed his cigarette out, did he put two and two together, and realise the perfectly timed wisdom of Robert A. Johnson's words:

... when we grow wiser we learn that the disasters of life are often the genius of the unconscious, forcing our egos into a new experience of the self.

Well, if that wasn't reminding him of the foolishness of his ways, and strongly discouraging him from continuing to smoke, then nothing was. So, hopefully the lesson had been learnt this time, for clearly, though in a good cause, the way was not all sweetness and light, nor peaches and cream, as he had foolishly imagined.

<sup>o</sup>And that's exactly how the materials of these action philosophies can come alive in your life,<sup>o</sup> his inner daemon

<sup>21</sup> Scullery: A small room (in large old British houses) next to the kitchen; where kitchen utensils are cleaned and kept and other rough household jobs are done.

advised him.

On Thursday afternoon, having previously informed everyone, Gwyn Wetherall let everyone go home an hour early. As previously arranged with his mother, Alex bought a fishcake and chips after dropping the mail off at the sub post office, and he ate on the walk back home. Otherwise he'd have been late getting to the group meeting, and probably in a lather, and that really wouldn't do.

As it happened, he still had a little time to kill, so he booted-up his PC. Emails could wait, because there was no way he'd have time to answer them, and in any case he wouldn't have been able to concentrate. By that time, having abstained from smoking for almost twenty-four hours, he was absolutely gagging for a nicotine hit.

Resisting the temptation at least until he got back downstairs, or perhaps on the way to the meeting, he opened up his Firefox web browser and loaded Facebook.

And, sure enough, there was the answer just waiting for him:

## The Unconscious Made Conscious

The unconscious contents are not always polite; they can burst into our conscious life in sometimes terrifying ways. They are willing to work with us if we are open to them, but they will make themselves felt, whether we want them to or not. The first route is preferable but harder, and demands discipline and determination. The second route is easier: you just let yourself go mad. ~ Gary Lachman.<sup>22</sup>



*Figure 5: Dickens' Dream [Unfinished work] / Robert William Buss (1804–1875) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

With that message in mind, and his ribs still aching from the previous day, Alex decided not to push his luck, in case even worse harm should befall him.

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<sup>22</sup> Gary Lachman, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World*.

Heck, if it turned out to be nothing more than superstition, and it meant that he finally quit smoking, then that was fine by him.

That reminded him of a cartoon by Joel Pett that he'd once seen. Someone is giving a speech at a climate summit, and a guy at the back of the hall is complaining: "What if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?"

And finally, lest he be in any doubt, he came across another related quote shortly after:

## The Knower Within

In the end we will only be transformed when we can recognize and accept the fact that there is a will within each of us, quite outside the range of conscious control, a will which knows what is right for us, which is repeatedly reporting to us via our bodies, emotions, and dreams, and is incessantly encouraging our healing and wholeness. ~ James Hollis.<sup>23</sup>



*Figure 6: Whisperings of Love (1889) / William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

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<sup>23</sup> James Hollis, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life: How to Finally, Really Grow Up*.

°Consider that a third opinion, Alex,° he was advised. °Or perhaps it's a fourth or fifth opinion? I've lost count.°

## 9.

As Alex nervously entered the hall, he saw a number of people already there. Some were milling around while one or two had already taken seats in the wide circle of chairs set in the centre of the room. He was already getting cold feet.

Seeing him enter, Gwyn waved and came over to greet him, and reassure him that a lot of people would be feeling a little anxious, before calling for their attention.

Just what I needed to know, he silently muttered to himself: that other people might notice I'm feeling nervous.

"Good evening, friends. I'm so glad that you could all make it, some at short notice. You can leave your coats in the room to your right, and half way through the session, you'll be able to stretch your legs and use the bathroom, and I and a volunteer will serve biscuits and light refreshments.

"As some of you will be aware already, there's been a change of plan this year. Usually members spend the first four months learning the theory and familiarising themselves with various writer, thinkers and mystics involved in the work. Then they move on for eight months to a group dedicated to praxis. That is, putting some of that theory into practice.

"However, due to the numbers, what we plan to do this year is combine both groups, studying the theory for the first forty minutes and, after the break, practice for the next hour. Then later in the year when we've covered all of the theory, we'll have two practical sessions instead.

Gwyn called for any questions. There was just one, from a middle-aged gentleman with a shiny bald head, sideburns and moustache, and a walking stick tucked under his arm. He'd noted that the hall would be booked for a longer period each week, and did that mean they'd have to pay more? He added that he would do so gladly.

"No, Major. Since there will be more attendees this year, there'll be no extra charge," she replied, and he was easily

satisfied.

“Any more questions?” Gwyn asked, looking around. “Well, if you think of anything, you can ask during the break. Not at the end of the meeting, though, as the caretaker, Mr Clitheroe, will want the chairs stacking and us out of the way in good time.”

Seeing that there were no hands raised in the air, Gwyn suggested that they all take their seats and begin.

“So, first of all, let’s go round the circle and we can each briefly introduce ourselves. Rather than dump any of you in the deep end, I’m willing to dip my feet in the waters first, and I hasten to add that this does not signify any elevated rank. We’re all fellow wayfarers here; hence the circle rather than rows of desks facing a lectern, or pews facing a pulpit, amid much pomp and ceremony.

“My name is Gwyn Wetherall and I’m a partner in a publicity-related firm. Some of you will be aware that in my spare time I play a small part as Secretary of the Cross-Cultural Studies Institute (the CCSI). I’ve been studying sociology, spirituality and mysticism for more years than I’d care to recall, though I still consider myself a novice. Perhaps an experienced novice, but a novice all the same.”

Gwyn Wetherall cast her eyes around the group and noted that the major’s hand was raised.

“Yes, Major.”

The man stood up momentarily, and gave a little bow, before deciding perhaps that he should sit back down again.

“I’m Arnold Frobisher, and I retired from military service last year, having spent most of my adult life in the army. Why am I here? Well, I’ll admit that I’m still finding it challenging to adapt to civilian life and I’ve been looking for ways of occupying my free time, and to better integrate myself into the local community. To that end, I recently joined the Institute and attended most of the events, the most recent being Professor Trelawney’s excellent talk on the imaginal world. And finally, in conversation with Mrs Wetherall, she mentioned this group, the Silver Circle, and suggested that I might find it interesting and rewarding. So, the long and short of it is: here I am, and I’d like to thank the

Secretary for the invitation, and thank you all for your good company and contributions.”

There were smiles and murmurs of appreciation, but the group didn’t appear sure whether or not they were expected to clap. Gwyn Wetherall put her hands together and made up their minds for them.

“Wonderful, Major,” Gwyn responded.

“Oh, please: do call me Arnold,” he requested. “I really need to move on from my days in the army.”

“Thank you, Arnold. And please call me Gwyn.”

Again, Gwyn cast her eyes around the circle, and a lady volunteered to speak, with a little wave of greeting. She was maybe in her early thirties – not that Alex was skilled in judging an adult’s age – and she had long blond hair tied back in a ponytail. She was wearing a loose blouse with an intricate embroidered floral design, and black slacks with slightly flared legs.

“Hello, I’m Maya; Maya Heslop.” She laughed. “Maya is an oddly appropriate name, really, since Maya means an illusion and the misperception of reality, and here I am hoping to understand more about the nature of reality.

“I have a scientific background, with a degree in biology before a change of tack, and a second degree and doctorate in neuroscience. Now I work for a large medical foundation as a research scientist, with some technical writing on the side.

“As for free time, I like to garden, to hike and camp in the countryside, and I’ve been a member of the Institute for several years now. That’s it really. As Arnold said ‘here I am’.”

“Thank you, Maya. That’s much appreciated, though you did omit one key phrase from your introduction.”

Maya was puzzled.

“Award winning”.

And now Maya blushed and cast her eyes down.

Gwyn caught Alex’s eye and he sucked in his breath.

“Would you like to introduce yourself, Alex?

His unspoken response to that was “No”, though he hoped that his reluctance or reticence wouldn’t show.

Oh, well. Time to dive in.

“My name is Alex Knowles. Last year I completed a course in information technology at the local technical college. I should add that I had been hoping to study computing at university, but my exam results weren’t good enough. My fault entirely, for not making more of an effort.

“Anyhow, since then, I eventually found a job. Gwyn here was kind enough – or foolhardy enough – to take me on as a junior clerk.

“I found out about the Institute from my work with Gwyn, and popped along to Professor Trelawney’s talk on the imaginal world, to see what it was all about. On Gwyn’s recommendation, I ended up in this group, and I’m very much looking forward to our meetings.

“I’m becoming increasingly interested in psychology, too. I guess right now I want to understand myself better, and slowly work my way out in wider circles from there.”

Gwyn Wetherall smiled. “And again, I should add that Alex here is proving to be a splendid and trustworthy colleague.”

Colleague, eh, rather than “employee” or “gopher”. That was kind of her.

Gwyn turned to Jake and he cleared his throat and began.

“Well, since leaving college, I’ve worked in the retail trade. Stocking shelves. Collecting long snakes of shopping trolleys from the car park. Helping out on the tills when we’re busy.

“I keep telling myself that it’s for the greater good; that it provides me with money to purchase paint and canvas – I’ve always wanted to be an artist, you see – but toiling away day after day at work has left me struggling to be creative, and has left me disillusioned.

“So, I’m rather hoping to find inspiration and meaning, and get myself into the right frame of mind to start being creative. Maybe eventually reduce my hours at the supermarket, or even leave mind-numbing work entirely. I can’t help thinking that there must be more to life than this.”

“Oh believe me: it may seem like cold comfort right now, Jake, but there definitely is ‘more to life than this’, and hopefully

we can play some small part in bringing that aspiration to fruition. For all our sakes. And thank you for sharing.”

“Okay, who’d like to go next?” she queried, scanning the group.

There seemed to be a little reluctance on the part of some of the others.

“Well, there’s no obligation on anyone here,” Gwyn assured them. “It’s early days for us a group. Another time, perhaps, when the ice has melted and we’re feeling a little more comfortable in the presence of others and in our own skin?”

“Dorothy Levine,” a middle aged lady spoke up before Gwyn moved on. “I don’t know what to say about myself. I work part-time in an office at an estate agent’s, but I don’t get involved with showing people around properties. Other than that I’m a wife and a mother of two teenage sons. My husband, Dennis thought it might be an idea for me to broaden my interests and meet more people.”

“George Truman,” another piped up. “I work as a porter at St. Helen’s hospital.”

Thanks to Dorothy, the ice had finally cracked.

“We’re Gladys and Michael Smith,” another greeted them, motioning to her husband in the seat to her left. “We attend the spiritualist church here and found out that you were running a group. We thought it might complement the work we do in the development circle.”

“Mary Oliver,” said another lady, perhaps in her late twenties. “I used to work as a reporter at the local newspaper before competition and changes in people’s habits eventually led to its closure. It was founded in 1885, would you believe. Such a sad loss for the community.

“Anyhow, I retrained and now work in the town library and sometimes moonlight as an independent, freelance journalist.”

“I’m Harriet Moore,” another joined in. “I’m a housewife and I have a collie and two pedigree cats in lieu of children. In my spare time I’m an author and I’ve had three books published by Harlequin UK’s Mills & Boon romance imprint. You can find me online, too. Just Google ‘Harriet Moore’,” the lady informed

them, carefully spelling out the names for them. “If I’d thought ahead, I’d have brought my business cards, but never mind.”

As for the remaining members of the circle, however, they chose not to introduce themselves, without making their reluctance too apparent.

Still, as Gwyn had noted, it was early days for the group.

Arnold, who sat to Alex’s right, looked a little irritated. “We could at least give name, rank, and serial number,” he said to Alex under his breath, but his voice travelled across the circle, nonetheless.

Gwyn raised her eyebrows at this, but looked like she was biting her lip. The aims of the group must surely include the fostering of community spirit and harmony.

One of the other ladies who had remained silent thus far, must have overheard the remark and, deliberately looking in the major’s direction, introduced herself. “My name is Deirdre. I’m currently unemployed and in the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) support group due to ill health. On Wednesdays I work as a volunteer at a local charity for people with disabilities, carrying out basic office tasks. And on Fridays I work in their charity shop, sorting and washing clothing that donors have brought in, dusting and arranging shelves, making tea and coffee for the other volunteers, and occasionally manning the till when they have to answer the call of nature or go outside for a quick smoke. So, much as I enjoy and appreciate the needs of our clients and customers, I really have little to write home about.”

There was a palpable silence in the room at this point, and nobody else volunteered to introduce themselves.

“Okay, thank you all, and hopefully we can give you something that really is worth writing home about, Deirdre,” Gwyn spoke at length. She clasped her hands together. “Let’s get down to business, then.”



In her talk at the first meeting, after the introductions, Gwyn Wetherall had introduced them to Iain McGilchrist’s extensive

studies of the hemispheric functioning of the brain, apologising profusely for the potted version that she was relating, and pointing them to his two *magna opera*: *The Master and His Emissary*, and *The Matter with Things*, if they were looking for some further reading. Well, a great deal of further reading. Or, should they prefer a less ambitious task, they might begin with the short work, *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning*.

As Gwyn made clear, McGilchrist (or McG as she fondly referred to the author) went to great lengths to distance himself from the earlier and yet still prevalent, though widely debunked, pop psychology that had associated logicity with the left brain and creativity with the right.

McGilchrist had gone so far as to say that:

Just about everything that is said about the hemispheres in pop psychology is wrong because it rests on beliefs about *what* the hemispheres do, not about *how* they approach it: each does so in a consistently different way. And mainstream science commits the same solecism, trying to work out what each hemisphere ‘does’: finding they are both involved in everything, it tends to conclude that there is no difference. That conclusion is at variance with that of pop psychology, but is just as misguided, for similar reasons: it starts from the same mistaken premise: that it’s the *what*, not the *how*, that matters.<sup>24</sup>

According to Wikipedia:

[This, McGilchrist replaced] with the idea that the two hemispheres pay attention in fundamentally different ways, the left being detail-oriented, the right being whole-oriented ...

... One of the fundamental differences between the hemispheres of the human brain (and that of other

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<sup>24</sup> Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*.

species, such as birds), according to McGilchrist is that the left hemisphere has evolved to sharply focus its attention on detail; it breaks things apart and tends to deal in abstractions, the explicit, and “either/or” (differentiation). The right hemisphere, on the other hand, has a broad and flexible attention that is open to whatever possibilities come along, and it sees things in their wider context, appreciates the implicit, and favours “both/and” (integration, holism). The right hemisphere has a better appreciation of itself and of the left, than the left has of the right. Both approaches are necessary and complementary, but the left hemisphere’s operation should not dominate the right. It makes “a good servant, but a very poor master.” [Hence the title of his first book].

McGilchrist further writes:

[Y]ou could say, to sum up a vastly complex matter in a phrase, that the brain's left hemisphere is designed to help us *ap*-prehend – and thus manipulate – the world; the right hemisphere to *com*-prehend it – see it all for what it is.<sup>25</sup>

Or that the right hemisphere experiences presence, while the left deals with re-presentations, just as Alfred Korzybski remarked that “the map is not the territory” and that “the word is not the thing”.

Gwyn had also spoken of four paths to truth, as described by Iain McGilchrist: science, reason, imagination (differentiating this from fancy or fantasy, as Henry Corbin and others do), and intuition, which were best used in combination.

He couldn’t remember what Gwyn had said exactly, even though he’d taken a pad with him and scribbled copious and largely-incomprehensible notes, but thanks to the wonders of the

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<sup>25</sup> Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*.

Internet community, he was able to pull up one of the quotes that she'd used to illustrate her talk:

## Science, Reason, Imagination, and Intuition



*Figure 7: An Allegory of the Four Elements / Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601–1678) and Hendrick van Balen the Elder (–1632) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

What is required [in philosophy or in life] is a synthesis of both intuition and imagination with reason: the imagined place – though one that is nonetheless with discipline achievable – where each is at its best, standing in equitable relation to each of the others, and informed, where relevant, by science. As [Henri] Bergson pointed out, if philosophy is not to be merely the further propagation of the analytic tendency in the modern mind, it must mean “to reverse the normal direction of the workings of thought.” In other words, it is to reverse the normal left hemisphere take, under which we approach everything in the hope of discovering its true nature by analysis, in order to recapture the right hemisphere take by synthesis. And he commented memorably, “criticism of an intuitive philosophy is so easy and so certain to be

well received that it will always tempt the beginner.” That’s partly because the applauding audience are already committed to the left hemisphere take – and therefore can’t see that they are missing anything. And partly because an analytic take is so terribly easy to express, whereas an intuitive take is something that some people largely lack, and even where they don’t, is much harder to express in everyday language. ~ Iain McGilchrist.<sup>26</sup>

After she’d wrapped-up this introductory topic, Gwyn consulted her watch. “Well, I think that’s more than sufficient cranial stimulation for this week,” she smiled, collecting her notes, depositing them in her briefcase, and standing. “So, what I suggest is that we take a break next door for biscuits and refreshments – we have a range of tea and coffee, or cordial, if you prefer. Yes, Deirdre, we have decaf. Thanks for reminding me.

“And then we’ll leave our cares behind and engage in a basic exercise to still your mind and make you receptive, that you can practise in the privacy and comfort of your own homes. No, Brian, it’s not mandatory homework, but it certainly is foundational to this course, and advisable.”

Having learnt his interpersonal skills at the Gordon Ramsay School of Fuckery, Brian was now Assistant Head Chef at the Hotel Royal, and let’s just say that he was not the easiest member of the group to please.

“Trust me, the stillness, receptivity, and mental fluidity that this engenders will be exactly what we need further down the road. And think of it as putting some meat on the bones.

“Sorry, what was that? Well, lentils in your veggie burgers, if you prefer. I was being metaphorical, rather than literal – and as we’ve just seen, the right brain is well at home with metaphor.”

Oh Lord, thought Alex, as he involuntarily recalled – and couldn’t exorcise – the words of the old song:

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<sup>26</sup> Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*.

Dem bones Dem bones Dem dry bones  
Dem bones Dem bones Dem dry bones  
Dem bones Dem bones Dem dry bones,  
Hear the word of the Lord.

As it turned out, that was the one and only time that Brian made an appearance in the group. Well, you can't please everyone, as they say. Fortunately, his place was taken by a newcomer, a horticulturalist by the name of Ruth, and Gwyn had Alex photocopy her notes from the first meeting, so that Ruth could catch up. He did query whether notes could be made available to all members of the Silver Circle, but Gwyn thought that the cost would be prohibitive. Perhaps a summary, then? Probably not. She'd already condensed the material to the bare minimum. Having said that, though, a self-published handbook was not beyond the realms of possibility. She'd have to pick her friend Sheila Trelawney's brains about that. Good thinking, Alex.

"I'm told self-publishing is the in thing, and no longer considered vanity," she added. "Though marketing might be something of a hurdle. Many reviewers and publications won't touch self-published works with a barge pole. And you can have the job of proofreader, Alex, with your exceptional eye for detail. I can't promise to make you rich, but I'll see that you're fairly recompensed. And maybe you might try your own hand at writing? Who knows where that could lead."

She laughed, catching herself in the act: "But here I am, getting carried away with myself." Then: "Well, it will give us something to work toward, and the book will largely design itself as the course progresses."

That last remark sounded rather like something Idries shah might have written, he pondered, and much later he actually did come across the quotation in an old review of Shah's seminal work, *The Sufis*:

"A book like this designs itself in a Sufistic manner,"  
he says.

But, much like Gwyn, he was getting way ahead of himself. Back to the practical session of the Silver Circle's inaugural meeting.

"Okay then, friends," Gwyn said with a loud clap of her hands as they resumed their seats after the mid-session break. "You won't need to take notes, so please put down all your notepads and bags and at least silence or turn off your mobile phones so we're not disturbed, if you haven't already done so. Thank you."

She waited a few moments until they'd stopped fidgeting.

"Good. Now, what we're going to do is first of all learn how to relax our bodies. Since we don't have mats or cushions for everybody, we'll be carrying out a sitting exercise, but you can accomplish the same thing at home sitting on the floor cross-legged. Or even laying down, if you can avoid drifting off to sleep. It really doesn't matter, and I'm certainly not expecting any advanced contortions like the half or full lotus position.

"The aim is simply to relax the body; then, later, to relax the mind, to allow you to enter a more receptive, meditative – but not vegetative or sleepy – state.

"Okay, so if you could sit upright in your chairs, with your feet together, and your arms gently resting on your thighs with your palms uppermost, we'll begin.

"The first key skill for both this physical exercise and for the later mind exercise, is breathing. It's important to breathe in a relaxed and natural manner, but the chances are that you have spent your whole life breathing in a rather unnatural manner. Breathe in through your nose, but don't expand your chest as you breathe in, instead use your diaphragm, pushing it downward, to expand your abdomen. As your belly expands, so your lungs will fill with air, with the air getting down deep into your lungs. Yes, I know you may find this counter-intuitive. For now, if it helps, place your hands on your abdomen to give you some feedback about the process.

"Breathe in for a count of four, and hold for a count of seven. Then breathe out for a count of eight. There are other versions of this sequence of counting, though the 4-7-8 system is popular, so

don't feel that you have to obey this as a rule chiselled into stone. You may well have to practise this for a few days or even weeks before you get used to it and it becomes second nature. So for today, really don't worry too much about the technique, as long as you're relaxed.

"Okay, arms back in your lap. If you want to make a ring with gentle contact between your thumbs and index fingers, feel free, but it's really not important, except that it signals your intention to relax and enter a meditative state. You may decide to lower your gaze, but keep your torso upright and your head straight.

"Now, let's start with your face and head. Gently use your facial muscles to pull your skin toward the back of your head. It might help if you adopt an expression of wide-eyed surprise. And bonus points if you can waggle your ears. Now pull the skin forward, and again it may help to simulate a frown, with your forehead furrowed, your chin taut and your mouth tight. And relax. Do that three times, always ending in a relaxed state.

"Now move down to your neck and shoulders. Gently move your head forward and hunch your shoulders, and again relax in the normal position, looking ahead. Again, repeat that three times.

"Onto the arms. Bring your upper arms forward, away from the sides, and gently tense, then relax them. Bend your arms now, so that you can feel the tension, and relax. And finally make your hands into tight fists, and relax them. Let your arms flop down beside you or gently rest in your lap.

"Ignore the previous advice about correct breathing, and deliberately breathe in by expanding your chest, then relax. Again, repeat that three times.

"Down to the stomach, again ignoring the advice about breathing. Pull in your stomach as you breathe in, and relax. If you're laying down, then you'll probably feel your torso gently sink down as you exhale.

"And finally, since you're sitting, just raise your lower legs and feel the tension in your thighs, and let them slowly flop back down, relaxed. If you're laying down, then gently stretch your upper legs and allow your legs to sink back down, then gently stretch your lower legs and let them sink back down.

“Okay, so one more time without me interrupting you, beginning again with your face. Don’t worry about what your neighbour or the person opposite is doing: you just work on your own process at your own pace.”

There was a lengthy pause as the members of the circle went through the procedure, then Gwyn spoke again.

“Well done. Right then, let’s have a go at calming our minds. Hands back in your laps. At this point you may wish to lower your gaze, or even focus on the breath coming through your nose. That’s up to you.

“Now I want you to breathe in and then exhale at a relaxed pace, and to silently count ‘1’ as you exhale. With the next exhalation, you count ‘2’ and so on until you get to ‘10’. I’m not going to tell you to make your mind a blank, because that is not going to happen, at least not at this early stage. If a thought arises, don’t pay it much heed but just let it move on of its own volition. Now, each time you do notice a thought and find yourself following that thought and adding more thoughts, I want you to go back to a count of ‘1’. Or maybe if it was only a minor lapse, just count your last number again.

“Okay, so I’ll close my mouth and you may begin. Raise your hand when you make it to ‘10’. If you feel that’s too soon, then maybe just start back at ‘1’ again.

There was silence in the room for over five minutes before Jake, the artist, tentatively began to raise his hand, then thought better of it and went back to his practice.

Five minutes later and he and Maya, the scientist, raised their hands, eventually followed by a flurry of hands from the others.

“Well done,” Gwyn smiled. “If you haven’t meditated before, it’s quite an eye-opener, isn’t it: the way the Monkey Mind chatters away. What you may find later is that although Monkey Mind appears to have gone quiet, he or she has simply learnt how to whisper, in the hopes that your observer self or watcher will not notice.

“I didn’t make it past ‘5’,” the major openly admitted. “It was like listening to a blessed horse-racing commentator.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Arnold. And don’t compare your

progress with others. With apologies to those among us who have been meditating for some time, as a group it's still very early days, and we're only looking to make baby steps just now."

"Beginner's mind," Jake nodded.

"Indeed," Gwyn smiled.

"Beginner's mind?" Alex queried. He'd heard that somewhere before, but wasn't quite sure what it meant.

"It's a term from Zen Buddhism," Gwyn explained. "It means you approach the world through a beginner's eyes, as if seeing a sight for the first time, or having an experience for the first time, without predisposed judgments, opinions, or biases, rather than thinking that you know a lot or know it all. It's linked to patience and humility. And as for patience, that is not what we ordinarily think of as waiting impatiently for a long time. Rather, as Idries Shah once wrote:

Patience is to be patient with patience.<sup>27</sup>

"Ah, right. Yes, I remember reading that. And of course, I thought little of it at the time, except that it sounded like a cool turn of phrase."

Gwyn nodded. "I agree. It's good to see these teachings come alive in our own lives. So, as I suggested, let's be patient with patience."

Again, Gwyn looked at her watch. "Well, we still have a few minutes left, so how's about we have another go at counting the breaths, and then we'll call it a night. Oh, and following up on Arnold's excellent suggestion, anyone who wants to come along and make merry, we can adjourn to The Green Man, a delightful hostelry on Castle Road, to take a cup of kindness."

Alex sighed. Now he'd have that earworm going round all night; or at least whatever words he could remember, with a mixture of humming and nonsense syllables in between. Still it was better than having "Dem bones" stuck in his head.

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<sup>27</sup> Idries Shah, *Learning How to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way*

Should old acquaintance be forgot,  
and never brought to mind?  
Should old acquaintance be forgot,  
and auld lang syne?

All together now:

For auld lang syne,<sup>28</sup> my dear,  
for auld lang syne,  
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,  
for auld lang syne.

Alex stayed for an hour at The Green Man, and just had the one pint of Kronenberg lager, washed down with a glass of cola, since he had work the next day.

One useful result from having a drink was that they loosened up and were soon chatting away quite merrily. Stewart, one of the other members, introduced himself for the first time. It turned out that he was a tax inspector, but he was eager to tell them that he was definitely off duty out of office hours.

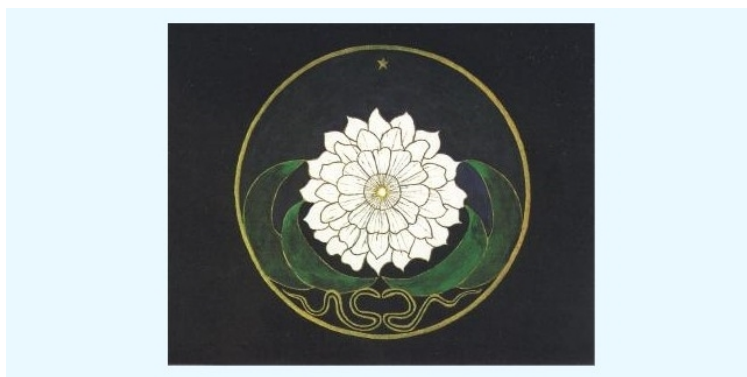
They'd been talking about spirituality and Gwyn had come out with a neat quote. All he could remember was the title *God 4.0*, and he'd managed to find the quote in a review on the Amazon web site, and quickly posted the quote on Facebook before getting ready for bed:

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<sup>28</sup> Loosely translated as “for the sake of times long past”.

## An Extra, Immanent Dimension of Consciousness

[I]t's better to think about the aim of spiritual and religious efforts this way: as developing another — an extra — dimension of consciousness, and “seeing” a reality coexisting along with, but above and beyond, the narrowly focused, survival-centered reality of our everyday world. ~ Robert Ornstein and Sally M. Ornstein.<sup>29</sup>



*Figure 8: Mandala Golden Flower Jung / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain. Mandala made by one of Jung's unknown patients before 1929.*

It was only later that Alex found out that Robert Ornstein was an associate of Idries Shah, and that the Ornsteins' work was influenced by the Sufi materials, especially the teaching-stories. So that was another little piece to add to the jigsaw he was gradually building up in his mind – or another node in the network.

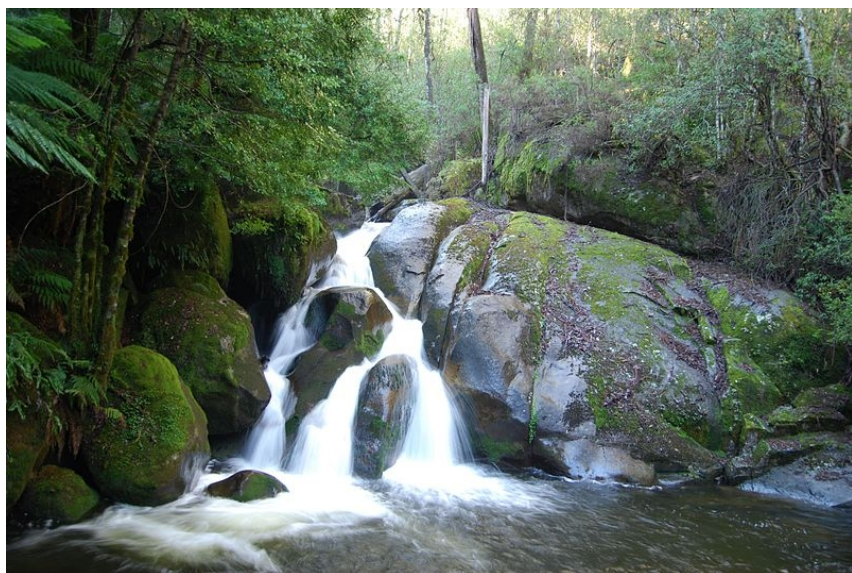
There was another piece, too, that he found on Friday night, that chimed with what Gwyn had been talking about. He'd been meaning to ask what she had meant by “mental fluidity”:

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Ornstein and Sally M. Ornstein, *God 4.0: On the Nature of Higher Consciousness and the Experience Called “God”*.

## Mental Fluidity

Consciousness changes continually within each of us, and does so radically each day. It shifts from the hallucination of dreaming sleep, to the fluid thought that is experienced in hypnagogic states, to narrowly focused workaday full alertness — and to everything in between.



*Figure 9: The Beeches Rainforest Walk / Peter Halasz / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0.*

The fluidity of our minds makes a possible change in consciousness closer to our daily experiences than we usually assume. It is a further development of what we experience when we get an insight into the workings of a machine, or into how another person is thinking, or when we suddenly discover the solution to a problem. Areas inside the brain temporarily shut off normal thinking to make way for a new insight or new level of understanding.<sup>30</sup>

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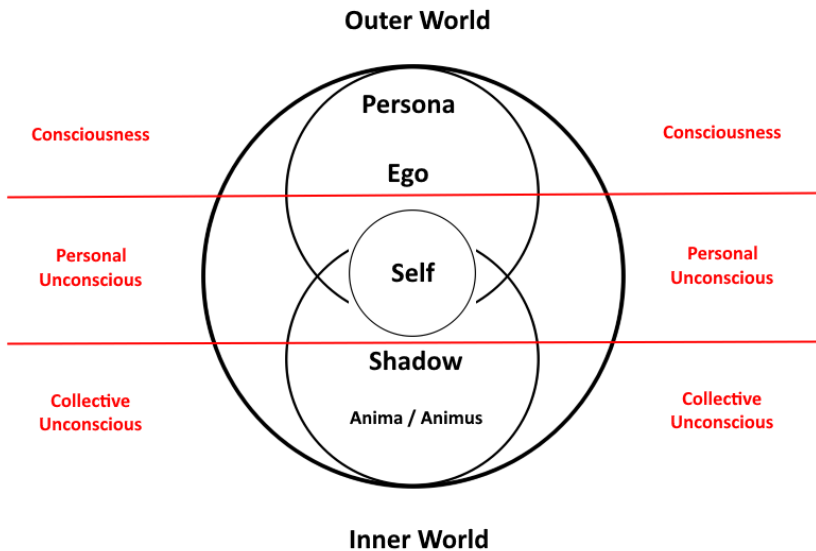
<sup>30</sup> Robert Ornstein and Sally M. Ornstein, *God 4.0: On the Nature of Higher Consciousness and the Experience Called “God”*.

# 10.

In the next session, Gwyn talked about depth psychology, and in particular, the work of the father of depth psychology, Carl Gustav Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology.

“First of all, let’s turn to the psyche. Jung wrote that ‘by psyche I understand the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious.’<sup>31</sup>

“And here, in this diagram you can see a schematic diagram of the psyche:”



*Figure 10: Schematic diagram of the psyche.*

“I’ll explain some of the terms later, but for now at the top we have the outer world and the realm of consciousness, with the

<sup>31</sup> C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types, Collected Works, Vol. 6.*

persona in contact with the outer world. Jung describes that as ‘a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual.’<sup>32</sup> and below that is the ego, part of which we are conscious of, and part of which we are unconscious.

“Below that are the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. One of the first things we encounter in our inner explorations will be the personal Shadow, and as we progress, we begin to see the collective Shadow; after that, we come into contact with the *anima* or *animus*; and encounter the true Self. Through self-work, we continuously integrate more and more of the personal, and even the collective unconscious, into the Self.”

Gwyn paused for a moment to let them catch up, as several of the group were scribbling away in their notepads.

“Whereas many spiritual and religious traditions speak of, or work toward, an ascent into the spiritual world, depth psychology is, at least in the early stages, a descent into, and exploration of, the inner world, negotiating and coming to terms with the personal Shadow, the unknown, unconscious, suppressed, dark side of our personality, and also becoming aware of the collective Shadow, the unknown dark side of humanity.

“It’s important to note, however, that there is such a thing as a Golden Shadow, which Jung described as one’s ‘submerged creative potential’, and so the work also involves reclaiming these facets of ourselves.

“Beyond the Shadow lies an encounter with our *anima* (our unconscious feminine psychological qualities in the case of a male) or *animus* (the unconscious masculine qualities in the case of a female).

“And from there, though somewhat further down the line, there is potential contact and communion with the *anima mundi*, Soul of the World.

“I should also make a distinction: whereas most spiritual and religious traditions aim for perfection, depth psychology’s aim is for individuation and wholeness of being.”

“To keep things simple, and quoting from Wikipedia:

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<sup>32</sup> C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*.

Individuation is a process of transformation whereby the personal and collective unconscious are brought into consciousness (e.g., by means of dreams, active imagination, or free association) to be assimilated into the whole personality. It is a completely natural process necessary for the integration of the psyche.

“Of course, though they say it is ‘a completely natural process’, the truth is that shadow work on the road to individuation can be a somewhat dangerous process, and the great work of individuation is a lengthy and difficult path.

“Throughout this process, the Self is both the central force guiding our development, and the end-product of the process. Well, I say end-product but it’s a lifelong, indeed never-ending process. You could say that the Self is the totality of the conscious and the unconscious, including our potential.

“As for dreams and active imagination, we’ll come to these now. And, be assured that further into the course we’ll be looking into lucid dreaming and exploring the imaginal world.

“So, starting with dreams: obviously we can’t carry out a dreaming exercise during our meetings, but what you can do is allocate a fresh journal and record your dreams. If I were you, I would also keep a notepad by your bed so that you can jot down your dreams before they quickly and inevitably fade from your memory. Trust me, no matter how sure you are that you will remember your dreams when you get up in the morning, much – if not all – of the memory will have been forgotten and lost.

“And if you have any dreams that are significant, and you’re willing to share and work with the material in the group, then please bring your journal along to the following meeting. Or you could broach the subject with me in private, if you prefer.

“Don’t try to analyse the dreams, though. As James Hillman advocates, stay with the image:

For Jungian Analyst James Hillman, psyche is image. He urges that the individual stay with the image and not

be distracted by the ego's demand for comprehension: "We sin against the imagination whenever we ask an image for its meaning, requiring that images be translated into concepts." For Hillman, it is mandatory to "see through" the image, to stay with the particulars of a personal viewpoint or code of experience rather than focus on the literal object to ask what it is "like," not what does this "mean". Hillman suggests that such a stance will broaden awareness or consciousness, by incorporating as many different views as possible before any interpretation is attempted.<sup>33</sup>

"Dream analysis is out, but dream amplification is another matter, as David Tacey writes:

Jung's reference[s] to free association [are] an attack on the Freudian method of dream interpretation, where the patient "free associates" on the images and actions of the dream. To Jung, this approach was wrong because it takes us away from the content of the dream. "Stick to the image!" he used to say to his students. The dream is a revelation from the psyche, and as such its meaning cannot be ascertained by activating the resources of personal memory or childhood history. It is a transpersonal message from the depths, and we should adopt a position of humility towards it. Jung believed the dream had to be approached with surprise and wonder, and we should be prepared for insights, both pleasant and unpleasant, that would be made known to us.

Jung's method of interpretation involves not [free] association but amplification, a skill developed by the analyst in his or her clinical training. The object is to amplify the dream images by relating them to the myths and symbols of world religions, literatures and cosmologies. Instead of relating the dream to the personal history of the patient, Jung attempts to relate it to the

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<sup>33</sup> Ginger Grant, *Re-visioning the Way We Work: A Heroic Journey*.

universal history of humanity, to the symbolic systems that have enshrined wisdom in every time and culture.<sup>34</sup>

“Now we come to active imagination, which is not to be lightly dismissed. And, by the way, if you’re interested in dreamwork and active imagination, I recommend Robert A. Johnson’s handbook, *Inner Work*.

“He writes:

[D]reams are the first of the two great channels of communication from the unconscious; the second is the imagination.

It baffles many people at first to hear that the imagination is an organ of coherent communication, that it employs a highly refined, complex language of symbols to express the contents of the unconscious. Yet, it is true: If we learn to watch it with a practiced eye, we discover that the imagination is a veritable stream of energy and meaningful imagery flowing from the unconscious most of the time.

We may picture two conduits that run from the unconscious to the conscious mind. The first conduit is the faculty of dreaming; the second is the faculty of imagination. Dreaming and imagination have one special quality in common: their power to convert the invisible forms of the unconscious into images that are perceptible to the conscious mind. This is why we sometimes feel as though dreaming is the imagination at work during sleep and the imagination is the dream world flowing through us while we are awake. ...”

... The images with whom we interact are symbols, and we encounter them on a symbolic plane of existence. But a magical principle is at work: When we experience the images, we also directly experience the inner parts of ourselves that are clothed in the images. This is the power of symbolic experience in the human psyche when it is

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<sup>34</sup> David Tacey, *How To Read Jung*.

entered into consciously: Its intensity and its effect on us is often as concrete as a physical experience would be. Its power to realign our attitudes, teach us and change us at deep levels, is much greater than that of external events that we may pass through without noticing.<sup>35</sup>

“Some of us can enter into an imaginative state in our everyday waking consciousness, and most of us can during sleep, but there is an intermediate state that is well worth looking at.

“The writer, Gary Lachman speaks of the intermediate state between sleeping and waking, hypnagogia. Strictly speaking, it’s called hypnagogia if falling asleep and hypnopompia if waking up:

Something ... [Emanuel] Swedenborg practiced throughout his life was a curious ability to hover in that strange state between sleeping and waking. This condition, known as ‘hypnagogia,’ allows for a conscious experience of the unconscious; Swedenborg shared this facility with other secret teachers, such as Rudolf Steiner and C. G. Jung.<sup>36</sup>

“So, how does one enter and remain for a time in such a state? Well, unlike dreams, that is something we can get a taste of after the break, and it’s another tool for your toolkit that you can use in the privacy and comfort of your own homes.”



“Okay then,” Gwyn prompted as they returned from their short break.

“Tonight, we’ll be exploring active imagination and inner dialogue. As Jeffrey Raff wrote:

Living with the self is the key practice in Jung’s

<sup>35</sup> Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth*.

<sup>36</sup> Gary Lachman, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World*.

spiritual model, but what is the self? Dialoguing with inner figures is a quintessential feature of the Jungian approach: the self is often experienced in this way. Personified as an inner figure, it embodies an individual's essential nature and, although often overwhelming, the self still wears a face resembling that of the conscious personality. But what is the self? Experientially, the self is an inner and subjective figure or center that feels powerful, numinous, and complete in itself.<sup>37</sup>

“And as Robert A. Johnson explains:

Essentially, Active Imagination is a dialogue that you enter into with the different parts of yourself that live in the unconscious. In some ways it is similar to dreaming, except that you are fully awake and conscious during the experience. This, in fact, is what gives this technique its distinctive quality. Instead of going into a dream, you go into your imagination while you are awake. You allow the images to rise up out of the unconscious, and they come to you on the level of imagination just as they would come to you in dream if you were asleep.

In your imagination you begin to talk to your images and interact with them. They answer back. You are startled to find out that they express radically different viewpoints from those of your conscious mind. They tell you things you never consciously knew and express thoughts that you never consciously thought.<sup>38</sup>

And, in case you're sceptical, he writes elsewhere:

Because of the popular notion that imagination is fictitious, many people react automatically by thinking

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<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey Raff, *Jung and the Alchemical Imagination*.

<sup>38</sup> Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth*.

that such an experience in the imagination [holding an inner dialogue] would be meaningless. They think, “I would just be talking to myself.” But if we work with Active Imagination we soon confirm that we dialogue with genuine interior parts of our own selves.<sup>39</sup>

“There’s nothing wrong with being sceptical, but please try to keep an open mind, and you may well be pleasantly surprised. Maybe not today, or tomorrow, or even next week, but hopefully the time will come when something surprising or unexpected pops out of your inner dialogue and gobsacks you – maybe something you really need to hear, whether you like it or not. And after that, you won’t need any convincing, because you will *know* first-hand. As Jung himself said in a BBC television programme: ‘I don’t need to believe, I know.’

Regarding knowledge, Idries Shah once wrote: ‘Knowledge is something which you can use. Belief is something which uses you.’; and concerning opinion, he wrote: ‘Opinion is usually something which people have when they lack comprehensive information.’<sup>40</sup>

“So, as I say, try to keep an open mind.

“At first, you may hear nothing, or hear nothing other than your own monkey mind babbling. But, given time, you’ll learn to ignore any nagging mind demons and discriminate between your own voice and that of your inner daemon<sup>41</sup> or inner guide.”

“Anyhow, back to business.

“Now we’ll go through the process of relaxing our bodies, and then relaxing our minds, as we did before. And then we’re going to change the rules. With your eyes closed, you’re going to allow yourselves to almost fall asleep. Don’t worry: there are arms on your chairs so there’s no chance of falling asleep and toppling over to the side, and if you notice, over there on the table

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<sup>39</sup> Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth*.

<sup>40</sup> Idries Shah, *Reflections*.

<sup>41</sup> Daemon or daimon, known to the Romans as a genius, to creative folk as an inner muse, to Christians as a guardian angel. Not to be confused with a demon.

there are a number of book rests for the seats. You simply slot the rest in here ... like so ... then swing the rest around and clip it into place over the other arm ... like so. Thus, there's no chance of you falling forward, either. And, just to be on the safe side, I'll be standing in the centre of the circle keeping an eye out for you. Now, if you do fall asleep, don't worry: that is only to be expected, but what I'd like you to do is to hover in a half-awake state for as long as you can.

"As I said, we're going to change the rules tonight. Whereas before you paid little heed to any passing thoughts, this time I want you to pay attention to any inner voice you might hear, and even interact with that voice, just as Jung himself engaged his inner guide, Philemon in creative dialogue.

"And later, in your own home, I'd like you to maintain a second journal in which you engage in such inner dialogue while you're awake. Some of you youngsters may even prefer to use your computer and type the dialogue in using your keyboard. For that matter, others may like to engage through modelling clay, or painting, or dance. Use whatever means are at your disposal and work for you.

"So, if you're all settled, let's begin."



"Okay, you can begin to wake up now," Gwyn said softly at length. "Stay relaxed and bring yourself slowly back to the so-called real world. Listen to my voice. Feel the solid wooden book rest in front of you. Look around the room and see the rest of the group in the circle. Carefully swing the book rest out of the way, stand up slowly, and stretch your legs for a few moments, then sit back down again. Good."



Once they were all settled in their chairs again, Gwyn went round the circle. "Frederick, would you like to report on your experience?"

Frederick shrugged. "I'm not sure if I experienced anything out of the ordinary, to be honest, Gwyn."

Gwyn smiled. "It really doesn't have to be anything extraordinary, Frederick. Tell me: what did you see, or hear, or smell. Are you sure your mind was blank throughout?"

Alex was of a timid and nervous disposition under certain circumstances and certain environments, but Frederick, who worked on the railways, had such a lack of confidence in his own abilities, and hence was loth to volunteer ideas, that Alex felt sympathy and even emotional pain on his behalf. And yet get Frederick talking about trains and the man was instantly transformed; he really was in his element.

"It could be a scene from your childhood: for instance, something as simple as playing with your toys."

The man's eyes widened.

"Well, I did see an image of an old teddy bear I once had. I'll have a think about that, Gwyn. Can you come back to me later?"

Well, that was material they could usefully work on, Alex thought.

"Okay," Gwyn smiled, then began to recite a short poem, perhaps for Frederick's benefit:

## The Raindrop

A drop which fell from a rain-cloud  
Was disturbed by the extent of the sea:  
“Who am I in the ocean’s vastness?  
If IT is, then indeed I am not!”  
While it saw itself with the eye of contempt  
A shell nurtured it in its bosom.  
The heavens so fostered things  
That it became a celebrated, a royal Pearl:  
Becoming high from being low  
It knocked on the door of nothingness:  
Until Being came about.<sup>42</sup>



*Figure 11: Here comes rain again / Juni from Kyoto, Japan / Wikimedia Commons (orig. Flickr) / CC BY 2.0.*

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<sup>42</sup> Saadi in Idries Shah, *Learning How to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way*.

“As Idries Shah points out: ‘The Persian poetic convention is that a pearl is a transformed raindrop.’”

Gwyn turned to Jake, the artist. “And what about you, Jake?”

“Well, at first there was nothing. Just silence.”

“And what did that feel like for you, Jake?” Gwyn asked.

“A bit disconcerting, actually. And a feeling of dread.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, it reminded me of my father. In what way? It reminded me of the day my high school exam results came through and I finally plucked up the courage to tell him that my results were good enough to get me into the art school that I’d set my heart on.

“I expected steam to erupt from his ears, or for him to start frothing at the mouth, for not discussing my options with him and my mother. But no, there was just a devastating silence and he walked out of the room. I didn’t know what to think, except perhaps that he realised that he was on the verge of exploding and thought he’d better stay out of my way until the feelings had subsided. I think the not knowing was actually more worrying than the prospect of a heated argument.”

“And did you go to art school, after all?” Gwyn queried.

Jake shook his head and sighed. “No. Before he could come back into the room and give me a good bollocking, I grabbed my coat and cycled back to school, to check through the vacancies on one of the computers. I found a business studies course at another college, made the necessary arrangements, and then cycled back home to tell my parents what they wanted to hear: that I’d picked a course with a respectable, well-paid career path.

“And the rest of the time, I spent running through those events in my mind and wishing that I’d gone with my heart instead of my father’s head, and enrolled at the art school.

“That’s it, really.”

Gwyn nodded in appreciation. “Well, that’s certainly quite a lot of useful material, Jake, and it must have been bugging you for quite some time. A suggestion perhaps: as I listened to you, I was reminded that in the ancient Greek culture there was several myths involving self-sacrifice; and of course there is the story of Jesus. Hence the phrase that popped into my head, that ‘we all

have our cross to bear'. Remember, though, that the crucifixion was followed by rebirth and healing. And then there's the fairytale of Cinderella. Doing one's duty rather than following one's dreams. Give that some thought.

"Of course, you're older now and hopefully standing on your own two feet, making your own decisions. And you're still young, so who knows what opportunities might still come along that will let you live your dreams. Anyhow, thank you for sharing it with us."

Gwyn turned to Maya. "And what about you, Maya?"

"Well, most of my time was spent listening to my own monkey mind, and most of the conversation was pretty basic: I mean, just everyday, banal chatter. Then, all of a sudden, as I must have been drifting off to sleep, I heard a man's voice quite clearly. Why, I don't know, but he kept repeating over and over the words "Lovers find secret places" and maybe other words that I couldn't quite make out due to interruptions from my monkey mind."

Alex had a sudden thought, and he reached into his jacket pocket to produce his mobile phone. "Bear with me," he said as Gwyn spotted what he was doing.

He opened up Google and tapped in the phrase, then scrolled through the results. He found no significant matches, so he tried the phrase again, this time in quotation marks.

"Bingo!" he smiled, and turned to Maya. "That's the first line of a poem by the Sufi poet, Rumi," he reliably informed her.

"Coleman Barks?" Gwyn queried.

He nodded. "He's listed as one of the translators."

"Well, in that case it may be more of an interpretation than a translation. Much the same with Daniel Ladinsky, too, who channels Hafiz," she responded. "But do go ahead. This is fascinating."

Alex cleared his throat:

## “Lovers find secret places”

Lovers find secret places  
inside this violent world  
where they make transactions  
with beauty.

Reason says, Nonsense.  
I have walked and measured the walls here.  
There are no places like that.

Love says, There are. ~ Rumi.<sup>43</sup>



*Figure 12: Les Amoureux (Soir d'automne, Idylle sur la passerelle) / Émile Friant (1863–1932) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain. English: The Lovers (Autumn Evening).*

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<sup>43</sup> ~ Rumi (Author), Coleman Barks, A.J. Arberry, Nevit O. Ergin (Translators), *Bridge to the Soul: Journeys Into the Music and Silence of the Heart*.

“Wonderful,” Maya replied, “‘Reason says, Nonsense’, indeed. That’s rather appropriate, because I must admit to being sceptical about active imagination.”

Alex went back to the results page and did a bit more scrolling. “Ah, I thought maybe that was just an excerpt from the poem. Here’s the full poem.”

He got up from his chair and handed his smartphone to Maya.

“Oh, wow. Even better,” she beamed, and she read the full poem out loud to the group.

He exchanged glances with Gwyn, who looked rather pleased, perhaps because this was the first occasion on which Maya had found the courage to speak confidently in the group. And maybe, just maybe, Gwyn was also thinking the same thing about him.

Alex stuck his finger in the air, and his eyes lit up. “I recall a similar piece by the Afghan poet, Khalilullah Khalili:”

In every state, the Heart is my support:  
In this kingdom of existence it is my sovereign.  
When I tire of the treachery of Reason –  
God knows I am grateful to my heart.<sup>44</sup>

Gwyn looked even more pleased and added her own contribution:

Heart to heart is an essential means of passing on the  
secrets of the Path.<sup>45</sup>

°Now we’re cooking,° a little voice enthused.

Virtually all of the group had something to report from their session that evening, and one of the clear messages that Alex drew from this was not to dismiss even the most apparently mundane inner messages.

“Okay, if there are no more offerings, and with many thanks to you, let’s move on,” Gwyn decided at length, and scanned the

<sup>44</sup> Khalilullah Khalili in Idries Shah, *Learning How to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way*.

<sup>45</sup> The Khwājagān (Masters), quoted in Idries Shah, *The Way of the Sufi*.

circle.

“A little additional homework for you over the next few weeks, then. You’ll remember I talked about keeping another journal – or computer printouts, if you prefer – to record what you might term ‘inner dialogues’, as a means to practise active imagination.”

Again, she checked the circle and there were nods all round.

“Just a bit more detail about the process and what you need to do, though again you can tailor the work to best suit you.

“As Mary Watkins explains:

In both Jungian and archetypal work, the bridging of the conscious and the unconscious occurs through dialogue, as in the practice of active imagination. Such bridging activates what Jung called the transcendent function. Hillman uses the language of “soul” for the space that opens up through dialogue.<sup>46</sup>

“Transcendent function?” Jake questioned.

“I’m sorry about the jargon, but you’ll soon get used to it,” Gwyn replied, riffling through her papers. “Ah, yes: here we are. The transcendent function is:

[t]he function which mediates opposites. Expressing itself by way of the symbol, it facilitates a transition from one psychological attitude or condition to another. The transcendent function represents a linkage between real and imaginary, or rational and irrational data, thus bridging the gulf between consciousness and the unconscious. “It is a natural process”, Jung writes, “a manifestation of the energy that springs from the tension of opposites and it consists in a series of fantasy-occurrences which appear spontaneously in dreams and visions”.<sup>47 48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Mary Watkins, “Breaking the Vessels: Archetypal Psychology and the Restoration of Culture, Community, and Ecology”.

<sup>47</sup> C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, Collected Works, Vol. 7.*

<sup>48</sup> Samuels, A., Shorter, B., and Plaut, F., *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian*

“And here’s a pretty clear and informative description of the process of active imagination and inner dialogue by Jeffrey Raff that is well worth quoting at length:

Living in the world of active imagination does not imply that we are in an altered state of consciousness constantly, having visions day and night. It means that our attention is never far from the center, and we can access the self very easily at any moment. Moreover, the world is alive and vital, filled with magical possibilities and a numinous background that takes very little to activate. Individuals in such a state of being are present in the moment, and participate consciously in every situation. At the same time, however, the world of the unconscious is also present, and imaginal encounters close at hand.

Active imagination may take many forms. While some people may paint an image or sculpt it, others may dance the effect they are experiencing, or write it in music. In my opinion, however, the ideal form of active imagination is a dialogue or interchange between an inner figure and the ego. The inner figure actually personifies the content of the unconscious we are attempting to engage, and it does so in a form that can speak and actively exchange information with the ego. Carrying on a verbal dialogue with an inner figure takes some practice, but once achieved, it is a supreme way to exchange information and generate the tension necessary for the transcendent function. As I said, there are other ways to do active imagination. Not everyone is able to dialogue with the inner voices, but some effort almost always provides access to the verbal connection. If we combine the ability to see and feel an inner figure with the capacity to hear it, then we are in a position to do some very deep active imagination work. This is not easy

to accomplish and must be practiced, much as we practice a musical instrument to achieve mastery. The more we practice, the better we become.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, Alex had talked to himself for almost as long as he could remember, so he needed no convincing that there really was an inner presence that had things to say and a need to be heard. Up until that evening, however, he'd thought that this was just one of his own eccentricities. But now he saw that it was a much-overlooked and neglected part of our human heritage.

"So, if you intend writing down your inner dialogue, sit yourself down and relax yourself using the techniques we described earlier. Then begin your conversation by picturing yourself approaching some inner figure, perhaps an inner guide, but preferably not someone you know or are related to in the outer world. And simply start 'talking' to them, by writing your words down. Wait, patiently, with an open and grateful mind, and without trying to force your will on the conversation, though if you hear abuse from some nagging little mind demon, then dismiss it. Pay attention to any voice that seems to have your best interests at heart and which tells you things you really need to hear, whether you may like it or not.

"Then write down any response you 'hear' in your mind. Or any vision you might 'see', for that matter. Feelings; sensory phenomena like taste, smell, or touch; goosebumps; *deja vu* – make a note of anything significant that arises. Above all, don't be defensive or dismissive.

"In turn, write down your response or question, and so on. Carry on like that for – let's say – thirty minutes, or however long feels right to you, based on how the conversation naturally flows.

"As I mentioned before, don't worry if it takes days or weeks before you establish what feels like a 'real' conversation with a 'real' inner figure.

"And finally, once you've returned and reoriented yourself to the everyday world, perhaps after a trip to the kitchen to make yourself a tea or coffee, or perhaps the next day or next week,

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<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey Raff, *Jung and the Alchemical Imagination*.

have a read through the conversation again. Don't try to analyse the conversation, but do make a note of any additional thoughts that may arise.

"That's how it works in the early stages. Further down the line, you may find yourself engaged in spontaneous inner dialogue as you go about your everyday life, just as we have not only 'sitting meditation' but also 'walking meditation' as, again, you go about your everyday life."

Gwyn consulted her watch. "So with that, dear friends, we'll hopefully see you next week. And any of you who wish to join us, we'll be adjourning to The Green Man. Thank you once again."



When he got home, feeling a little squiffy from the drink, Alex did a quick search on Facebook and found another interesting quote relating to what Gwyn Wetherall had been talking about:

## Active Imagination



*Figure 13: Two Men Contemplating the Moon / Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) / The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Wikimedia Commons / CC0 1.0 Public Domain Dedication.*

Active Imagination is not like some current “visualization” techniques in which one imagines something with a goal in mind. There is no script; Active Imagination has a completely different relationship with the unconscious, one based on recognition of its reality and power. In Active Imagination, you go to your unconscious to find out what is there and to learn what it has to offer to the conscious mind. The unconscious is not something to be manipulated to suit the purposes of the conscious mind, but an equal partner to engage in dialogue that leads to a fuller maturity. ~ Robert A.

Johnson.<sup>50</sup>

James Hollis also had some interesting things to say about inner dialogue, and one's personal daemon:

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<sup>50</sup> Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth*.

## Trusting in One's Inner Dialogue

In the end, the challenge to any of us regarding this internal dialogue is whether we can learn to trust, over time, what comes from within; mobilize the courage to act on it; and stick it out until we come into some clearing in the woods and know, intuitively, that that is where we belong.<sup>51</sup>



*Figure 14: Whinfell Forest clearing / Simon Johnston / Wikimedia Commons (orig. Geograph) / CC BY-SA 2.0.*

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<sup>51</sup> James Hollis, *Living Between Worlds: Finding Personal Resilience in Changing Times*.

## Our Daimon



*Figure 15: Meditation / William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

Our daimon is our tutelary and constant companion. It has been there from childhood to the present, but it is usually drowned out by the noise of our environment, the fears that haunt us, the “stories” that separate us, and the sundry distractions popular culture offers to help us avoid our own souls. Put simply, our daimon is our personal link to wisdom, to that which transcends ordinary ego consciousness. It embodies what is right for us, no matter

how trying that summons will prove to the comfort motives of the ego.<sup>52</sup>

As for how on earth this knowledge of the imagination wasn't common knowledge, and hardly touched upon in school and daily life, Professor Trelawney had written quite a lot about this in *Down the Rabbit Hole*. He flicked through the book (which didn't come with an index) and found a quote she'd used, from Gary Lachman:

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<sup>52</sup> James Hollis, *Living Between Worlds: Finding Personal Resilience in Changing Times*.

## The Rejected and Lost Knowledge of the Imagination

While I was writing *The Secret Teachers of the Western World*, a phrase kept returning to me with an insistence that forced me to pay attention to it. It was coined by the poet, essayist, and Blake scholar Kathleen Raine. Raine, who I met on a few occasions and interviewed some years ago, spoke of what she called “the lost knowledge of the imagination”. This was linked to something she called “the learning of the imagination”, a phrase that she found in the work of the poet W.B. Yeats, himself a devotee, as was Raine, of the tradition of “rejected knowledge”. A “lost knowledge” and a “rejected knowledge” – Raine also speaks of an “excluded knowledge” – may not be identical, but they certainly seem rather similar, and in the great dustbin of ideas, filled to the brim by the rigorous editing of the new way of knowledge, they must, I suspect, be close neighbours.

Raine wrote many books arguing that this “lost” or “excluded” knowledge was in fact central to our humanity, and in them she showed how some of the most respected figures in Western culture were in fact students of it. She even went so far as to establish an academy dedicated to this knowledge, which she christened Temenos, a Greek word meaning “sacred space”, the holy ground that lay before a temple to the gods. Like William Blake, Raine laboured at this “mental fight” for many years, dedicating her life to it. ...<sup>53</sup>

So perhaps that is what Gwyn Wetherall had hinted at when she spoke of the Resistance, he mused. Was there a conspiracy – whether deliberate or unwitting, or simply ignorance – or was he simply being unnecessarily conspiratorial? Jeremy Naydler’s battle for the Soul of the West, Henry Corbin and Michael

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<sup>53</sup> Gary Lachman, *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*.

Meade's's battle for the Soul of the World: they did seem to be linked in some way to what Gary Lachman had written.

The Golden Shadow, too, he wondered? Perhaps even the search for the Holy Grail, which had occupied Henry Corbin in his latter years, as Professor Trelawney had written.

°If you're looking for links, then you might add the Golden Chain,° his inner daemon suggested. He'd learnt by now not to idly dismiss such intuitions or sources of inspiration.

And, Google scholar that he was, it didn't take Alex long to find one or two quotes in answer to his questions. If a topic or fetish existed – no matter how bizarre – then you could almost bet that you could find it in a Google search:

## The Golden Chain

Throughout their lives W.B. Yeats and C.G. Jung sought out precedents for, and affinities with, their visionary — their daimonic — standpoints. Between them they uncovered and studied just about every major proponent of our tradition. This is not surprising, because it is a feature of the tradition that it threads together all who discover it, to form a series of historical links. The alchemists called it the *Aurea Catena*, the Golden Chain; and to grasp one link is to be connected to all the others. ~ Patrick Harpur.<sup>54</sup>



*Figure 16: 0072936754915 A / Danny011974 /  
Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0.*

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<sup>54</sup> Patrick Harpur, *Daimonic Reality: A Field Guide to the Otherworld*.

Alex raised his eyebrows. Well, that certainly was an inspired, guess.

°Inspired guess? Inspired *guess*! Give me a little credit, young man.°

Okay, okay. Thank you for your inspiration, and a little credit to me, also, for not dismissing such intuitions as lightly as I once did.

He turned back to his computer and modified his search, to see if Patrick Harpur had more to say about the subject, and again he was not disappointed:

## Perennial Philosophy and the Golden Chain



*Figure 17: Perennial Landscape / Bindersbee / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

The Renaissance magi consciously placed themselves in a tradition which harked back, as they thought, to the Chaldeans, Egyptians, Orphics and Pythagoreans – essentially the same tradition as the Golden Chain of alchemy which anticipated the Romantics from Goethe, Schelling and Coleridge, for example, to W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and C. G. Jung. Whatever the differences in their expressions of the tradition – this “perennial philosophy” – certain tenets (if I may recapitulate for a moment) remain constant: that the cosmos comprises a system of correspondences, notably between microcosm and macrocosm; that the cosmos is animated by a world-soul which links all phenomena together; that the human soul is but an individual manifestation of the world-soul; the

chief faculty of the soul is imagination; and that, finally, the experience of personal transmutation, of gnosis, is of the essence. ~ Patrick Harpur.<sup>55</sup>

“Gee Willikers!” he exclaimed out loud. “As Sherlock Holmes would say: ‘The game is afoot, Watson.’”

°Ssh!° he was advised. °If your father hears you, he’ll think you’ve gone loopy.

°And another thing: don’t go getting an inflated opinion of yourself, Sleepy Joe. You’re not out of the woods yet. Scroll back up the page to that post about Gurdjieff.°

Which post?

°The one that you skipped over in your haste. What’s the point of learning about “beginner’s mind” and the need for patience, if you’re not going to put these things into practice?

°Further up the page. Further. Yes, that one about sleep and slavery:°

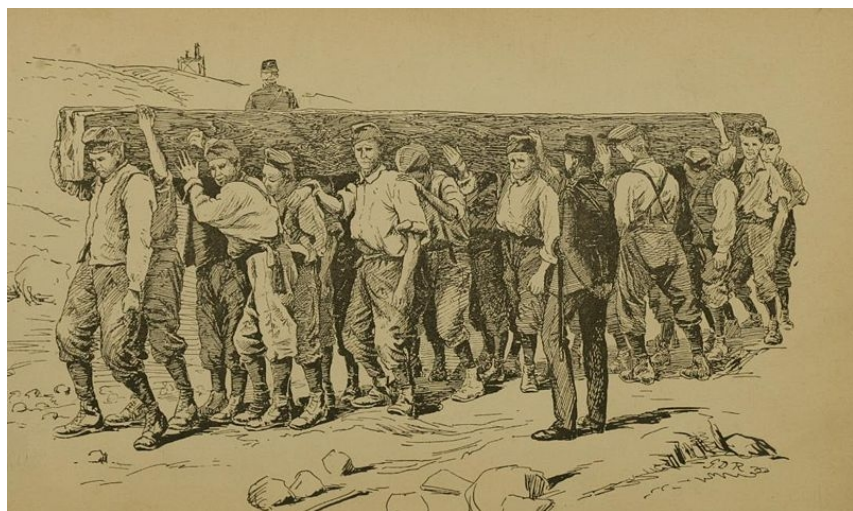
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<sup>55</sup> Patrick Harpur, *The Philosopher's Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination*.

## Sleep and Slavery

In order to awaken, first of all one must realize that one is in a state of sleep. And in order to realize that one is indeed in a state of sleep, one must recognize and fully understand the nature of the forces which operate to keep one in the state of sleep, or hypnosis. It is absurd to think that this can be done by seeking information from the very source which induces the hypnosis. ... One thing alone is certain, that man's slavery grows and increases. Man is becoming a willing slave. He no longer needs chains. He begins to grow fond of his slavery, to be proud of it. And this is the most terrible thing that can happen to a man.

Without self knowledge, without understanding the working and functions of his machine, man cannot be free, he cannot govern himself and he will always remain a slave. ~ George Ivanovich Gurdjieff.



*Figure 18: Convict Chain Gang / Unknown artist / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

# PART 2: Entry

## A Fundamental Mistake

“Q: What is a fundamental mistake of man’s?

A: To think that he is alive, when he has merely fallen asleep in life’s waiting-room.”

~ Idries Shah, *Seeker After Truth*.

## Veils

“Knowledge is not gained, it is there all the time. It is the ‘veils’ which have to be dissolved in the mind.”

~ Idries Shah, *Neglected Aspects of Sufi Study*.

## Open Prison

“You are in prison. If you wish to get out of prison, the first thing you must do is realize that you are in prison. If you think you are free, you can’t escape.”

~ G.I. Gurdjieff.

# 11.

At one of the following meetings, Gwyn addressed them.

“Well, friends, we’ve worked hard over the last few weeks and we’ve arrived at a plateau, set up base camp, and spent some time acclimatising ourselves to the slightly more rarefied atmosphere.

“Many of you will be glad to know that we’ve covered most of the theory, and you’ve begun some basic exercises. Of course, as yet, we are still very much in the foothills.

“All this attending educational lectures and reading is greatly tempting, of course, and a great many would-be students spend their whole lives in such study. But in reality they have reached an unseen or unobserved impasse, and are merely milling around base camp and congratulating themselves and their fellow wayfarers on having achieved such dizzying heights.

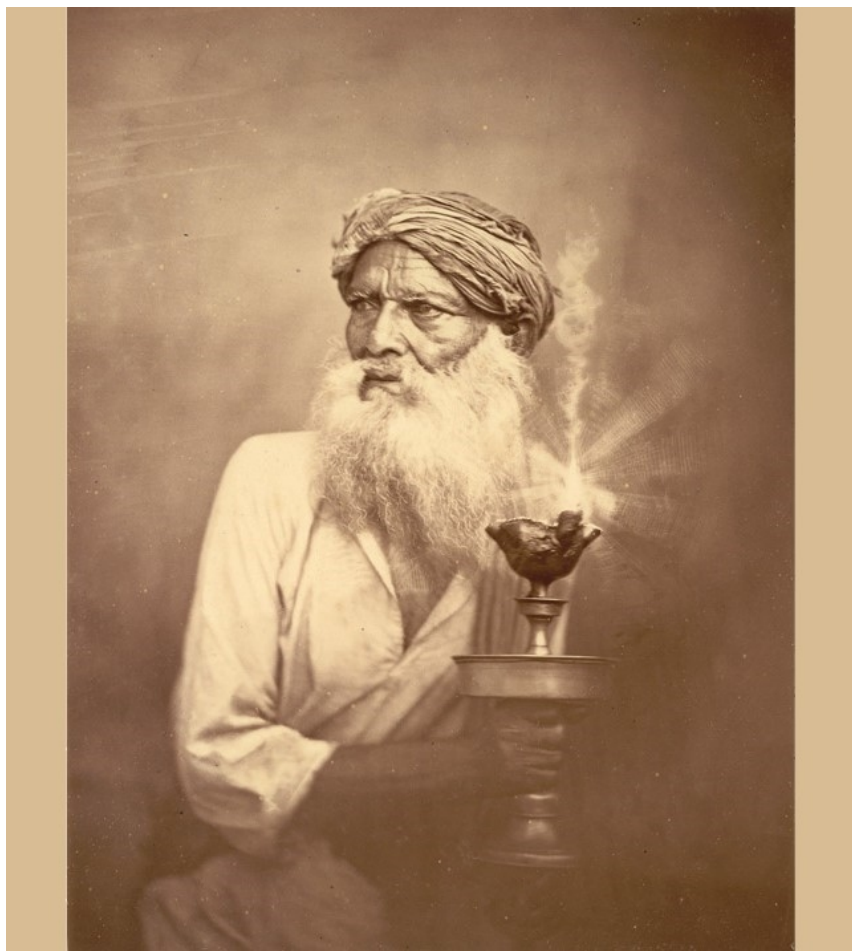
“So now it is time for us to move on, to reach a higher plateau and set up an intermediate camp, *en route* toward a *further* summit. I won’t say the *eventual* summit, because there is no eventual arrival at some ultimate destination. All we can do is go further and further along the path, and get closer and closer to the source of it all.

“What is it that T. S. Eliot wrote in ‘Little Gidding’? Ah, yes:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

“What we can do on our trek, however, is to make a mental note of a spot on the horizon, and work toward that. And the first thing we’re aiming for now is ‘direct knowledge’, which begins with, among other things, self-knowledge. Hence the Ancient Greek aphorism ‘know thyself’.”

## Direct Knowledge



*Figure 19: Portrait of an old man with a lamp in Eastern Bengal in the 1860s / Unknown author / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

In both the mystical and the paranormal there seems to be a kind of direct knowing, not mediated by the usual routines of the intellect. In both a kind of shift of consciousness occurs, a kind of turning inward that

reveals another world. ~ Gary Lachman.<sup>56</sup>

“And just one or two more selections on the subject, to set the scene and give you a taster, as we get ready to embark on the next leg of our journey.”

At this point, Alex was reminded of the interchange between Morpheus and Neo in *The Matrix Resurrections*, just before Neo was again offered a choice between blue pill and red:

Morpheus: Set and setting, right?

Neo: Oh, no.

Morpheus: It’s all about set and setting.

And psychoactive pill or not: like Neo, Alex was hesitant, realising that they’d reached a point when there could be no going back. It was time to make a firm commitment, without knowing quite where he was heading. In part, it was a fear of the unknown; a fear of failure; or a fear of ridicule – something almost primeval that certainly went back to his early life as a timid child, son of an overly-strict father.

°No, no, don’t go there,° the voice advised him. °Your mother and father had their own difficulties, and did a pretty good job of raising you.°

“Penny for them,” Gwyn spoke, and he almost jumped out of his chair. “Penny for your thoughts.”

Alex waved his hands in the air. “Oh, I’m sorry. I was miles away.”

“Is that all?” she queried.

“I’ll be honest: I had a realisation that at this point I would have to commit myself to the path. That there would be no going back.”

Again he was reminded of the first *Matrix* film, and the commitment Neo was first asked to make.

Neo: I can’t go back, can I?

Morpheus: No. But if you could, would you really

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<sup>56</sup> Gary Lachman, *Beyond the Robot: The Life and Work of Colin Wilson*.

want to?

Alex snapped out of that frame of mind. “It’s nothing, really. Please carry on. I just got lost in old thought patterns, that’s all.”

“Well, let me know if you have any queries or doubts, Alex; any of you.”

Fortunately, Gwyn did not press the issue any further, though Alex was sure that she would bear it in mind as they continued.

“Okay, then let me offer two last thoughts and one important clarification before we break camp.

“The first last thought, then:”

## The Message of the Mystic



*Figure 20: Jacob's Dream / William Blake (1757–1827) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

From time immemorial, certain men and women appear to have developed their consciousness far beyond the “normal” level or state which the rest of humanity has taken for granted as “life”. These are the mystics. They are of all times and places, of the East as well as the West. They emerge from every religion or none. For

theirs is a spiritual rather than a religious quest. Religion, derived from the Latin “*religio*”—to bind—does just that, confusing morality with spirituality, doctrine with development. It is not belief that matters to the mystic, but experience—personal, inner experience. Then belief is replaced by knowledge—direct spiritual knowledge. ~ Max Gorman.<sup>57</sup>

“The second last thought:”

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<sup>57</sup> Max Gorman, *Stairway to the Stars: Sufism, Gurdjieff and the Inner Tradition of Mankind*.

## Direct Transmission



*Figure 21: Vintage Crosley Wood Table Radio / Joe Haupt from USA / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 2.0.*

Exercises and studies help to develop finer organs of perception. This is the first part of study.

The second part is to be in circumstances in which that which is to be perceived is more richly present. This second part of study confuses many people because it is based upon environment, time, place and certain people. It has a framework which they cannot grasp. Small wonder, since the design is based upon a fine perception which they do not yet possess.

The third part is equally important. It consists of the direct transmission and reception, from one body to another, of communications which are too fine to be perceived by the ordinary methods. When you try to render such a transmission in words, it comes out as

nonsense. If you try to draw or paint it, much will be missing. If you put it into sounds, you will capture some of it faithfully, but not enough. The pattern made by rendering some in sound, some in mime, some in words, and so on is incomplete and used in the “exercises” part of study. In religious behaviour these elements are worked into pious and other observances.

Direct transmission may be called a telepathic communication from an individual or a group, acting as an amplifier for a certain original Truth, capable of transmitting to a less-developed individual or group.

This is one of the functions of a teaching individual or teaching-group. Such people and groups are ultimately dependent upon the existence of a correctly aligned and harmonised “receiving group” for their operation to be successful.

In addition to “projecting” upon such groups, they can, however, affect people and groups who have a certain harmony but may be unaware of the source of their “inspiration”. ~ Idries Shah.<sup>58</sup>

“And now the final clarification: When I mentioned the impasse that many face, leaving them milling around at base camp, often blissfully unawares, I was talking about the limits of the intellectual approach to study – or the emotional approach to study, for that matter.

“However, I was not suggesting that you abandon books or abandon intellectual debate. The written materials play an important role in everyday life, in the ‘transmission’ and in the study:”

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<sup>58</sup> Idries Shah, *Knowing How to Know: A Practical Philosophy in the Sufi Tradition*.

## More than “just reading”



*Figure 22: The Alchemist / Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

[There] are books written by realized individuals and teachers, from various traditions and teachings ... In this

kind of reading the learning is not cerebral, but more of accessing the states of consciousness of the writer or teacher. The books function as conduits for the transmission of their states of realization. I happened to develop the sensitivity to be open to such direct transmission through the word. ~ A. Hameed Ali (aka A. H. Almaas).

“All I’m saying is: it’s useful to be widely-read and to engage in intelligent and reasonable debate. And it’s perfectly natural for social animals as we are to experience and express human emotions, providing we don’t let them get out of hand. Of course, we’re not looking to set up a circus, but nor are we seeking to enrol folk into an austere monastic life. Just don’t get bogged down in these pursuits, and don’t limit yourself to such approaches.”

She spent a few moments riffling through her notes.

“As Chang explained to Hugh Conway in James Hilton’s novel, *Lost Horizon*:

If I were to put it into a very few words, my dear sir, I should say that our prevalent belief is in moderation. We inculcate the virtue of avoiding excess of all kinds—even including, if you will pardon the paradox, excess of virtue itself. In the valley which you have seen, and in which there are several thousand inhabitants living under the control of our order, we have found that the principle makes for a considerable degree of happiness. We rule with moderate strictness, and in return we are satisfied with moderate obedience. And I think I can claim that our people are moderately sober, moderately chaste, and moderately honest.<sup>59</sup>

“And with that, dear friends, let’s take a very early break and devote the rest of this evening to working toward cultivating the

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<sup>59</sup> James Hilton, *Lost Horizon*. Largely set in the fictional Himalayan utopia of Shangri-La in the valley of the Blue Moon.

capacity for ‘direct knowledge’.”



“This evening, dear friends, we’re going to start with a meditation session, and then begin reading some stories. But before you turn up your noses, these are no ordinary parables but specially designed tales and anecdotes that have been termed ‘teaching stories’.

Stories like these have been given the name “teaching stories,” because their effect is not only to provide pleasure or a useful parable, but also to connect “with a part of the individual which cannot be reached by any other convention, and establish in him or in her, a means of communication with a non-verbalized truth beyond the customary limitations of our familiar dimensions.”<sup>60</sup>

Teaching stories purposely contain certain specially chosen patterns of events. The repeated reading and absorption of the stories allows these patterns to become strengthened in the mind of the person reading them. Since many of these events are improbable and unusual, this effort begins to create new constructs in the reader — new “organs of perception,” so to speak. The stories can also serve as reflection points. “Reflection” can mean both “to think about” and “to mirror.” Often an action caught in a story forms a pattern that is also present on another level of consciousness ...”

Some stories can serve as templates for consciousness, patterns frozen so that we can observe ourselves. ~ Robert Ornstein and Sally M. Ornstein.<sup>61</sup>

“The teaching stories, anecdotes, jokes and poetry bypass or evade our internal censors, our internal guards, and our rational

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<sup>60</sup> Idries Shah, *Caravan of Dreams*.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Ornstein and Sally M. Ornstein, *God 4.0: On the Nature of Higher Consciousness and the Experience Called “God”*.

intellect.

“Another way of looking at this process is that it involves bribing and goading our guards and censors and other defences to either cooperate in this new venture, or to not interfere with the process, or at least to turn a blind eye on our endeavours. And it involves developing and becoming fluent and becoming sensitive in detecting a metalanguage by means of which we may communicate with our imprisoned ‘princess’ or heart, and she with our everyday self, so that an escape from imprisonment may be accomplished.

“And another way of looking at it is to use the metaphor of digging through a mountain [of conditioning] to unearth a priceless treasure – a treasure that yearns to be found. But I digress.

“Okay, so let’s spend a few minutes in silent meditation. If you feel you no longer have to count your breaths, then please feel free to drop that procedure.”



“Right shipmates, if we’re all back in the so-called ‘real world’ again, let’s begin with a story about the design of just such an escape:”

## The Legend of the Design (or “A Model Prisoner”)



Figure 23: *Prisoners Exercising / The Prison Courtyard*, also known as *Prisoners' Round* / Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) / olga's gallery / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0.

A man was once sent to prison for life for something

which he had not done.

When he had behaved in an exemplary way for some months, his jailers began to regard him as a model prisoner.

He was allowed to make his cell a little more comfortable; and his wife sent him a prayer-carpet which she had herself woven.

When several more months had passed, this man said to his guards: "I am a metalworker, and you are badly paid. If you can get me a few tools and some pieces of tin, I will make small decorative objects, which you can take to the market and sell. We could split the proceeds, to the advantage of both parties."

The guards agreed, and presently the smith was producing finely-wrought objects whose sale added to everyone's well-being.

Then, one day, when the jailers went to the cell, the man had gone. They concluded that he must have been a magician.

After many years when the error of the sentence had been discovered and the man was pardoned and out of hiding, the king of that country called him and asked him how he had escaped.

The tinsmith said: "Real escape is possible only with the correct concurrence of factors. My wife found the locksmith who had made the lock on my cell, and other locks throughout the prison. She embroidered the interior designs of the locks in the rug which she sent me, on the spot where the head is prostrated in prayer. She relied upon me to register this design and to realize that it was the wards of the locks. It was necessary for me to get materials with which to make the keys, and to be able to hammer and work metal in my cell. I had to enlist the greed and need of the guards, so that there would be no suspicion. That is the story of my escape."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Idries Shah, *The Magic Monastery: Analogical and Action Philosophy of the Middle East and Central Asia*.

“As an aside, consider the many thesaurus-like wordplays about designs and models.”

Gwyn bent down and rummaged in her briefcase, and produced a bundle of papers, stapled together. “To make the most of these teaching stories, you will need to read and re-read them a few times, and every so often. So pass these sheets around the circle and take one set each.”

Maya asked: “What should we do with them? I mean, how should we study them?”

Gwyn thought for a moment. “When you’re alone, I would suggest just reading them in a relaxed manner and with an open mind. Just let the stories soak in. Don’t go hunting for deep meanings, but make a note of any deep meanings or ideas that occur to you spontaneously. I think maybe the best thing to do is to read a story during one of the sessions, then re-read the story a few times over the course of a week, and then what we can do during the next session, after meditation, is go round the circle and see who sees what in the story. We can each add something for the benefit of other members of the circle, as if we were each adding ingredients into a communal stew pot. How does that sound to you?”

They were all agreed on that.

“Remember, the purpose behind this is to establish *inter*-psychic and *intra*-psychic lines of communication. Fostering links with the group and also with different parts of your own self.

“And I could really bake your noodles by suggesting that these lines of communication are not limited by distance, nor by time – which is a local, not cosmic, phenomenon.

“Look, I know I said that we were leaving theory aside for now, but here’s something else to consider about the self:”

The mind is a squadron of simpletons [each with their own often outdated and myopic vision and agenda]. It is not unified, it is not rational, it is not well designed—or designed at all. It just happened, an accumulation of innovations of the organisms that lived before us. The

mind evolved, through countless animals and through countless worlds. ~ Robert Ornstein.<sup>63</sup>

“And, among other things, we are here to do something about that sad and errant state of affairs.”

Once the group was settled once more, Gwyn suggested they read one more story, and then either wander home or adjourn to the Green Man.

“So, who’d like to begin by reading the story? I think it’s best if we go round the circle and give everyone a chance to read one of the teaching-stories.

“Arnold? I didn’t see your hand up, but you have a twinkle in your eye. Would you like to read the next story, ‘The Indian Bird’? It’s another story about imprisonment. You would? Excellent. Then, since we’re all sitting comfortably, please begin.”

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Ornstein, *The Evolution of Consciousness*.

## The Indian Bird



*Figure 24: Bird in Cage: Aratinga solstitialis / High Contrast / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 3.0 DE.*

A MERCHANT kept a bird in a cage. He was going to India, the land from which the bird came, and asked it whether he could bring anything back for it. The bird asked for its freedom, but was refused. So he asked the merchant to visit a jungle in India and announce his captivity to the free birds who were there.

The merchant did so, and no sooner had he spoken when a wild bird, just like his own, fell senseless out of a tree on to the ground.

The merchant thought that this must be a relative of his own bird, and felt sad that he should have caused this death.

When he got home, the bird asked him whether he had brought good news from India.

“No,” said the merchant, “I fear that my news is bad. One of your relations collapsed and fell at my feet when I mentioned your captivity.”

As soon as these words were spoken the merchant’s bird collapsed and fell to the bottom of the cage.

“The news of his kinsman’s death has killed him, too,” thought the merchant. Sorrowfully he picked up the bird and put it on the window-sill. At once the bird revived and flew to a near-by tree.

“Now you know”, the bird said, “that what you thought was disaster was in fact good news for me. And how the message, the suggestion of how to behave in order to free myself, was transmitted to me through you, my captor.” And he flew away, free at last.<sup>64</sup>

“Thank you, Arnold,” Gwyn beamed as he concluded the story. “There’s your homework for this next week, then. Re-read ‘The Legend of the Design’ and ‘The Indian Bird’. Remember, we’re not subjecting the stories to literary criticism or intellectual dismemberment.

“And now, with thanks to you all, dear friends, let’s stack the chairs for the caretaker and depart.”

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<sup>64</sup> Idries Shah, *Tales of the Dervishes*.

## 12.

At the next meeting, they began with a few minutes' meditation to get into a quieter and more receptive frame of mind. Then they went round the circle and each told the group what impressions the two previous stories, "The Legend of the Design" and "The Indian Bird", had had on them.

Frederick popped his hand up. "I'm sorry, though both stories are ingenious, I'm not sure what to make of them."

"Don't worry unnecessarily, Frederick. Whether we understand them or not, or even have no belief in them, the teaching stories lay down a seed bed, and we may have to wait for the seeds to be watered, and later exposed to the light and warmth of the sun, before they begin to germinate and grow.

"Many of the stories will only make sense or 'click' into place when we have corresponding patterns of experience in our everyday lives. Then we might suddenly 'grok'<sup>65</sup> what they mean for us. As Doris Lessing once remarked, on opening up *Seeker After Truth* the first story she re-read lit up for her like a Christmas tree. She said that she would have thought this extraordinary had the same thing not happened so many times before. That is not to say, she continued, that it has to mean the same thing, or anything, to you."

Maya had her hand raised, and Gwyn invited her to speak. "Well, it seems to me that the wife first of all started by exercising reason, and then she had to translate that into intuition, so that the prisoner would come to realise her intention through exercising his own intuition. And then, he in turn would have to use reason in order to devise a practical plan based on that intuitive knowledge."

Jake nodded. "Yes, we often forget just how ingenious intuition is, or discount it."

"It's something subtle," Arnold Frobisher chipped in,

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<sup>65</sup> Grok: Understand (something) intuitively or by empathy. From Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

“whereas reason is more blatant and demanding of our attention. We can see that clearly in the story of the Indian bird.”

Alex stuck his hand up and caught Gwyn’s eye. “In both cases, it’s necessary to use subterfuge to sneak past or co-opt the guards or the keeper. I’m guessing that among other things, they represent the rational mind or the sovereign intellect.”

“Perhaps the wife and the bird represent the heart or soul,” Gladys Smith suggested. “Or perhaps the wife is Spirit?”

Deirdre had been scratching her chin for some time, before plucking up the courage to join in. “Regarding the locks, I’m thinking that’s to do with issues that hold us captive at a psychological level, and the need to understand the mechanics of these ‘inner workings’ of the mind.”

“Wonderful,” Gwyn nodded. “And as for what I said last week, the story of the prisoner contains many word plays about designs and modelling. In the original Persian and Arabic, you find words with similar meanings clustered together around a common consonantal root, just as we group words together in a thesaurus. Perhaps Shah was trying to give us a feel for that, in English.

“He is a model prisoner, a prisoner of inadequate conceptual models, and a maker of models (see also the film, *The Shawshank Redemption*). A dictionary and thesaurus will render more associations, such as model, design, *naqsh*, impression, prototype, blueprint, paradigm, exemplar ... and more besides. There are far too many associations for this to be anything other than deliberate.”

Once they’d exhausted their ideas, at least for the time being, and they’d once again settled, Gwyn offered them another story. “This is quite long,” she told them, “so we’ll just listen to the one story this evening, and I’ll read this time:”

## The Legend of the Stone Soup



*Figure 25: Mesmerising Camp Fire / Azadeh Farshidi / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0.*

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, and in a land not a million miles from here, there were two hungry dervishes, who are seekers, people of the “poor”.

One evening in their travels, they came across a small village and decided to stay for the night. There was an inn there, just by the side of the village green. But because they had no money, the two dervishes could not afford to stay there. Sometimes the pair would take out their musical instruments and play and entertain the inhabitants with jokes and news, in exchange for a few coppers for food and lodgings. But not tonight, for it had been a long haul up into the foothills of the mountains that day, and they were both too dog-tired to play, or even raise a smile.

So it was that the two dervishes set their scant belongings down by the side of the village green, right in

front of the inn. While one of them set about stacking up the sticks of wood he had scavenged along the way, the other arranged the stones which he'd collected in his travels, into a small circle around the wood.

Being a sleepy little village unaccustomed to strangers, it was not long before the two travellers' arrival attracted the attention of the villagers as they passed by on their way to-and-from the inn, or about their business. Some stood watching nearby and others had their faces pressed to the glass of the windows of the inn, whilst one or two of the younger ones gathered close-by to see what was going on.

Soon, with the aid of a flint, a steel blade and a little tinder, the first dervish had a fine fire going. And meanwhile, the second dervish had taken out a large cauldron from his bulging back-pack and had returned from the village duck pond to set the smoke-blackened pot of water a-top the blazing fire.

Then the villagers saw a most curious thing. Having looked to the heavens and begged the Lord's assistance in their enterprise, the second dervish knelt down and took from his inside breast pocket a large bright purple, velvet purse. And then, with the utmost care and due ceremony, he reached inside the purse and drew out first one, then a second and finally a third small stone. Holding each up toward the waning sun, as it slipped down toward the horizon, he chanted some more incomprehensible words, which sounded to one or two of those villagers closest to the travellers, like some kind of magical incantation. And then, again, with exaggerated ceremony, he placed each stone on the end of a long wooden spoon and gently lowered each stone in turn into the heart of the simmering cauldron.

One of the youngsters watching nearby could contain herself no longer.

"What are you doing, stranger?" she asked. For what she had seen made no sense to her.

“Boiling stones,” replied the second dervish.

“Boiling stones? Whatever for?”

The first dervish looked up from gently stirring the pot and replied, with a benign smile: “Why, we are making stone soup, my child.”

“What’s that?” a villager asked, sidling up to the girl. “What’s yon stranger say?”

“They’re making stone soup,” the girl replied, with a shrug of her shoulders to suggest that she, too, was as baffled as the others.

“Stone soup? Stone soup! Never heard such stuff and nonsense,” muttered the man, and he sidled off toward the others to tell them what was going on, and one went scurrying inside the inn to relay the strange news.

And before long, half the village were slowly edging their way toward the fire to see for themselves the truth of the strangers’ exploits with the stone soup.

Drawing-in a deep breath and surreptitiously crossing herself to ward off any evil that might be lurking in the village that evening, the girl took a step closer toward the cauldron, intent on having a quick peek at this strange concoction the strangers called stone soup.

“Please, dear friend,” invited the second dervish. “Come and join us, if you wish.”

“Here,” said the second dervish, taking off his jacket and laying it on the grass. “Sit down here.”

He stood up and raised his voice. “Indeed, friends, come and join us one and all. And when it is ready, you may all savour the heaven-sent delights of our famous stone soup, renowned across the realm, from Bahl in the east to Cesil in the west. From Rinjan in the north to the capital in the south.”

Not one of the villagers made a move, though by now the whole of the small population were out on the green, standing there and looking on at this strange phenomenon.

“Come, come,” said the second dervish, dipping the

long wooden spoon into the cauldron, raising it to his lips, sniffing the vapours and taking a small sip. "Mmm .... How can anything with such a mouth-watering aroma and splendid taste, and made under the ever-watchful eye of the Good Lord, be in any way harmful to you. See, have I not tasted this delicious stone soup with my own lips? What more re-assurance do you need that we are here with the best possible intentions and, though yet strangers to you, that we mean you no harm, only good?"

"Come, my friend," he smiled, offering the steaming spoon toward the girl. She stepped closer.

A gruff-looking hulk of a man, evidently the girl's father, rushed forward and stepped between the girl and the dervishes. "No, stranger, let me taste this stone soup of yours first. Just to be on the safe side, eh? Not that I'm inferring that you're a liar or a sorcerer or anything like that ...."

The first dervish smiled and held out the spoon. "Here, my friend, taste this stone soup, which is like no soup you have ever tasted before. Savour it."

The man took the tiniest sip, then waited a moment. Then, finding that he had not in fact been transformed into a newt or turned into a pillar of salt, as he had imagined he might, he took another larger slurp and stood there for a time, unsure of quite what to say, without causing offence and without being thought an idiot for having such a coarse and indiscriminate palette.

Another, the man's wife, stepped forward now, snatched the wooden spoon from his hand and took a sip. Like him, she stood there for a time pondering. And then she spoke up. "Kind sirs, this is indeed the most delicious soup I have ever tasted, but ..." she paused for a moment. "If you will indulge me, I do believe that it would be an even finer soup were you to add a couple of onions. I have some fresh ones at home, straight out of our very own garden, if you can wait just a moment."

Begging her leave, the woman dashed off down the village high street to her house and returned some short time later with the onions. She was about to drop them in the pot, when another of the villagers spoke up. "Their juices might blend into the soup better, dear Grandma Hagathi, if the onions were cut up into small pieces."

"Here," said one of the young lads close-by. And he brought out a knife he carried with him and handed it to the woman. But when he saw that the woman's hands were terribly deformed by disease and that she could no longer hold a knife and safely cut, he sat down in the grass and began to cut the onions up.

"Hang on, I'll get you a board to cut the onions on", offered one of the others, and she dashed inside the inn to have a word with the cook.

Moments later, the cook himself came out to see what was going on. After all, with all the villagers outside, there was no trade in the inn to take care of.

He stepped forward and peered into the simmering cauldron as the lad added the diced onion.

"May I?" he asked, pointing toward the spoon, for he'd already heard of this allegedly famed stone soup from the others, and he wanted to check for himself whether it really was as good as had been made out.

"Help yourself. You'll taste no finer, squire," the second dervish beamed.

The cook raised the spoon to his face, ran his nose over it to smell the bouquet, took a sip and swished the stone soup back and forth in his mouth, as his own master had instructed him as an apprentice.

"Hmm ...." the cook said.

The two dervishes had their hands clasped in front of them and they were looking to him in eager anticipation for his official seal of approval.

"Um, yes indeed, it is a delicate soup," the cook began, not wishing to cause unnecessary offence. Besides, Lord only knows what might happen if these

two strangers were angered.

“And do you know what, if you’ll forgive my impertinence ....”

“Fire away,” agreed the first dervish.

“Well, I do believe that this fine stone soup would be even better – if such a thing is possible – were you to add a few wild mushrooms. Now, it just so happens if you can wait a few moments, I have the very thing in the kitchen. They’ll only go to waste if they’re not used.” And judging by the way trade had gone in the inn that evening, they would indeed be going to waste.

All this time, the first dervish was carefully tending the cauldron and sniffing the air and licking his lips. “Mmm,” he’d say from time to time: “It won’t be long now. The finest stone soup you’ve ever tasted.”

By now, the villagers had largely lost their inhibitions toward the two strangers and they were all gathered closely around, waiting in eager anticipation. And every now and again, one of them would put on a brave face and ask for a sip. And then they’d say. “Mmm. That is delicious. But it might be made even more delicious if we were to add some potatoes ....” or whatever.

“What about some tomatoes?”, offered another, growing quite excited and eager with anticipation. And even the village butcher came to the camp fire himself and offered them some meat that he had left over.

... Until, shortly, by the contribution of a little by many, a hearty stew was made, upon which the entire village and the weary dervishes dined... and while doing so, shared their tales, talents, and camaraderie throughout the night.

The very next day, having left the magical stones in the safe-keeping of one of the village elders, the two dervishes (who by now could be called “strangers” no more), continued their journey, leaving the sleepy little village and its people behind. But the villagers never forgot them, and the lesson they had learned. In fact,

during the hardest of times, in such a time as this tale, that little village thrived, because the village folk never forgot how to make “stone soup”.

Such is the legend of the “Stone Soup”.

## 13.

“So, what did you make of the Legend of the Stone Soup?” Gwyn wanted to know at the next meeting, after a lengthy period of meditation.

“Well, everyone contributes a little of their own to make a fine communal soup,” said Frederick with little of his usual hesitation, which Alex found pleasing. “I mean, that’s exactly what we’re doing here, isn’t it.”

Stewart nodded. “Yes, indeed: ‘sharing the care’, you might call it.”

“The outcome – the whole – being more than the sum of the individual parts, too,” added Maya.

“It was a bit cheeky of the two dervishes, though, wasn’t it?” Mary Oliver laughed.

“What you might term a ‘noble lie’? A little white lie?” Alex queried. “I mean, they all benefit on the night, and the village benefits from the good example for years to come.”

“Is there any such thing as a noble lie?” asked Arnold Frobisher. “I was brought up to be honest and truthful. And if I wasn’t then I was severely reprimanded, and rightly so.”

Maya wasn’t so sure. “And yet without the little white lie, there would be no legend of the stone soup and the fine example people derive from it.”

“But in perpetuates a myth,” countered Arnold.

“Myth has played a very important role in cultures through the centuries,” offered Gwyn, “though in the increasingly troubled, modern and post-modern West, it is sadly lacking.”

Gwyn riffled through her notes. “Here’s something that James Hillman had to say about literalism, storytelling, and ‘soul making’:

## Literalism



*Figure 26: Poem of the Soul – Sunrays / Louis Janmot (1814–1892) / Wikimedia Commons/ Public domain.*

Soul-making goes hand and hand with deliteralizing consciousness and restoring its connection to mythic and metaphorical thought patterns. Rather than interpret the stories into concepts and rational explanations, we prefer to see conceptual explanations as secondary elaborations upon basic stories which are containers and givers of vitality. As Owen Barfield and Norman Brown have written: “Literalism is the enemy”. I would add: “Literalism is sickness.” Whenever we are caught in a literal view, a literal belief, a literal statement, we have lost the imaginative metaphorical perspective to ourselves and the world. Story is prophylactic in that it presents itself always as “once upon a time”, as an “as

if”, “make-believe” reality. It is the only mode of accounting or telling that does not posit itself as real, true, factual, revealed, i.e., literal.<sup>66</sup>

Gwyn checked her watch. “Well, I think we have time to read one teaching story this evening, and we’ll look at it again next week:

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<sup>66</sup> James Hillman, *Loose Ends: Primary Papers in Archetypal Psychology*.

## The Legend of the Cake-Baking Islanders or “The king who divined his fortune”



*Figure 27: Flour bag wall / Annette Teng / Wikimedia Commons (orig. Panoramio) / CC BY 3.0.*

A king who was also an astrologer read in his stars that on a certain day and at a particular hour a calamity would overtake him. He therefore began to stockpile all manner of raw ingredients such as flour and eggs and milk and posted numerous guardians outside, stacking the materials from floor to ceiling until he could no longer leave the warehouse he had built-up. By this time he was beginning to have second thoughts about the whole matter, but he could no longer conceive of any means of escape.

Then one day a Sufi, passing by, looked in through one of the remaining small openings, took in the situation and called to the King:

“Friend, if you wish to escape, you must first of all use some of these provisions to bake me a cake.”

The King could make no sense of what the Sufi was saying. Besides, he had read such a lot about the dangers of going out and baking one's own cakes, let alone the dangers of forming groups of people to learn and discuss the craft.

The Sufi continued: "You must have the constituents, they must be mixed correctly, and then they must be cooked correctly. You cannot go on amassing the raw materials without finally making a useful attempt to bake a cake."

"What a load of absolute bollocks! What have cakes got to do with my predicament? I remember now why it was that I chose to seclude myself in here: to avoid such raving maniacs as you!"

And with that, realizing from within that he could still see daylight, he found an opening, which he filled up, to prevent further misfortune entering. In blocking this door he made himself a prisoner with his own hands.

And because of this the king died.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Attar of Nishapur in Idries Shah, *The Way of The Sufi*. Ever-so-slightly rewritten, with due regard to time, place and people.

## 14.

So, what did you make of “The Legend of the Cake-Baking Islanders”, Gwyn asked them after the break at their next meeting.

“Well, it was clearly a parody,” replied Mary Oliver. “I’d have liked to have heard the original.”

“It makes a useful point, though, doesn’t it?” offered Jake. “The way the intellect has us amassing vast ‘cerebral libraries’ of information, which we call knowledge, a great deal of which we really don’t need to know, or that we might actually be better off not knowing.”

Alex had a thought: “The Sufi doesn’t carry a huge inventory of knowledge, though. He, and his knowledge, arrive ‘just in time’, when that knowledge is most needed. Though, unfortunately in this case, the intellect doesn’t want to know, and pays no heed. With tragic consequences, just as the Sufi advised.”

Maya Heslop nodded. “The king did have a vague idea that something was wrong, but he didn’t listen to his intuition, nor to the Sufi.”

Finally, Gwyn added: “In some ways, we could liken the warehousing of raw materials to theoretical study; and ‘baking a cake’ to engaging in practical work, making careful and particular use of elements of the theory.

“Right, then: let’s have a read through another story about ‘The Elephant in the Dark’. Any volunteers? Good show, Harriet. Off you go ...”

## The Elephant in The Dark



*Figure 28: Townspeople, Who have Never Seen an Elephant, Examine its Appearance in the Dark [Detail] / Unknown artist, in a work attributed to Rumi (1207–1273) / Acquired by Henry Walters / Walters Art Museum / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

Six blind medical students sat by the gate of a great city as an elephant was led slowly past. Inspired by scientific curiosity of the highest degree, the six blind students rushed forward to palpate the great beast and to determine the nature of his great being.

The first man's hands fell upon the elephant's tusks.

“Ah,” said he, “this creature is a thing of bones; they even protrude through his skin.” Later on, years having passed, this man became an orthopedist.

At the same time the second blind medical student seized the elephant’s trunk and identified its function. “What a nose!” he exclaimed. “Surely this is the most important part of the animal.” Accordingly he became a rhinologist.

The third man chanced upon the elephant’s great flapping ear and came to a similar conclusion; for him the ear was everything, so he, in time, became an otologist.

The fourth rested his hands on the huge chest and abdomen of the elephant. “The contents of this barrel must be enormous,” he thought, “and the pathological derangements infinite in number and variety.” Nothing would do but that he should become an internalist.

One of the blind men caught hold of the elephant’s tail. “This,” he said, “would appear to be a useless appendage. It might even be a source of trouble. Better take it off.” The blind man became a surgeon.

But the last of the six men did not depend upon the sense of touch. Instead he only listened. He had heard the elephant approaching, the rattle of chains and the shouts of the keepers. It may be that he heard the elephant heave a great sigh as he trudged along. “Where is the creature going?” he asked. No one answered. “Where did he come from?” he asked. No one knew.

Then this man fell into a deep reverie. What was in the elephant’s mind, he wondered, in having left wherever he was and having come to this great city. Why does he submit to the indignities of our curiosity and the slavery of chains? And while he was wondering how to find out the answers the elephant was gone.

This man became a psychiatrist.

The other students were disgusted at this impracticality. They turned their backs upon their visionary companion. What difference does it make, said

they, what the elephant's purposes may be? And his chains – they constitute a legal not a medical problem. The important thing is to recognize the elephant's structure!

Then they fell to quarrelling among themselves as to whether the elephant's structure was primarily that of a nose or that of an ear or that of a tail. And although they all differed flatly from one another on these points they all agreed that the psychiatrist was a fool.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Ornstein, *The Mind Field*. Adapted slightly from Karl Menninger's story, "The Cinderella of Medicine".

## 15.

“Any takers for ‘The Elephant in the Dark’?” Gwyn enquired.

“Well,” offered Maya Heslop. “In education and within the scientific community, psychology and psychiatry, like sociology and political science, are often seen as ‘soft sciences’ and not taken as seriously as hard, rigorous science.

“‘The Cinderella of Medicine’, too. That’s quite telling.”

“I don’t know what Doctor Iain McGilchrist would say on the matter,” said Jake, but their bias toward structure sounds rather ‘left brain’ to me.”

Harriet Moore waved her hand in the air. “Perhaps the elephant in the room here – what isn’t being acknowledged by the participants – is that they don’t seem to realise that they are all groping blindly in the dark?”

Alex scratched his chin, wondering how he might word his offering. “I notice that five of the blind medical students are just using their limited sensory input, that of touch, and also making assertions; whereas the sixth, the would-be psychiatrist, is instead using his mind, which is not limited in the same way as their senses, and his approach is through questioning, which sounds altogether less restrictive and more reasonable. The others are dealing with parts, which as Jake says is suggestive of the left brain, whereas in a sense the would-be psychiatrist is dealing with the elephant more holistically.”

He frowned. “I’m sorry, that’s not quite what I meant to say, but I’m sure you get my drift.”

Maya spoke again: “Something else that is just written in passing is that the budding psychiatrist ‘fell into a deep reverie’. Whereas the others ‘fell to quarrelling among themselves’. Again, perhaps that says something about the hemispheric functioning of the brain?”

“Perhaps he’s just an introvert? And maybe the others are wannabe alpha males?” Arnold Frobisher queried.

“Excellent,” Gwyn smiled as they eventually ran out of ideas.

Then let's look at 'Truth' which we'll discuss next week. Alex, would you like to read the piece?"

## Truth



*Figure 29: Statue de Khodja Nasreddin (Boukhara, Ouzbékistan) (5679934081) / dalbera from Paris, France / Wikimedia Commons (orig. Flickr) / CC BY 2.0.*

Nasrudin, like the Sufi himself, does not violate the canons of his time. But he adds a new dimension to his consciousness, refusing to accept for specific, limited purposes that truth, say, is something that can be measured as can anything else. What people call truth is relative to their situation. And he cannot find it until he realises this. One of the Nasrudin tales, a most ingenious one, shows that until one can see through relative truth, no progress can be made:

One day Nasrudin was sitting at court. The King was

complaining that his subjects were untruthful. “Majesty,” said Nasrudin, “there is truth and truth. People must practise real truth before they can use relative truth.

“They always try the other way around. The result is that they take liberties with their man-made truth, because they know instinctively that it is only an invention.”

The King thought that this was too complicated. “A thing must be true or false. I will MAKE people tell the truth, and by this practice they will establish the habit of being truthful.”

When the city gates were opened the next morning, a gallows had been erected in front of them, presided over by the captain of the royal guard. A herald announced: “Whoever would enter the city must first answer the truth to a question which will be put to him by the captain of the guard.”

Nasrudin, who had been waiting outside, stepped forward first.

The captain spoke: “Where are you going? Tell the truth — the alternative is death by hanging.”

“I am going,” said Nasrudin, “to be hanged on those gallows.”

“I don’t believe you!”

“Very well, then. If I have told a lie, hang me!”

“But that would MAKE IT the truth!”

“Exactly,” said Nasrudin, “YOUR truth.”<sup>69</sup>

“Wonderful, Alex. And Dorothy, perhaps you could read ‘The Parable of the Three Domains’?”

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<sup>69</sup> Idries Shah, *The Sufis*.

## The Parable of the Three Domains



*Figure 30: Freshly baked bread loaves / Flickr user “FotoDawg” / Wikimedia Commons (orig. Flickr) / CC BY 2.0.*

HUMAN life, and the life of communities, is not what it seems. In fact, it follows a pattern evident to some and concealed to others. Again, more than one pattern is moving at a time. Yet men take one part of one pattern and try to weld it with another. They invariably find what they expect, not what is really there.

Let us consider, for example, three things: the wheat in the field, the water in the stream, and the salt in the mine. This is the condition of natural man; he is a being which is both complete in some senses and has further uses and capacities in further senses.

Each of the three items is representative here of substances in a state of potentiality. They may remain as they are, or circumstances (and in the case of man, effort) may transform them.

This is the condition of the First Domain, or state of man.

In the Second Domain, however, we have a stage in which something further can be done. The wheat, by effort and knowledge, is collected and ground into flour.

The water is taken from the stream and stored for a further use. The salt is extracted and refined. This is a Domain of a different activity than the first, which was merely growing. In this Domain, stored knowledge is brought into play.

The Third Domain can come into being only after the three ingredients, in correct quantity and proportion, have been assembled in a certain place, at a certain time. The salt, water and flour are mixed and kneaded to become dough. When the yeast is brought, a living element is added; and the oven is made ready for the baking of the loaf. This making depends as much upon “touch” as upon stored knowledge.

Everything will behave in accordance with its situation: and its situation is the Domain in which it is cast. If the objective is bread, why talk of salt-making?



This story, originating with the Sarmoun Sufis, echoes the teaching of Ghazali that “the ignorant man has no real idea of the learning of the scholastic. Equally, the scholastic has no adequate conception of the knowledge of the Enlightened Man.”

It also underlines the dervish belief that traditionalist religious, metaphysical or philosophical schools are continuing to “grind flour” and cannot progress further, lacking the presence of men of insight, who appear only rarely.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Idries Shah, *Tales of the Dervishes*.

## 16.

“Any thought about the piece titled ‘Truth’? Gwyn asked at their next meeting.

“Just that you can almost hear the Captain of the Guard’s cogs and pistons grind to a halt and seize up.”

Alex nodded. “Yes, and yet again I’m wondering if it’s a left brain thing. Certainly, it’s to do with rationality?”

“And yet Nasrudin uses that very rationality or logicity in a tricky fashion to defeat him and the king, who I take to be the sovereign intellect,” Maya Heslop noted.

“Hmm,” replied Arnold Frobisher. “It’s certainly an ingenious tale, but perhaps a little too ‘clever’ for my liking. Clever words and mental gymnastics can only take us so far.”

Gwyn scanned the circle as they all went quiet. “Okay, so if there are no more takers for ‘Truth’, what are your thoughts on ‘The Parable of the Three Domains’?”

“Now that reminds me in some ways of that other tale – the one about the cake baking,” Frederick piped up.

Jake nodded. “Yes, it shows a stage beyond merely accumulating and processing raw ingredients. Actually using those ingredients in bakery – in the previous story, to bake a cake; in this story, to bake bread.”

Maya chimed in. “In this case, there’s also the introduction of ‘yeast’,” she noted.

Gwyn nodded. “That’s right: the addition of a ‘leaven’. That suggests the presence and action of a Teacher.

“I’m sure that Shah would insist that the leaven indicates a Sufi, but the author Peter Kingsley writes that the Ishraqi mystics (of the Illuminationist school) are an ‘eternal leaven’; a ‘tradition of those who appear with the dawn; who belong to the moment of dawning; who tirelessly and timelessly work at fetching the gifts of the sacred into the light of day.’<sup>71</sup>

“Still, we can reconcile the two views by considering ‘Sufi’ to

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<sup>71</sup> Peter Kingsley, *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity*.

be a peel-off label for ‘people like us’ or ‘we friends’ of whatever persuasion or walk of life. Be that an officially enfranchised Teacher in a Sufi *halqa* (circle) or Jane Smith who runs the local deli.”

She added: “In the case of Idries Shah and his brother Omar Ali-Shah (otherwise known as ‘Agha’), it is said that they had a difference of opinion, agreed to disagree, and went their separate ways. Of course some point out that ‘things nominally or apparently opposed may be secretly working together’, just as the opposition of thumb and fingers facilitates one’s ‘grasp’. And others note that their initials, IS and OAS together form the word ‘OASIS’, but that may simply mean that their father, the Sirdar Ikbāl Ali Shah had visions of their complementing one-another.

“Anyhow, from what I can gather, Idries Shah was very much set on building up a body of written materials, including a great many teaching stories, whereas Omar Ali-Shah was all for launching into advanced group work, which we might liken to ‘baking cakes’ or ‘baking bread’.

“And, of course, there’s more to the split than this, but let’s leave it at that for now.”

Gwyn rose to her feet at this point. “So much for the theory and the basic exercises. Next week, dear friends, we’re finally going to learn how to bake.”

# PART 3: Exploration

## The Greatest Trap

“As the ancient Gnostics patiently explained almost two thousand years ago, there is no greater trap than to believe one has arrived at “the completion of all completions”—when in reality one hasn’t even arrived yet at the very first mystery of existence behind which all the other mysteries after mysteries lie.

“Then even liberation traps us in its net, thanks to the elegance and grace and speed with which we are caught by what we’re sure has set us free.”

~ Peter Kingsley, *A Book of Life*.

## 17.

There was a stranger at the next meeting of the Silver Circle – a small and slightly rotund gentleman with thinning red hair and a matching, carefully manicured beard – and once they’d taken their seats, he introduced himself, smiling broadly in welcome.

“Good evening, friends,” the man greeted them. “I’m Stefan Grainger, and I’m here to help you work with dreams.

“As the intrepid psychonaut C. G. Jung wrote:

## The Dream

“The dream is the small hidden door in the deepest and most intimate sanctum of the soul, which opens to that primeval cosmic night that was soul long before there was conscious ego and will be soul far beyond what a conscious ego could ever reach.”<sup>72</sup>



*Figure 31: Jacob's Dream [Brightness and contrast adjusted] / Adam Elsheimer (1578–1610) / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.*

“More specifically, I’ll be your guide to introduce you to the mechanics of lucid dreaming, dreams in which you know that you are asleep and dreaming, and in which your interactions can become more and more proficient.

As for the practice, you’ll have to carry that out in your own

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<sup>72</sup> Carl Jung, “The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man”, *Psychological Reflections: An Anthology of Jung's Writings 1905-61*.

home, though Gwyn and I will be available for the next few sessions, should you have any reports to make, any queries, or any concerns.

“Here we go, then:

“As you go about your everyday, waking life, ask yourself every now and again ‘Am I dreaming?’ and perform a reality check, such as looking around for some familiar object and checking if it’s in the right place. Or look at a clock or the cover of a book and see if you can read it. Or examine your hands and see if they are fuzzy or distorted in any way. The benefit of getting used to examining your hands is that no matter what scene you’re experiencing in a dream, your hands are going to be there. Well, unless you’ve donned gloves or a spacesuit, or the lights have gone out.

“In the film, *Inception*, one of the characters keeps a spinning top with him, and when he needs to perform a reality check, he sets the top spinning. In the real world, the top would gradually slow down, begin to wobble, and eventually come to rest; whereas in the dream world (at least the theory goes) the top would keep on spinning. But you’re really looking for something more basic than that.

“Whatever: the idea is to get used to performing a reality check in your daily life, in the hope that you will be reminded to do this during your dreams, thus alerting yourself to the fact that ‘Hey! I really am dreaming!’

“Prior to going to bed, you can also carry out a meditation exercise, as Gwyn has already shown you. That will help put you in a more receptive frame of mind.

“Then, as you go to bed, make sure you place a notepad and pen by your bedside, and you may need to get hold of a bedside lamp, if you haven’t already got one. That way, when you wake up you can immediately jot down anything you remember about the dream, before the memory fades away. I’d keep the notepad to scribble in and keep a separate journal to neatly write up your notes during the day.

“When you go to bed, and each time before you fall asleep again, tell yourself ‘I will be aware that I’m dreaming’. Again, get

used to giving yourself this reminder.

“Also, have a think about any common themes you experience in your dreams. In my own case that would be being chased and struggling to fly away, visiting a public house and ordering a Guinness, and searching all over the place for a lavatory. The hope here is that when you are dreaming, you will recognise the theme and realise that you’re dreaming.

“If you do wake up after a dream, write it down, then try to drift off to sleep again, with the dream in mind, in the hope that you’ll be able to re-enter the dream.

“As for waking up after a dream, so that you can write it down, I wouldn’t bother with anything artificial, like setting an alarm. Instead, you could try crying for help, in the hope that other parts of your brain will wake up. Or you could pick a difficult task like reading the page of a book, which will engage parts of your brain not involved in REM sleep.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the sheer frustration may wake you up. Whatever works for you.

“And finally, once you begin to get used to lucid dreaming, try to improve your interactions in your dreams: try to hold rational conversations with others; if you’re buying something, then ask the price and count out the change; behave as if you were at night school – or a toddler at kindergarten – learning the basics.

“In all these things, be patient with yourself: it may take days or weeks or even longer before you get used to these procedures and they begin to yield results.

“And finally, some cautions, from the [Healthline web site](#), and a reminder to let me or Gwyn know immediately, should you experience any adverse effects, or if you have any worries.

Negative aspects might include:

- **Sleep problems.** The WBTB and MILD techniques<sup>74</sup> [which I am not recommending and so will not explain] involve waking up in the middle of the night. These interruptions can make it difficult to get enough

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<sup>73</sup> A recurring sleep state during which dreaming occurs; a state of rapidly shifting eye movements during sleep.

<sup>74</sup> WBTB: Wake back to bed. MILD: Mnemonic induction of lucid dreams.

rest, especially if you have a sleep disorder or an irregular sleep schedule.

- **Derealization.** Sleep disturbances can lead to derealization, or the feeling that people, things, and your environment aren't real.
- **Depression.** The sleep interruptions of induction techniques may increase depressive symptoms.
- **Sleep paralysis.** Lucid dreaming may occur with sleep paralysis, which can be brief yet unsettling. Plus, sleep problems can increase the risk of sleep paralysis.

Source: [Healthline web site](#) (cautions).

“Again, from the Healthline web site, you should consult a healthcare professional if you experience:

- frequent nightmares
- nightmares that regularly disrupt sleep
- fear of sleeping
- traumatic flashbacks
- emotional changes
- memory problems
- trouble sleeping.

Source: [Healthline web site](#) (when to see a doctor).

“Always err on the side of caution,” Stefan strongly advised them. “And now, Gwyn and I will take any questions you may have.”

## 18.

A week later, Alex finally got the message and quit smoking.

Four or five days earlier, he had noticed himself being a little short of breath, especially first thing on a morning, before he'd cleared phlegm from his chest. Later, he developed a runny nose, and thankfully that helped clear his chest and ease his breathing.

As if that wasn't sufficient, though, he developed a chest infection and – perhaps due to swallowing phlegm – a slightly sick feeling and explosive diarrhoea. And, to crown it all, he took a home test and discovered that he'd contracted COVID-19.

°I lost count long ago,° his inner voice reminded him. °But I would say that this constitutes the sixth, seventh and eighth opinions – all of which strongly recommend that you quit the smoking habit.°

Even burning his favourite sandalwood incense sticks had left him feeling nauseous, and smoking really had made him feel gross. Only then, when he was feeling grim, and could not face a cigarette (not least because of changes to his senses of taste and smell) did he finally kick the habit.

His parents had had a mild dose of COVID fairly recently, but to be on the safe side, apart from making trips to the bathroom, he semi-isolated himself in his bedroom, and bless her, his mother provided room service, and scrupulously washed her hands and bleached his crockery and cutlery. She, too, was under strict orders from his father, who liked to plan their life like a military campaign.

Later that day, he came across a quote that added an even more sombre tone to these recent events:

Once you've learned the language of imaginal causality, it reads like an open book. The bottom line is *no*. The subtext is "*Disregard at your own peril.*" We escaped with our lives this time. Another time we might

not be so lucky.<sup>75</sup>

°Well, that's you told,° the inner voice remarked. °And quite rightly so.°

Indeed, that's me told, he readily conceded.

Alex had to take a week off work, and skip one of the group meetings, and he couldn't face practising his meditation exercises or lucid dreaming routines, but now slowly but surely, he was beginning to feel a bit brighter and better now.

One thing he could do was follow Stefan's instructions and get used to the reality check: asking every so often as he pottered around the house, 'Am I dreaming?' and checking his hands and nearby objects. That was not taxing at all.

As he scrolled through his Facebook feed, catching up on all the posts he'd missed while feeling under the weather, he came across another neat quote, too, by the same author, Cynthia Bourgeault:

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<sup>75</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *Eye of the Heart: A Spiritual Journey into the Imaginal Realm*.

## The Imaginal World



*Figure 32: Perfume set from Sovjetunio cca 1965 / Takkk / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0.*

The imaginal is that quality of aliveness moving through this realm, interpenetrating, cohering, filling things with the fragrance of implicit meaning whose lines do not converge in this world alone but at a point beyond.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *Eye of the Heart: A Spiritual Journey into the Imaginal Realm*.

Now that he was beginning to feel better, Alex had noticed that he seemed to be hovering on the brink of a reality that he had once known and since lost virtually all touch with. He couldn't quite see this reality, but he was in some way reminded of it. It was as if there was a clarity to it, and a subtle and elusive scent. He came closest to this lost reality when the sun was shining in bright, clear blue skies.

And Cynthia Bourgeault's words – her “fragrance of implicit meaning” – reminded him of this, too.

Alex had a half-remembered poem in the back of his mind, too, and after a lot of Googling, he managed to locate it:

## A Shropshire Lad: XL

Into my heart an air that kills  
From yon far country blows:  
What are those blue remembered hills,  
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,  
I see it shining plain,  
The happy highways where I went  
And cannot come again.

~ A.E. Housman.<sup>77</sup>



*Figure 33: Blue remembered hills / Peter Evans / Wikimedia Commons (orig. Geograph) / CC BY-SA 2.0.*

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<sup>77</sup> A. E. Housman, “A Shropshire Lad: XL.”

°Enough with your quotes, already!° his inner voice protested.

°Now that you're back in the land of the living, it's time to finally stop "milling around at base camp", as Gwyn suggested, and actually get down to some Real Work, Sonny Jim.

°And that, in turn, requires Real Commitment and Real Effort.°

Almost at that very moment, Alex heard the distinctive ping of new mail arriving in his email client inbox, and he clicked on the taskbar to have a look.

His initial reaction had been that it would probably be more spam from yet another Russian porn site, and he was pleasantly surprised, then, to discover that it was an email from Gwyn, titled "Silver Circle Update".

He read the short message:

"Hi, Alex. Hope you're feeling a bit better now. Missing you, but please don't rush back to work or to the group until you're feeling 100%.

"Regarding the lucid dreaming, Stephan has a few useful things to add, partly based on questions raised by group members. Please see the attachment. Not sure if you can open a Microsoft Office document, so have also attached a PDF.

*"Illegitimi non carborundum!"*

"Kind regards, Gwyn."

He had to look up that phrase and he was reliably informed by Google that this was a mock-Latin aphorism that might be loosely translated as: "Don't let the bastards grind you down!"

He wondered if by that Gwyn was merely being jocular, or else referring to the gremlins that seemed to be plaguing their lives increasingly. Whatever. If Gwyn meant it, then she must be aware of what was going on.

~~~~~oOo~~~~~

"Fellow wayfarers," the document began, and Alex began to carefully read it:

19.

From: Stefan Grainger.

To: Members of the Silver Circle.

Fellow wayfarers,

Thank you for your queries and reports regarding the lucid dreaming practice.

First of all, for our purposes, we're not aiming to manipulate or control the content of the dream, but rather to interact with whatever presents itself to us. Of course, you can probably think of notable exceptions to this: for example, should you find yourself being abused or attacked or in some other nightmarish situation. In which case you may spontaneously awaken from the dream out of fright. Or you might find some way of escaping the scene, for example by flying away, or simply changing the scene to somewhere more pleasant: perhaps revisiting a pleasant location that you enjoyed during your childhood, or some family favourite. Or you may choose instead to stand up to, and negotiate with, any aggressors.

Another question is where do these lucid dreams take place? Well, whether it's a regular dream or a lucid dream, it may simply be taking place at a psychic level. But what we're really aiming for is engagement, through active imagination, at the imaginal level. Now, I know that you've been told that when practising inner dialogue through active imagination, you should avoid dialoguing with people you know in the everyday world, but we can make an exception here.

If any of our fellow Silver Circle members turn up in our lucid dreams, then that really is a bonus for us, because further down the line, one of our aims is to engage together in the imaginal world.

As I say, that's a lot further down the line, but just as we deliberately carry out "reality checks" in the everyday world, so that we're more likely to remember to do this in lucid dreams, so we can perhaps find ways of enhancing our chances of meeting

up in the imaginal.

To this end, during the last group session, we went round the circle to find out what sort of physical setting each member was particularly comfortable in or particularly interested in, or the most memorable.

After much to-ing and fro-ing, we decided that what we'd do is pick one setting that the group members could all agree on. The Houses of Parliament was suggested because everyone could picture it, but it soon became apparent that it was way too large and complicated. We were looking for something simpler, that we could easily picture.

Stonehenge was another suggestion, as was the very room where we meet at the Spiritualist Church. But in the end, what the group settled on was the ancient oak tree with an octagonal wooden bench around its trunk, overlooking the duck pond, in the town gardens. Remember the names "Royal Oak" and "Clement Gardens", and if you can't figure out how to get there, which is a common occurrence in dreams, you can always ask passers-by.

Anyhow, please see the photograph below. Study the scene frequently and commit it to memory. In fact, visit the park and sit under the tree in the everyday world, to get used to the setting.

Also see the photograph that I took of the group at our last session. Of course, Alex was absent from that photograph, but one of Gwyn's staff found a picture of Alex at a social evening, and used her wizardry to photoshop him, and also me, into the group image. Make yourself familiar with each of the faces and the person's full name.

Welcome to Night School!

Best wishes,

Stefan Grainger.

20.

Alex had tested negative for COVID for the second time, that morning, and though still not really feeling up to returning to work, he decided to go and have a walk around town to exercise his legs and clear his head.

His walk that day took him right past the convenience store where he often bought his tobacco, and he had to admit that this was a tempting sight, but that day he kept his eyes on the pavement ahead and deliberately walked straight past.

He crossed the road and walked along for a time until he came to the wrought-iron gates that led into Clement Gardens. Then he followed the wide, winding path that led downward toward the pond. The roses and other plants in the flower beds on either side of the path were in glorious full bloom, and the air must have been laden with scent. Unfortunately, though Alex was well on the road to recovery, he still had not regained his sense of taste or smell, so he'd have to postpone that heady delight for another day.

Alex stood for a time looking out over the pond and watched as a duck crossed over the water with a slinky snake of ducklings following her, and another duck, perhaps the father, bringing up the rear, perhaps to ensure that they didn't leave any of the merry troupe behind. They emerged, one by one, on a grassy rock that sat like a small island in the centre of the pond.

To his right stood the ancient "Royal Oak" and he wandered over to it and, after brushing aside a few crumbs and depositing someone's thoughtlessly discarded fish and chips wrapper in a nearby waste bin, he sat down on the bench facing the pond to drink-in the peaceful atmosphere. Then, eventually having had his fill, he decided to wander back home again, in time for lunch.

Alex had just risen to his feet and half-turned away from the pond when he caught sight of a figure just a few feet away, peering at him.

"Hi there, Arnold!" he called out, instantly recognising the

major.

“Well, hello there, Alex,” the man greeted him. “I thought it was you, but I wasn’t quite sure.” Arnold stepped closer and then hesitated.

“It’s okay, I’m over the dreaded lurgy now,” he reassured the major.

“Glad to hear it, dear boy,” the major replied, taking a few steps closer, but still keeping his distance, and not offering to shake Alex’s hand.

“Any luck?” the major enquired. “With the lucid dreaming, I mean.”

“Oh, I haven’t been feeling up to that, as yet,” he told the man. “But I thought I’d better take Stefan’s advice and visit the park.”

“Well, I’ve been practising my ‘reality check’ each day, and I’ve gone to bed trying to convince myself that ‘I will be aware that I’m dreaming’. No luck, so far, though.”

“What about the others?” he wanted to know.

“Pretty much the same story. Maya did have a brief lucid dream, so she says, and she actually realised that she was dreaming. In the dream, she’d fished out her credit card and tried to read the name and number written on it. Unfortunately, the frustration of not being able to do so woke her up prematurely and, alas, she couldn’t get back into the same dream.”

“Ah, that’s a pity,” he nodded.

“Stefan and Gwyn didn’t seem worried. Early days – or rather nights – as yet.” The major looked around and leant forward conspiratorially. “To be honest, I don’t hold out great hopes, though – don’t get me wrong – I’m willing to keep an open mind and give it my best shots. I’d like nothing better than to be proved wrong.”

Alex had an uneasy feeling, though he couldn’t quite place its origin. He turned to face the major and casually observed him from head to toe, and then something prompted him.

°Off on a long walk through town and no walking stick.°

“No walking stick?” he queried.

The major looked down and checked himself. “My word,

that's observant of you, dear boy. Why, yes. I'm sure I had my stick with me when I came out. Must have left it somewhere. Now, let me think. I popped into the bookies to place a bet on the nags.⁷⁸ Then I had a quick half and a pork pie in the Specked Trout ... Or was that yesterday? Do you know, I must be getting absent-minded."

Alex had a thought, and he brought out his wallet, found his debit card, moved close to the major and held his card aloft. "Can you read anything on this card?" he enquired.

The major took the card and held it close to his face. "Not without my glasses on. Print's far too small," he noted, handing the card back.

Alex checked the card himself. It was bright red and on one side it had the large stylised words "Virgin Money" written on it.

Again, he held the card up before the major's face. "Tell me, Major, what colour is my debit card?"

The major appeared quite flustered now. "Do you know, I couldn't say."

Alex took back the card and turned it over. There was what looked like his name near the bottom, something which he was likely to remember, and above that was the number of his card. Of course, he couldn't remember the number, but he did know that it ended in "4076". He'd seen that on a few order summaries. But what was most striking was that he couldn't quite make out the card number.

"Well, Major. I can't quite believe this, and perhaps you can't either, but I do believe we are both dreaming."

The major just stood there and frowned.

"Carry out your reality check," Alex advised the man.

The major stretched out his hands in front of him and turned them this way and that. "Good Lord," he gasped at length. "I seem to have misplaced my wedding ring, too. And my old signet ring. And I never, ever take off my wedding ring. Last time I had surgery, one of the nurses very kindly taped it to my finger. Can't be too safe, you know."

The major cast one long glance in Alex's direction, an

⁷⁸ Nag: horse. He placed bets on horse races.

expression of disbelief etched across his face, and then he was gone. He quite simply vanished into thin air before Alex's gaze.

And at that point, Alex woke with a start and leapt straight out of bed, panting.

"Ho-ly mo-ly!" he gasped, before sitting back down on the side of the bed and reaching for his notepad, anxious to write all this down before he forgot.

21.

The next night, Alex found himself once again walking down the winding path toward the pond, and he immediately realised that he must be dreaming.

As Alex approached the Royal Oak, he noticed a figure leave his seat under the tree and turn to face him. It was a man, a little smaller than him, wearing a brown mackintosh with the collar turned up, and a matching brown trilby hat. The man reminded Alex of someone he'd once met, but for the life of him, he couldn't place the man's face. There was something familiar about those piercing, blue eyes.

"Ah," said the man, consulting his notebook and greeting him. "And you must be Alex Knowles."

Alex frowned. "And *you* are?"

"My name is not important, Mister Knowles. But what is important is the organisation I represent." The man held out a white card and Alex took the card and examined it. On one side, there was the image of a large black spider and, turning it over he read out the word "SPIDER" in block capitals.

"SPIDER?" he queried.

"It's an acronym, Mister Knowles, and it stands for SPECIAL Investigations into Dreamers, Escapists, and Rebels. We're sometimes mistakenly referred to as gremlins, since they do SPIDER's bidding.

"We've had our eye on you and your little group the Silver Circle for some time now, Mister Knowles."

"So?" Alex retorted. "Lucid dreaming's not a crime is it?"

"Oh, but it's not just lucid dreaming, is it, Mister Knowles. We know all about Professor Trelawney and Gwyn Wetherall's interest in the imaginal world."

"Bully for you. As I say: it's not a crime is it? And in any case, what's it matter to you what we get up to in our spare time?"

"Unauthorised access to the imaginal world is not permitted, Mister Knowles, and it is our job to enforce the boundaries."

Alex pocketed the card and pushed past the man, determined to take his seat under the ancient oak, but the man reached out and caught hold of his arm.

“If you know what is good for you, you’ll leave this place and not return.”

Alex tried to prise the man’s hand free, but he had Alex’s arm in a vice-like grip.

At that moment, Alex caught sight of a third figure approaching them with a long staff in his hand. Seeing the bushy red beard, he realised it must be Stefan.

“Stefan!” he cried out and made to run toward him, tearing himself free from his assailant’s grasp.

In that instant, Stefan brought his staff crashing against the man’s chest, sending him reeling, and Alex woke up in a sweat and leapt straight out of bed.

22.

Alex wasn't sure whether he dare trust a phone call or an email, so once he'd had breakfast, he dashed off to Smith & Wetherall's and headed straight for Gwyn Wetherall's office and knocked loudly on the door.

"Enter," came the dulcet reply.

"Alex," Gwyn greeted him as he entered. "I wasn't expecting you back into work until Monday."

Alex flopped down on the seat facing Gwyn's desk.

"Are you alright, Alex?" she queried. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

The lady went across the office and clicked the kettle on, and busied herself making two mugs of coffee.

Once the coffee was brewed and they'd settled, Alex detailed the encounter he'd had during the night.

"I see. This is serious," Gwyn whistled, and immediately tapped a number into her phone and waited for a response.

"Hi, Stefan. It's me. Could you come over to Smith & Wetherall's? Something big's come up. Right. See you in a few minutes, then."

Gwyn replaced the receiver. "Stefan's already on his way," she informed Alex, and went to get a cup of tea ready.

Finally, after half an hour, Stefan appeared. "I'm sorry I'm later than expected," he told them, going over to the window and peeking out between the Venetian blinds. "Someone was staking out the front of my house, and I had to sneak out of the back and grab a bus instead of driving. Don't worry: I gave the Opposition the slip."

"... for now," he added, returning from the window, sitting down to the side of the desk and taking a gulp of tea. "You do make a fine brew, Mrs Wetherall."

"Well," Stefan spoke at length, as Alex related the story. "I have no recollection of the encounter you describe, but I'm not denying that it happened. My best guess would be that you

mobilised your own innate defences, and that you projected my likeness, with which you are familiar and presumably trust, onto your rescuer.”

Stefan finished the remains of his tea and placed his cup and saucer on the desk. “Clearly, the Silver Circle is compromised, as are Sheila Trelawney, and your good selves. And, they call themselves SPIDER now, do they?”

“The Opposition?” Alex promoted. “Who are they?”

“Puppets of an age-old and shadowy right-wing elite,” Stefan explained. “They work to keep humanity enthralled. Using and abusing us, encouraging and promoting disharmony in an eternal cosmic struggle, and siphoning off our negative energies for their own nefarious purposes. Evil incarnate – and disincarnate.”

“So what do you propose, Stefan?” Gwyn wanted to know.

“One thing we have to do is immediately disperse the Silver Circle,” he replied without a second thought.

Alex let out a deep sigh “Just when we’ve started making progress.”

Stefan qualified his statement. “You’ll note that I used the word ‘disperse’ and not ‘disband’.”

“So we work underground,” Gwyn Wetherall suggested.

“Yes, we bury ourselves a little deeper. As they say in theatre: ‘The show must go on.’”

“Does the Institute have any other groups that meet on a Thursday evening?” he enquired.

Gwyn shrugged. “Knitting and crochet, and the book club.”

“Good. Then change the venue for one of those groups. Have them meet at the Spiritualist Church in place of the Silver Circle. With any luck, the Opposition will think that it’s business as usual.”

“What about the Silver Circle, though?” Alex queried.

“Well, as Gwyn suggested, some of us can operate underground,” Stefan told them. “Your good selves; the major; Maya the scientist, and Jake the artist have all made some progress with the lucid dreaming.”

“Underground?” Alex prompted.

“Well, remote working,” Alex explained. “Or perhaps brief

ad-hoc meetings at random locations. We can keep in touch using an app that a friend of mine developed. It's a messaging and video call program like WhatsApp, with end-to-end encryption. I'll leave the details with you, Gwyn."

"And the others?" Gwyn enquired.

Stefan shrugged. "I'm sorry, but we'll have to let them go.

"And we'll have to find another venue for the lucid dreaming," he added. "We can't use the Royal Oak any more."

"What about the secret garden at the top of Rosedale Avenue?" Gwyn suggested. "The advantage of the garden is that it's secluded from view."

Stefan nodded. "That will do for a start, yes. But be prepared to move the location – perhaps even time and time again – if the Opposition rumble us. The best we can hope for is that we keep one or two steps ahead of them. Which, of course, is nothing new.

"And see if you can find a decent image online of the secret garden."

"I just checked Google and there's only one poor quality image, with an annoying copyright watermark," Alex reliably informed them. "But leave it with me: I'll go there later this morning and get some pix and share them."



Later that week, Alex tried out the new messaging app and managed to connect with Stefan and Gwyn, but he was not ready for what Gwyn had to report.

"I tried to get in contact with Sheila Trelawney so we could hook up using the app, but there was no reply, so I phoned her housekeeper, Missus Moffitt. The long and the short of it is that Sheila's gone missing. There was no note. No signs of a break-in or a struggle. No signs of packing. No clothes missing. Nothing."

"Have the police been informed?"

"Yes, they told Missus Moffitt to phone around friends and relatives, then wait 24 hours, and if she hadn't returned, to file a missing person's report."

"Twenty-four hours, baloney!" Stefan hissed. "You can file a

report straight away.”

“... Anyhow, that’s where we are now. Missus Moffitt said she’d phoned virtually everyone in Sheila’s address book (which was still on the table in the hall, by the way, along with her car keys, her handbag and purse).”

“That’s a big ‘by the way’, Gwyn. Surely, that’s a clincher,” replied Alex, tapping away at the keyboard on his mobile. God, how he hated mobile phones.

There was silence for a few moments and then Stefan left a message, offering what little comfort he could, and suggesting that they all try to meet up that night.

“One last thought for now,” Stefan added. “Do you have a recent photograph of Sheila?”

Moments later, Gwyn came back with “I have a reasonable photo of her from the talk she gave for the Institute the other night, but there’s a large photo on the back of her latest book, *Down the Rabbit Hole*.”

“Then scan that image and attach it to a message, so we can all access it. If the police can’t find her, which seems highly likely, then by hook or by crook, we will try.”

“Right you are, chief.”

23.

Stefan and Gwyn must have been the first to arrive that evening, because when Alex materialised in the secret garden, they were already there waiting for the others.

The next to arrive was the major, wearing just his pyjamas, and apparently blissfully unaware that he was asleep and dreaming.

Alex delicately tried to get the major to perform a reality check, but when he did, the major immediately lost it and was zapped back wherever he had come from.

A few more minutes passed and Maya and Jake appeared simultaneously, holding hands. Evidently, they had hooked up romantically, though whether this was in their dreams or in real life, Alex did not know. He felt a twinge of envy, which suggested that, beyond his awareness in waking life, he was actually becoming quite fond of Maya.

“Okay, looks like we have a quorum,” Stefan noted at length, once he’d determined that the rest of them had pretty much stabilised.

“So what now, chief?” asked Gwyn.

“We need to find Professor Trelawney,” he replied without hesitation.

“But she won’t know we’re here,” Alex objected.

“Did she know that we were meeting at the Royal Oak?” asked Maya.

Gwyn nodded. “Yes, I kept her informed.”

“Then, that’s our best bet,” Jake opined.

Stefan told him about the previous night’s encounter, and advised against it. “That would be asking for trouble,” he concluded.

“Well, wake me up when you think of any brighter ideas,” Jake suggested. “Who’s coming with me?”

Gwyn checked with Stefan and shrugged. “We have to start somewhere, Stefan. The Opposition know about us, but maybe

Jake can get away with it?"

"Very well, but I wouldn't try hopping over there, as you'll probably lose the thread of your dream. Your best bet would be to walk there and back ... if you have the presence of mind to find your way."

Maya stepped forward unhesitatingly. "I'll go with Jake."



Jake and Maya entered the park through the bushes, rather than wander down the winding path, and they waited until they were sure that the place was deserted before venturing into the open and approaching the pond.

"What are we looking for?" Maya wanted to know.

"Anything, anything out of the ordinary," Jake told her.

"Such as?"

Jake looked this way and that, and shrugged as he slowly circled the octagonal wooden bench. "Your guess is as good as mine," he whispered.

Maya bent down beside the bench and reached underneath. She'd found a crumpled piece of paper, but when she disentangled it, she found that it was just somebody's carelessly discarded shopping list, and so she screwed it back up again and tossed it in a nearby litter bin.

Something else on the ground caught her eye, though, and she picked it up. It was a small diamond earring.

"What about this, then?" she asked, pressing the earring into Jake's palm.

"That's a possibility," he nodded.

"A possibility?" she hissed under her breath, "How many people do you know who have lost expensive earrings ... with the butterfly clip still attached?"

"So, what do you think? Is that a clue?"

Maya thought for a moment. "Not in itself, but I do I think it's a clue from the professor that she is leaving us clues. I wish I could better recall what she was wearing in that photo Gwyn showed us."

“I don’t quite recall, either, Maya.”

“I think it’s safe to say that this is one of the professor’s earrings, though. Let’s say that’s our working hypothesis.”

She had second thoughts and went to retrieve the piece of paper from the rubbish bin. Fortunately, the bin must have been emptied recently and she soon found the paper.

“Hurry!” Just then, Jake caught hold of her arm and dragged her away from the tree. Someone was coming down the winding path and heading their way.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jake hissed and, keeping their heads down, they hurried away through the bushes.

Ten minutes later, they rejoined the others in the secret garden.

“Find anything?” Stefan asked.

Maya took hold of Gwyn’s hand and pressed the earring into her palm.

“Gosh, I’m sure that’s one of Sheila’s earrings,” she gasped.

Maya nodded. “So, she had the presence of mind to head for the tree and leave us a clue.”

“Anything else?”

“Just a crumpled up shopping list,” Maya noted, and she straightened out the note and handed it to Gwyn. “But it could be anybody’s.”

“But what use is it to us?” Alex asked. “We’ll have forgotten what it said before we wake up.”

Stefan stretched out his hand. “Leave it with me. I’ll remember,” he offered. Then: “Okay, guys. Let’s call it a night. We’ll be in touch again tomorrow.”

He had one last look at the shopping list and committed it to memory using an ancient technique that he’d practised ever since his own mentor, Daryl Banks, had first taught him lucid dreaming.

6 V. toms.
Rocket salad
Coleslaw
Sirloin steak

Whole milk
Orange juice with bits
Sugar
Tuc biscuits
Ritz crackers
Eclairs
Lager (1664).



The next day, Alex waited patiently online until Gwyn and Stefan had joined the message thread and moved past the exchange of greetings.

“Here’s the shopping list that Maya found,” Stefan announced, and the list popped up in the thread.

“Gosh, how on earth did you remember all that?” Maya wanted to know.

“It’s an old technique I was taught,” Stefan told them: “The Memory Palace or method of loci, which is used as a strategy for memory enhancement. You’ll find reams of material about it online, but if you want to cut to the chase (as movie studio executives advise, not wishing to bore the audience), then buy, beg, borrow or steal *The Art of Memory* by Frances A. Yates. And get into the habit of using the technique.”

“Well, that’s great, Stefan, but we’re still left with nothing more than an old shopping list,” the major pointed out.

There was a lengthy pause at this point, then Maya spoke up.

“Maybe it’s not a shopping list, after all?”

Alex frowned. “I don’t get you.”

“Tuc biscuits, Ritz, eclairs, lager. Bear with me. If you take the initials, that spells ‘T.R.E.L.’. Could that be short for Trelawney? And before that, there’s sugar? Could that be ‘Sh...’ for Sheila?”

“That’s a possibility, Maya, so let’s not discount it.”

“Kronenbourg 1664 is Sheila’s favourite tippie, by the way,” Gwyn pointed out.

“Maybe we’re onto something, after all. Start at the top,

then,” Stefan advised.

“6 V. toms,” Alex offered. “Toms is most likely short for tomatoes. But what’s ‘V’ stand for?”

“Vine, most likely,” Gwyn suggested. “Tomatoes ripened on the vine.”

Again there was silence, broken at length by Stefan. “Nothing else jumps out of the page at me.”

“6 vine toms, then? And why six and not five, seven, or eight? Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

“So how come she abbreviated that?” the major wanted to know. “Everything else is spelt out in full.”

“To hide the word?” Gwyn queried.

“Wait a minute,” Maya chipped in. “What if it’s not 6 vine tomatoes, but – let’s say – 6 Vine Street?”

“Bear with me, I’ll get my A to Z,” Gwyn responded. Shortly afterwards she came back. “There’s a Vine Street in town, and also Vine Terrace.”

“My money is on Vine Terrace,” Stefan said. “But we should check them both.”



While Gwyn headed for Vine Street with Jake and the major in her car, Stefan and Alex went to check out Vine Terrace. Since she was at work, Maya could do no more than anxiously monitor the app.

Stefan slowly made a pass by 6 Vine Terrace with the intention of parking a little further down the road. The first thing they noticed as they passed by was that there was chipboard covering the two downstairs windows, and the front door was ajar.

Rather than stake out the address, Stefan decided to throw caution to the wind. Getting out of the car, he opened the boot, handed a large steel wrench to Alex, and made straight for the front door. He eased it open a little further, put his finger to his lips, and stood there for a few moments listening intently. Then, hearing nothing, the pair of them crept inside the hallway, hoping

that the bare floorboards wouldn't creak and give them away..

Just then, Stefan heard a noise coming from a room to his left and, deciding to commit himself, he roughly kicked the door open with his foot and entered the room.

Alex dived into the room after Stefan, his heart pounding heavily in his chest, and ready for anything.

The room was empty, however, except for one overturned hard-backed chair and a figure curled up nearby.

"Sheila!" Stefan cried, and he crossed the room and unceremoniously brought the prone lady to a sitting position. He went round behind her, untied the gag around her mouth, and tugged at the rope binding her wrists behind her back, while Alex knelt beside her and untied her feet.

There was a business card on the floor and Alex knew straight away what it was, but he quickly stuffed it in his pocket. The only important thing right now was to get the hell out of there.

The professor started to say something, but Stefan already had her on her feet and was making for the door. "Later, Sheila. Let's get you somewhere safe before we're discovered."

Only when Stefan had pulled away and left Vine Terrace did he speak again. "Let Gwyn know that Sheila's safe, and tell her we'll meet at Smith & Wetherall's in ten minutes."

Alex nodded and sent her a brief message.



Ten minutes later, they had all arrived and were gathered in Gwyn's office, and they all made a fuss over the professor.

"Thank you all so much, but really, I'm fine now. 'Worse things happen at sea', as my dear old mother would say."

Gwyn was already brewing coffee and the major reached in his coat and fished out a silver flask. "A little medicinal brandy to calm our nerves," he informed them, passing the flask around so that they could top up their drinks.

Alex fished in his jacket pocket and produced the card. On one side was the logo of a large black spider and on the reverse

side was the word “SPIDER” in block capitals, just as he’d remembered from his dream. Beneath that was a hand-scrawled message: “A little reminder to stay out of things that do not concern you.”

He passed the card to Stefan, who read it and passed it to the others.

“So, it looks like they were expecting us to find you, Sheila,” Gwyn suggested.

“Yes, I’m sure that they simply wanted to put the frighteners on us,” the professor nodded. “I mean, they could have done untold wickedness to me, and yet they simply subjected me to a lot of questioning without resorting to force. And, knowing that you would come looking for me, they could have waylaid you, too, rather than just departing the scene.”

“So, what about your work, Sheila. Are you going to ‘stay out of things that don’t concern you’, as they suggest?”

The professor took a large gulp of her laced coffee. “Not on your nelly,” she laughed.

“But we should perhaps find you somewhere safe, at least for the time-being,” Gwyn advised. “Why don’t you come and stay at my place. There’s an intercom downstairs, and the front door will be locked unless we recognise the caller and release the door.”

The professor weighed this up for a few moments. “Thank you, Gwyn. I’ll do that, then. But only for a few days. Oh, and we must let my housekeeper, Missus Moffitt, know.”

“And the police?”

The professor pursed her lips. “Yes, they’ll need informing, but we’ll just say that I had made last minute arrangements to stay with you, and not make mention of abduction, eh?”

“And I really can’t thank you all enough. You really did a splendid job.”

Alex wasn’t so sure. “Through good fortune, we managed to locate and free you, Professor, but what’s to stop them striking again? If not now, then next week, or next month, or next year?”

Professor Trelawney spread her hands wide and shrugged. “I can’t hide myself away, or cower, or be forever fearfully looking over my shoulder. The work must go on.”

°You know, there's an old adage,° an inner voice informed him: °The best defence is a good offence.°

And what's that supposed to mean? he shot back.

°When circumstances are favourable and the opportunity presents itself, you'll see,° the voice replied cryptically.

24.

Alex was walking home later that day when he had the distinct, and yet subtle and irrational, impression that someone was watching him. Every now and again he cast his eyes across the street and behind him, and every now and again he stopped on the pretext of looking in shop windows to check the reflections.

As he passed the Harding's Electrical showroom, instead of carrying straight on, he deftly sidestepped into the ginnel, a covered passage, between two shops, and turned round, facing the street.

Shortly afterwards, a figure in black trousers, a long black coat and black leather trilby stopped momentarily just outside the ginnel and cast his eyes down the passage. Their eyes met for a brief second, and then the brown-haired man recoiled in shock and hurried off down the road.

Alex was on the man's tail immediately, and the faster he pursued the man, the faster the man walked to evade him. The tables had been turned, as they were both acutely aware.

The man had his phone out now, and he slowed momentarily and fumbled with the device, before putting it to his ear. He was, most likely, either calling for instructions or for backup.

Alex trotted after the man, determined by now to accost him and demand an explanation. Just as he did so, however, another figure emerged from a nearby shop, looking the other way, and walked straight across Alex's path. Unable to swerve or stop in time, Alex banged straight into the man, and since he was only slightly built and the other man was burly, he rebounded and ended up on his backside. Alex got up immediately, both of them apologising profusely, and he ran on down the street, finally catching up with the first man on the corner, as he was forced to wait for the traffic lights to change and the green man to show at the crossing.

"Why were you following me?" Alex demanded, catching hold of the man's arm.

“What the hell?” the man demanded, spinning round to face Alex.

Only then did Alex realise that the man he’d just accosted, who had a full head of yellow-blond hair, was not the same man who had been following him. And yet he couldn’t have had his eyes off the man for more than a few seconds.

He immediately let go of the man’s arm and apologised. “Oh, I am so sorry, sir. I thought you were somebody else.”

“Blithering idiot!” the man swore.

Just then, the beeps sounded and the green man appeared on the crossing and, turning away, the man marched off across the road and disappeared into the crowd. And, as for the first man, he was nowhere in sight.

It was only later, as he turned into his road that Alex began to wonder about the odds of coming across two men wearing near-identical black coat, hat, and trousers on the high street within minutes – perhaps only seconds – of each other. And just how timely he had “accidentally” been knocked off his feet as he was about to accost the first man. These thoughts disturbed him.

°Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you,° a friendly voice reminded him.⁷⁹

Ha bloody ha-ha.

°Well, what other explanations are there, if it wasn’t an accident and an innocent misunderstanding? A glitch in the matrix? You do recall Occam’s razor, don’t you?°

Huh?

°Other things being equal, explanations that posit fewer entities, or fewer kinds of entities, are to be preferred to explanations that posit more.°

I still don’t follow.

°It’s a philosophical tool for “shaving off” unlikely explanations.°

Well, I was shadowed and, when I turned the tables, I was given the slip. Those two basic facts, I do know.

⁷⁹ A quote from Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*.

°Instead of saying “followed”, you used the term “shadowed”,° his inner voice reminded him as he got home and went upstairs to boot-up his computer.

Did I?

°You very distinctly did,° he was reliably informed. °And that is a notion worth a little consideration.°

After going back downstairs to say hello to his parents, and grabbing a mug of coffee, Alex went back to his computer for a while, until dinner was ready.

What was it Jung had said about the Shadow? Something about what happens in the “real world” if it’s denied in the inner world. He tapped a few trial phrases into Google and eventually came up trumps:

Products of the Unconscious

“Until the shadow is integrated into the personality, the world appears filled with opponents or adversaries who are actually products of the unconscious; afterward, people can be seen as individuals, even people who disagree with us.”⁸⁰



Figure 34: Shadow of a person on a cobbled street / Magdalena Roeseler / Wikimedia Commons (orig 500px) / CC BY 3.0.

Hey Buster, I didn't make this up, and it's got nothing to do with me denying my Shadow, he told himself. Let's be very clear about this: Professor Trelawney was abducted – in the real world. I was followed – in the real world. There's nothing metaphysical, supernatural, or plain paranoid about that. What was it Freud

⁸⁰ Robin Robertson, *Jungian Archetypes: Jung, Godel, and the History of Archetypes*.

said? “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”⁸¹

°So, you don’t find it strange that you come across these characters in a lucid dream and then again in the “real world” as you call it?°

I didn’t say that. Yes, of course I find that strange. Going back to Occam’s razor, I guess the simplest explanation for that is that these are “real world” people who have, like us, the ability to access the imaginal world through lucid dreaming.

°There’s something else to consider, though, Sonny Jim. Why are they so insistent that you and the others stay out of the imaginal? As if access is somehow forbidden.°

I don’t know, he replied, off the top of his head. But I aim to find out.

And then again, he *did* know, and he was strongly reminded of Stefan’s earlier words:

The opposition are “puppets of an age-old and shadowy right-wing elite. They work to keep humanity enthralled. Using and abusing us, encouraging and promoting disharmony in an eternal cosmic struggle, and siphoning off our negative energies for their own nefarious purposes. Evil incarnate – and disincarnate.”

⁸¹ Freud meant that just because an object is longer than it is wide, it’s not necessarily a phallic symbol. This is a more generalised idea.

25.

Alex absentmindedly checked the time on his wristwatch. He was confused for a moment when he saw that it read 3:03 and yet it was clearly daytime. He had his watch set to 24 hours, so 3:03 meant 3:03 AM. Had it been 3:03 PM, the watch would have shown 15:03.

At that moment, Alex realised that he had fallen asleep and was dreaming, and he decided that he'd go back to the Royal Oak and wait around, and if one of the agents from SPIDER showed up, then he'd confront them.

He had been waiting on the bench for perhaps five minutes when he heard footsteps on the gravel path, turned to see a figure walking toward him, and rose from his seat to accost the man. As the figure approached, Alex could see now that it was the same man who had been following him earlier that day, and wearing the same black coat, black leather trilby, and black trousers.

"So, we meet again," he greeted the man. "I'm Alex Knowles, though of course you'll know that already. And you are ..."

The man stopped in front of him, not too close, but within spitting distance. "You can call me Janus.

"But enough of the niceties, Mister Knowles. I thought that my colleagues had made it clear that you were to cease your lucid dreaming experiments and stay away from the imaginal realm."

"I'm here because I have some questions to ask you about that," he explained to the man.

Janus went to sit on the bench, and Alex remained standing in front of him.

"Such as?" the man asked.

"Such as why we should desist, and on whose authority. The last I heard, this is still a free country – or a free world, if you like – and citizens have rights."

Mister Knowles, I was named after the Roman god of doorways and passages. Let's say that I am a gatekeeper, and I

represent an organisation that is charged with allowing – or denying – access to the imaginal realm,”

“You mean SPIDER, I presume. SPecial Investigations into Dreamers, Escapists, and Rebels.”

“SPIDER is one of the departments in our organisation but, as I said, my job is that of a gatekeeper. And my instructions are to dissuade you from attempting to enter the imaginal realm, and to deny you access.”

“You say ‘instructions’. Who do you report to?” Alex wanted to know.

Janus shrugged. “I report to my line manager.”

“And who does he report to?”

“She reports to the general manager who reports, in turn, to the Executive.”

“And who do the Executive report to? That’s like a board of directors, right?”

“That’s above my pay grade, Mister Knowles. And besides, it is none of your concern.”

“Humour me. I’m not asking you to divulge State Secrets, Janus. Who do the Executive report to?”

The man stood up. “They report to Shadow.”

“SHADOW? What’s that stand for?”

“As I intimated, I am but a humble cog in a very large and well-oiled machine, Mister Knowles. I know little more than you do about such matters. We are only told what we need to know.”

The man approached Alex and patted him lightly on the shoulder. “Sleep,” he requested, and as he said that word, Alex noticed that his surroundings had begun to shimmer, and as they gradually faded away, he found himself slipping into another dream.

26.

Later that same night, Alex once again found himself wandering down the winding path toward the ancient oak and the duck pond.

Janus was already there, on the octagonal bench, facing away from the pond and toward the path, watching and waiting for him.

“Back again, Mister Knowles? You really don’t want to take ‘no’ for an answer, do you?”

Alex approached the tree and sat down a couple of feet away from the man.

“I need answers. It’s a part of my psychological makeup, I guess. Always has been. I need to know why you insist on denying me – denying us – entry into the imaginal.”

Janus didn’t reply immediately. He reached into his coat pocket, brought out a hand-held device, and tapped away at the keyboard. The man held the device in front of Alex and pointed to the screen. Alex had time to see a slowly rotating portrait of himself on the screen and his full, Sunday name – Alex Robert Knowles – beneath it, along with other details that he couldn’t quite make out.

At the bottom of the screen, in maroon block capitals, it read “Level 6”.

Janus took his hand back and pocketed the device.

“What’s Level 6?” Alex wanted to know.

“It’s what you would call the everyday world.”

“And what’s this?” he asked, casting his arms around.

“It’s an intermediate zone,” Janus told him. “The border between level 6 and level 5, which is higher. And you shouldn’t even be here. I’m putting my neck on the line for you, right now.”

“You still haven’t told me why,” Alex insisted.

Janus shrugged. “You don’t have security clearance. It’s as simple as that. You have to understand that this is for your own protection as well as ours.

“Look,” the man continued, gently patting Alex’s arm. “This is not a light-hearted game of skittles. It’s not all peaches and

cream or being fed grapes by adoring houris in the deeper realms. Wayfarers are faced with a great many dangers to themselves, and they also pose a danger to those around them, both in the deeper realms and also in the everyday world.

“So access has to be strictly controlled and closely and carefully monitored. Sometimes interventions are required in order to maintain order or to rectify damage caused to, or by, hapless wayfarers; to mitigate any unfortunate leaks or, for that matter, any maleficence. There’ve been leaks before, and in some cases, in the wrong hands – whether foolishly dabbling or deliberately manipulating – this has had dire consequences and caused the gravest concern. Perhaps now you can begin to understand our prohibitions?”

“So, how does anyone get clearance to access these deeper – higher? – realms, if they are so well guarded?” he wanted to know.

“I believe it’s written in one of your ancient texts, the *Tao Te Ching*, that ‘when the student is ready the teacher will appear,’ and also, further along the line, that ‘when the student is *truly* ready, the teacher will disappear.’”

“Don’t go all cryptic on me now, Janus. I need straight answers.

“And,” he added, “you can tell your boss that I mean no harm.”

Janus nodded. “So you believe, Mister Knowles, though at this early stage who is to say? You hardly know yourself and your true motivations. Hence our reserve.

“If and when you are ready, and if it is in your destiny, then you will be invited,” the man replied, and he touched Alex lightly on the shoulder. “There is no other way. So be patient. But for now: sleep.”

And for a second time that night, the scene around him began to dissolve and, as they say, the lights went out and he fell into a dreamless sleep.

27.

Alex had returned to work by now and, though the worries about SPIDER had receded, they still met secretly in virtual chat meetings, at 7pm each Thursday night, and they exchanged the odd message at other times.

He hadn't told the others about his nightly excursions to the Royal Oak, in case Stefan or Gwyn told him to put a stop to it. In spite of what Stefan had said about the Opposition, it seemed clear to him by now, that SPIDER meant them no harm, and at the same time, that they would use force, if necessary, to prevent incursions into the imaginal ... unless of course, people like Janus were unwitting puppets for the Opposition. What was that phrase he'd once read? "Dupes of Klingsor", Klingsor being a dark magician.

°Don't go there,° his inner voice strongly advised.

That night, he had intended to go back to the park and build on the rapport he was developing with Janus. Or at least he hoped that they could continue their conversation. When he was with Janus, it was as if he drank-in some subtlety in the atmosphere – perhaps simply due to Janus's presence – and he was at his most lucid.

As he walked down the winding path toward the pond, he caught sight of someone running toward him. He instantly recognised Jake, the artist, and was shocked by the fear etched across the man's face and in his wide eyes.

One minute there was Jake ahead of him, and in the next instant something dark and hideous appeared out of nowhere and grabbed hold of Jake by the arm and dragged him off to one side of the path, into a clump of bushes with bright orange flowers. Alex got only the briefest glimpse of the creature, but in that instant he experienced great terror. He tried to cry out, yet all he could do was let out a long and terrible moan.

Scared as he was, Alex pulled himself together and ran toward Jake, to help in any way he could. But when he got to the

spot, he caught a brief glimpse of Jake, and then he was gone. It was as if the man had been dragged through some doorway and the doorway had simply vanished into thin air.

Alex stood there for some time, taking slow, deep breaths to calm himself, so that the shock did not wake him from the dream. Then he staggered further down the path toward the ancient oak, in the hope of finding Janus and, hopefully, some explanation for the horror that he'd just witnessed.

Janus was standing by the tree, frantically tapping away at his hand-held device, as Alex ran up.

"What happened?" he demanded to know, collapsing onto the bench.

Janus had an agitated look on his own face. "You know this man?"

"Jake. I don't know his second name, only that he's an artist." He hesitated. "And a member of the Silver Circle."

"We'll make enquiries," Janus replied, tapping something into his device. Then he turned to Alex, terror etched into his own face. "I tried to reason with him. I tried to warn him not to pass ..."

"What happened?"

"He wouldn't listen. He just pushed straight past me. Out of Level 6. And that's when a Dark Guardian pursued and grabbed him."

"A Dark Guardian?"

"From Level 5. God only knows what will happen now."

"What can we do?" Alex asked urgently.

Janus cast his arms wide. "I don't know. I'll have to report to my line manager. Christ, I'm in deep shit. But your friend? He's in this up to his neck; even way over his head. What can you do? You must return straight away. Find your friend – what's left of him – and see that he's safely taken care of."

Janus clapped his hand on Alex's shoulder, and in an instant, Alex shot up in bed, wide awake, panting, and still scared out of his wits.

28.

Alex jumped straight out of bed and checked his alarm clock. It was still only six in the morning. He was going to dress immediately, but decided instead to take a quick shower, hopefully without waking his parents, while he calmed himself and thought about what to do.

As soon as he was downstairs, Alex grabbed some cereal and a quick coffee and, between hurried mouthfuls, he hastily scribbled a concocted, semi-explanatory note for his parents, and sent a message to Stefan and Gwyn.

Jake's in deep trouble. We urgently need to meet.

He waited until he'd finished his cereal. Of course, there was no reply. Unless they had the app open, which was unlikely, they wouldn't hear a notification. He realised that there was little chance that Stefan or Gwyn would pick up his message until they woke up, and maybe not even before they'd bathed, dressed, and had their own breakfast. And, being Saturday, chances were that they would have a bit of a lie-in.

Casting caution to the wind, he texted Stefan and Gwyn with the same terse message. The mere fact that he was not using the app should convince them of the urgency.

Ten minutes later, his phone pinged and he saw a brief text from Gwyn, telling him to meet her at Smith & Wetherall's. He tapped in a reply to the affirmative and headed for town. There was not a moment to waste.

As soon as he got there, he heard the beep-beep of a car horn and, seeing Gwyn waiting for him in the car park, he dashed over and climbed in.

"Do you know where Jake lives?" he asked breathlessly.

Gwyn grabbed her bag and found her address book. "Got it, yes."

"Then let's drive there now, and I'll explain on the way."

Gwyn was already buckled up and heading out of the car park.

“Deep trouble, you say?”

“Deep trouble, yes, and probably in need of urgent help.”



When they arrived at Jake’s bedsit,⁸² Gwyn rang the doorbell several times, to no avail. They could hear the chimes, but there was no response.

Alex fished in his trouser pocket, found his wallet, and pulled out his plastic library card. He pushed it in the gap near the Yale lock,⁸³ but he couldn’t get the card in far enough. Maybe Jake had clicked the catch in place to deadlock the door? He pushed harder and harder and then, all of a sudden, the flexible card shifted, the bolt retracted, and the door swung open.

“Well done, Master Burglar,”⁸⁴ Gwyn briefly nodded, already heading inside the room.

They found Jake sitting there cross-legged on a rug, in front of an unlit electric heater, hands on his knees and muttering some incomprehensible incantations to himself. His eyes were open, but he was staring straight ahead and nearly-oblivious of their presence. Alex thought perhaps that rather than enter the imaginal though lucid dreaming, Jake had entered while meditating.

Gwyn went over to the kitchen cabinet and made a strong coffee for Jake while Alex tried to get some reaction out of Jake. In the end, Gwyn managed to get him to sip the coffee while holding it up to his mouth. Alex guessed that drinking was pretty much a reflex action.

A little later, Jake appeared slightly more lucid, aware that there were others in the room with him, and he muttered something urgently, but it mostly came out as delirious gibberish.

Gwyn was on her phone now. “Hi, Sheila? Glad I managed to catch you. Tell me, are you still in private practice? All still up-to-

⁸² Bedsitting room: A furnished sitting room with sleeping accommodations (and some plumbing).

⁸³ A pin tumbler lock.

⁸⁴ An allusion to the role Bilbo Baggins was assigned in *The Hobbit*.

date? Oh good. Listen, we have a patient for you. Jake, the artist from the group, the Silver Circle, that I was telling you about.”

Gwyn went on to give the professor a brief and breathless account of what Jake had gone through, and his current condition, as best she could ascertain it.

It was agreed that Professor Trelawney would see Jake and then decide on the best course of action, so they eventually managed to get Jake on his feet, into a coat, out of the flat, locking the door behind them, and into the back seat of the car, with Alex beside him. Then Gwyn drove them into the countryside to the village of Hebden Wyke where the professor had a cottage.

By this time, Gwyn had also been on the phone to Stefan and he, too, met them as they arrived at the cottage.

Jake was more responsive now and he seemed to take in the fact that they were there looking after him, but he was still pretty distant and largely incoherent.

The professor had diagnosed psychosis and there was some worry on their part that Jake might become aggressive, and so the question of possible hospitalisation was broached. In the end, however, the professor prevailed upon them to let Jake stay with her. They were more likely to get sense out of Jake, and get him to see sense, than hospital staff who knew nothing about the imaginal.

To set his own mind at rest, Stefan in turn prevailed upon the professor to let him stay for a few days, as a safeguard. That decided, he drove back home, packed a few essentials, picked up a prescription that the professor had written out, and returned later that morning.

Alex really wished that he could have stayed with Jake, but perhaps he would be needed elsewhere, and at least it was agreed to stay in frequent contact via the app.

29.

Gwyn dropped him off in town, and he'd phoned his parents to let them know he'd been called into work but would be back sometime in the afternoon. They'd be calling into the local social club, then off shopping, and he was happy to look after himself, and be left to fend for himself.

Having grabbed some lunch on the way, as soon as he got home, he headed up to his room.

He had to find Janus. But there was no way he could get off to sleep in the middle of the day, especially with so many thoughts whirling round in his mind. Perhaps he could calm himself down through meditation, but unlike Jake, he was very much a beginner, and he doubted he could even clear his mind, let alone make it to the Royal Oak.

In the end, a spot of meditation did clear his mind, but that's as far as he got. All he could do now was check the app for fresh messages, and wait patiently for nightfall.



Alex retired to bed quite early that evening, though not so early that he would arouse his parents' curiosity or suspicions. Being creatures of habit, any change in routine would be duly noted and questioned, and then he'd end up lying to his parents and privately hate himself for deceiving them.

As he entered through the wrought-iron park gates and slowly made his way down the winding path, past the roses and bushes, he passed a middle-aged couple strolling the other way. The lady said "Hello" in greeting and her partner touched the brim of his hat and called out "Lovely evening". They didn't seem at all perturbed that he should be trespassing in a restricted area.

Another old man in a smart navy blue blazer approached him, too. He stopped in his tracks, hooked his wooden walking stick over his arm, fished out a colourful flyer from a manilla folder

under his arm, and held it out to Alex.

Alex smiled, thanked the old gentleman, and scanned the printed sheet. He couldn't make out all the details, but the sheet was headed "Night School" in a large, bold face, and beneath that it looked like a list of courses.

"You're new around here, aren't you?" the old man queried. "Hope to see you at the classes. Good social life, too. You'll get to meet some lovely people."

And with that, the man tucked the manilla folder under his arm and walked off.

"Time is of the essence!" a voice urgently reminded him, and he hurried on.

As Alex continued on down the path, he heard the clop-clop of heels behind him and turned. It was Maya Heslop, the scientist, from the group, and he stopped to greet her.

"I hear we've had a spot of trouble," Maya said, broaching the subject. Then: "Poor Jake."

"You do realise that this is a restricted area, don't you, Maya?" he warned her. "The Powers That Be don't seem to like us mooching around."

"Is that right?" Maya replied, tucking her hand in his arm and tugging at him. "Well, we'll have to see about that."

As they approached the Royal Oak, Alex saw that Janus was already there, waiting.

"Predictable as ever, Mister Knowles," the man greeted him.

Alex tossed his head. "I was about to say the selfsame thing, Janus."

"And you've brought reinforcements, I see," the man nodded, tipping his black leather trilby in Maya's direction. "I know you must get tired of hearing my voice, but the answer's still 'no'."

Maya spoke up. "We're here to make inquiries about a friend of ours. Jake Horsley."

"Ah, so we have a name," Janus nodded, and he tapped away on his hand-held device. "Thank you, that's useful."

"Any news?" Maya wanted to know.

"Our people are making their own inquiries, but no news as yet of his whereabouts. Just that he's most likely in Level 5."

Then, belatedly: “And might I ask who you are?”

“Maya Heslop. I’m a friend,” she informed him.

Again, the man tapped away on his device, then looked up sharply. “I’m sorry, Ms Heslop. I had no idea.”

Maya raised her eyebrows. “Oh, for heaven’s sake man, why not blurt it out. Let the whole world know.”

Janus took out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. “I’m sorry,” he repeated.

Alex wasn’t quite sure what was going on. “Sorry for what?” he wanted to know.

Maya exchanged glances with Janus. “Well, since Janus here has blown my cover, I might as well confess.”

“Confess?”

The lady drew a deep breath. “That I work for SHADOW,” she told him.

Alex pulled away and stood facing her.

“You mean that you’re working for the Opposition? That all this time, having taken you under their wing, you’ve been spying on the group?”

“Oh, it goes back a lot further than that, Alex. I’ve been a member of the Cross-Cultural Studies Institute (the CCSI) for several years now. But really, don’t think of it as spying on your operations. Instead, consider that I’ve been taking a benign interest in your work – especially in Professor Trelawney’s academic writing, but more recently in Stefan Grainger’s practical skills. And you, too. You’re a natural, and naturals are in much demand and quite short supply.”

Maya patted Alex’s arm lightly. “And we certainly don’t work for the Opposition,” she assured him, “so you can put your mind at rest.”

That would have to wait. Alex turned to face Janus. “I need access to Level 5.”

“And I need to know exactly where Jake was when he was abducted,” Maya requested, “since that’s all we have to go on, as yet.”

Janus looked at Maya and shook his head vigorously. “You may outrank me, Ms Heslop, but Mister Knowles here isn’t

cleared for Level 5, so he's going nowhere except back home to the Land of Nod."

As the man said this, he raised his hand and he was about to instruct Alex to sleep, but Alex deftly sidestepped and moved out of reach.

"Look again," Maya instructed, and Janus checked his device.

"But I don't understand. I swear that Mister Knowles was Level 6, and I checked only moments ago."

Maya smiled and raised her eyebrows. "Orders from on high," she replied. "And a change of plan."

"As I said, I need access to Level 5," Alex reiterated, his heart not skipping a beat.

Maya tossed her head back and laughed. "The middle-aged couple you passed on the way; the old gentleman with the flyers for Night School – didn't that strike you as a little odd, Alex?"

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well yes, but then all sorts of peculiar things go on in lucid dreams."

Maya hooked her hand under his arm and began leading him back up the winding path. "What I'm trying to tell you, Mister Knowles, is that you are *already* in Level 5. Congratulations on your promotion.

"Now, show me the spot where Jake was abducted. The very place he disappeared, if you can be that precise."

Alex looked around him as they walked back up the path. "But I don't understand. This looks just like the everyday world: your Level 6."

Maya patted his arm gently. "The levels interpenetrate. Like, like ... water carrying oxygen. Moving to a deeper level isn't like moving in space and time. It's simply a change in your *state of being*. There's an old saying:

We are nearer to him [man] than his jugular vein.

"That pretty much sums it up."

"All I remember is that the bushes had bright orange flowers," he replied, casting his arms around.

“Ah,” Maya replied. “*Berberis darwinii*, otherwise known as Darwin's barberry.”

He looked around. “That clump over there, I think.

“But what’s happened to Jake?”

“Well, they’ve taken his subtle body, leaving him a burnt-out shell of his former self,” she told him, going over to the bushes and looking around. “And we have to get it back.”

Then: “Ah yes, I can see footsteps and a long furrow where he must have been dragged.”

Janus had followed them back up the path. “It looked like a Dark Guardian to me,” he suggested.

“More Ghoul, I would say, than Dark Guardian,” she replied.

“I barely caught sight of the creature,” Alex told her. “But that was enough to stop me dead in my tracks. It was an almost primeval sort of fear.”

Maya nodded. “That sounds like a Ghoul to me. Or Shadow.”

“Is Shadow that bad?” He asked.

“Well, it varies from person to person, depending on their development, but let’s put it this way: most people stay the hell away from Shadow – all the dark things we’ve rejected and buried deep inside us, and including some of our good qualities – or from Collective Shadows, and with very good reason. Unthinking idiots say that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, but when Shadow is scorned, believe me, it – and its almighty wrath – can grow to monstrous proportions. That’s the bad news. The good news is that the Psyche is bigger and, through brave acknowledgment and patient negotiation, over time it can integrate more and more of the Shadow.”

“So,” Alex said at length, as Maya returned from exploring the bushes. “Where do we go from here?”

“Well, first of all I think we should go and see Jake, though I’m not sure how much sense we’ll get out of him,” she replied, “and then we may need to come back here, to see if we can pick up the scent.”

Alex sighed. “He’s at Professor Trelawney’s, twenty miles’ drive away ...”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Maya laughed. “Where does she

live?”

“In a village. Hebden something, I think.”

Maya pulled an object out of her shoulder bag. It was a hand-held device like the one Janus frequently consulted.

“Hebden Wyke?”

“Sure,” he nodded.

“Then follow me,” Maya replied, grabbing his arm and tugging him up the winding path, still looking intently at the device.

As they passed through the wrought-iron gates of Clement Gardens, and emerged onto Woodend Crescent, their surroundings changed abruptly. It was like walking through an invisible veil.

As they emerged from under an old stone archway by the side of the country lane, they both looked around and Alex whistled “Well, I don’t know how you did that but, yes, this is the professor’s village.” He looked left and right. “I think her cottage is up here to the right.”

Well, it was a fifty-fifty shot, and they headed off up the hill.

A couple of minutes later, as they rounded a bend in the narrow lane, Alex caught sight of the white walled cottage, set back from the road, with a large garden at the front, and pointed it out. “Yes, there it is.”

Alex was about to ring the front doorbell, but Maya went straight in. “No point in ringing the bell,” she informed him. “You’d wait here ’til doomsday before they’d answer it.”

“How come?” he wanted to know, ringing the doorbell loudly in any case, and heading in after her.

“Because they won’t hear it. They’re in Level 6 and we’re still in Level 5, remember?”

Professor Trelawney was there, sitting in one armchair beside the hearth; Jake sat opposite her in a second armchair, looking as bombed-out as ever; and Stefan was sitting on the settee further back in the room, watching the professor attempting to engage Jake in conversation. Maya and Alex walked straight into the living room, making no attempt to conceal themselves, but the three occupants were utterly oblivious to their presence.

Moments later, Maya caught hold of Alex's arm and pulled him out of the room and back outside.

"But what was the point of that?" Alex wanted to know.

"Just a little demonstration for your benefit, Alex."

"How can you get any useful information from them if we're in two different worlds, as it were, and can't communicate with them?"

"Two reasons, Alex. I wanted to show you proof that you really are in a different level to that of the everyday world. And I also wanted to confirm for my own benefit Jake's condition."

She led Alex back down the garden path and out through the twisted wooden gate. Then, after tapping away at her hand-held device, she pushed Alex back through the gate. For a couple of moments, as he passed through the gateway, Maya disappeared from sight, and in the next instant there she was again, standing beside him and pushing him back up the garden path.

"Okay, this time, ring the bell," Maya requested. Within moments, Stefan appeared and, seeing who it was, he greeted them warmly and invited them inside.

"Sheila's finished talking with Jake for now, so we won't be disturbing them," the man advised them, as they hesitated on the threshold into the living room.

"Ah! Alex. And you must be Maya. It's good to see you both, albeit under difficult circumstances. Do come in and sit yourselves down on the settee and I'll go make a fresh pot of tea. Or coffee, if you prefer."

They both agreed on tea, and with that the professor excused herself and headed for the kitchen.

When Professor Trelawney had returned, they waited until their tea had been poured and they were settled, then Maya asked her how Jake was, and whether he'd said anything useful. Anything that might give away the whereabouts of his subtle body.

According to the professor, he was more aware of his surroundings now, though still only semi-conscious. He was full of largely incoherent conspiracy theories, and scared out of his wits, so she'd prescribed an anti-psychotic that also had sedative

properties. That had at least calmed him. Stefan had kindly fetched the prescription from town and was staying with them for the next few days.

In case there's any possibility of violence, Stefan whispered in Alex's ear.

"One thing he does keep repeating – with as much insistence as he can muster, I would say – is,

You'll have to scavenge if you want to find me.

Maya put her cup and saucer down on the occasional table and went over to kneel by Jake's feet.

"What do you mean, we'll have to scavenge if we want to find you, Jake?

At this, Jake's eyes flashed wildly, and he cast furtive glances around the room.

"Shush!" he whispered, raising his finger, as if to put it to his lips, but not quite coordinated enough to reach the target.

"Why 'shush!'" Maya whispered.

"Walls have ears," he slurred.

"You mean, you can't tell us directly, because someone bad might hear?"

Again, Jake cast his eyes around the room, without moving his head, and he nodded almost imperceptibly.

"So you're talking in code? In riddles?"

He blinked, slowly and deliberately, three times.

"Tell me if I'm getting warmer, Jake. We're scavenging."

He blinked.

"Who scavenges?" she asked, turning to the others.

"Poor people looking through bins and skips?" Stefan shrugged.

"Animals? Like coyotes?" Alex offered.

"Children?" suggested Professor Trelawney.

Jake's face showed the slightest trace of a smile.

"I think we're getting warmer," Maya noted.

"It's a scavenger hunt!" the professor exclaimed.

Jake's eyes lit up for a moment.

“A treasure hunt, and you’re providing clues,” Maya smiled.

Jake blinked three times.

Maya gently patted Jake’s hand. “Excellent,” she replied. “Then let’s have the first clue.”

“One moment.” Professor Trelawney flipped through her handwritten notes. “I didn’t understand this at the time, but now it’s beginning to make sense:

Has to be broken before it can be used.

“Any takers?” she asked, scanning the room, and being met by blank faces.

“An egg!” she laughed triumphantly.

Again, Jake’s eyes lit up momentarily.

“Okay, Jake,” said Maya, gently squeezing his hand. “We’re with you now. Give us a real clue.”

Jake pushed himself up in his chair, more alert and coherent than he had been all day.

Come up and let us go; go down and here we stay.

They ummed and ahed over that one for more than five minutes until Maya finally got it. “An anchor,” she whispered in Jake’s ear.

“There’s only one place in this landlocked town with an anchor,” Stefan told them, “and that’s the Hope and Anchor, a public house on Queen Street.”

“So, what do we do now?” Alex wanted to know.

“What else can we do?” Maya replied. “We go there and, as they say, we’ll see what we see when we see it.”

“In other words, we wing it,” he smiled.

“We’ll go,” Maya volunteered.

“I’m willing to drive,” Stefan offered.

“No, it’s okay, we left my car up the road,” Maya lied. “And we’ll stay in touch via the app.”

Maya and Alex grabbed their jackets, said fond adieus to the

others, not least to Jake, and hurried out of the cottage and down the garden path.

Maya wondered whether to dash all the way down the hill to the old stone archway or use the gate at the bottom of the front garden. In the end, haste won out and as they passed through the crooked, little wooden gate, they instantly appeared in town, on Queen Street, right under the archway leading into the quadrangle at the Hope and Anchor.

Professor Trelawney was looking out over the garden from the living room window as the pair vanished into thin air, and after the initial surprise, that gave her much pause for thought.

30.

After they reappeared in the archway, Alex and Maya went round the front of the old granite building in search of the anchor. What better place to begin their search?

They found it there, an ancient anchor painted in thick silver-grey enamel paint to deter the rust, with its stout chain securely fastened to the stone wall, not that this was strictly necessary, given the sheer mass of the anchor. It would have taken six strong and sober men to carry it away.

They checked the anchor and the two long planters fashioned out of old horse troughs that sat to either side, but there was no fresh clue, and having exhausted their search outside, they ventured inside the public house.

They passed through the hallway and entered the bar, and Maya very kindly ordered them two brandies. She told the bar steward that they were on a treasure hunt with some friends, and asked if anyone had left a clue leading to the next location.

The barman shrugged. "Sorry, can't help you there, miss," he replied, leaving them feeling somewhat deflated, so they finished their drinks in sullen silence.

As they were leaving, however, the barman came up to them. "I've had a thought," he offered. "Have a look on the public noticeboard in the hallway on the way out. You never know, there might be something pinned up there."

They thanked the man, not daring to get their hopes up on the strength of a "might be", and after Alex had pointed Percy at porcelain,⁸⁵ they left the bar.

Alex quickly scanned the posters and cards pinned to the cork pinboard, but nothing caught his eye, which left him feeling even more glum, but Maya worked methodically through the notices from top to bottom and left to right, and all of a sudden she let out a muted "whoopee!" and tapped her finger on a small card that had been obscured by the later addition of a poster.

⁸⁵ Visited the gents' lavatory.

“Oh, ye of little faith!” she reiterated, pulling the card free and reading it out aloud:

Stiff is my spine and my body is pale, but I’m always ready to tell a tale.

Alex got the answer to that almost instantly, yet Maya got there first.

“A book!” she exclaimed.

“In a bookshop maybe,” he suggested. “But that narrows it down to several thousand volumes.”

Then Maya added: “But there’s more.”

Alex was busily typing away in the app, to bring Professor Trelawney and Stefan up to speed.

My life can be measured in hours, I serve by being devoured. Thin, I am quick, Fat, I am slow, Wind is my foe.

“And here’s the third and final part:

All animals are equal but some are more equal than others.

“Hallelujah! Maya exclaimed. I know that one, but let’s give the others a chance.”

“Okay, now we have something to go on. But I’m already way behind with the one-finger typing. Hold the card up and I’ll send them an image instead. Hopefully someone there can point us in the direction of the right bookshop.”

Five minutes later, a message came back from Professor Trelawney.

“Try The Book and Candle, a second-hand bookshop down an alley near Boots chemist, off Station Road. And the book you’re looking for is *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, as I’m sure you’ve already deduced.”

It wasn't that far to Station Road so, rather than risk attracting attention, they walked.

Once inside, they located the fiction section and quickly worked their way along the shelves until they came to "O" for Orwell and then "A" for *Animal Farm*.

Maya picked up the book and turned to the bookmarked page. Nothing. So she riffled through the pages looking to see if a card had been inserted into the book. Finally, she handed the book to Alex to let him have a look.

Alex flipped through the book and thoroughly examined both sides of the bookmark, again to no avail. Just as he was about to give up, however, as he turned the book this way and that, he noticed something written in pencil across the bottom edge of the pages with the book closed.

Phew! That was a relief.

Maya took the book, then fished in her shoulder bag for her purse, and took the book to the counter to pay for it. That was the least they could do.

"No, thank you, I don't need a bag," she assured the lady at the till.

Once they were outside the shop, Alex had Maya hold up the book and took a quick snap of the bottom edge of the book, and sent the image to the others. Only then did they have a look at this next clue.

You'll find me in the building that has the most stories, in the place where today comes before yesterday.

"Hmm, that's a tricky one," Alex pondered, and he went over to sit on a nearby bench to think.

31.

Moments later, Alex and Maya's phones pinged, and Alex checked the app. The major and Deirdre had joined the conversation now. The more the better.

"The building that has the most stories?" posed the major. "That's got to be the town library."

"We'll start walking," Maya tapped in, and grabbing Alex's hand, they headed up town.

But "the place where today comes before yesterday?" That had them all perplexed.

Then Deirdre chimed in: "It's not the time, it's the words themselves," she informed them.

There was a pause and a row of little, moving dots to let them know that someone was typing.

"Where does 'T' come before 'Y'?"

"In a dictionary!" Maya and Alex exclaimed in unison, and Deirdre confirmed this in her next message.

Just moments later, Alex pulled the heavy oak door open. Being a gentleman, he stepped out of the way to let Maya enter.

"No, after you," she insisted.

They scouted round the library and, having found the reference section, Maya called him over.

There ahead of them lay a row of dictionaries and encyclopedias. Cambridge, Collins, Macmillan, Oxford English; and several bilingual dictionaries ... they were spoilt for choice.

Alex grabbed the leftmost book and Maya grabbed the next in line, and they checked for any obvious bookmarks or notes.

"Better check for 'today' and 'yesterday', Maya suggested when they'd been through the row and found nothing, so they started back at the leftmost book and flipped through the pages.

Maya let out a little yelp. She had the English-French dictionary open to a page, and she waved it in front of Alex's face. "Aujourd'hui," she informed him, and he remembered from his abortive secondary school lessons with Mademoiselle Fletcher

that it was French for “today”.

Tucked away, further down the page, was a little slip of paper, not thick enough to have registered when they’d been checking for bookmarks.

Maya held the book out and Alex took a quick photo, attached it to a message and sent it to the group.

O, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive!

“Sounds Shakespearian,” Professor Trelawney responded almost immediately. “But it’s not: it’s Sir Walter Scott.”

“Google reliably informs me that it’s from his poem, ‘Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field’,” the major added, after a long period of silence.

“Well, that doesn’t tell us very much at all,” Alex sighed. “We’re surely not meant to pore over an epic poem.”

“Spiders weave webs,” Maya noted.

“And webs are traps for the unwary,” Alex added. Then: “There’s something amiss here.”

“How do you mean?”

Alex took the book from Maya and returned it to the shelf. A cold shiver ran through him. “I don’t know,” he replied, “but I just had the most awful feeling.”

It was just like that ominous moment of *déjà vu*⁸⁶ in *The Matrix*, just before trouble arrives and all hell breaks loose.

Almost in that same instant, Alex sensed a hideous black presence behind him. He half-turned and attempted to step away, but a cold hand, blacker than ebony, clamped down hard on his shoulder. With immense strength that he could not resist, nor even think of resisting, the creature began to drag him to the left, along the reference section, toward an open doorway into the next section of the library.

He forced his head around and briefly saw another of the creatures – a sight that terrified him out of his wits – lunging for Maya. But she deftly sidestepped and – just as Alex began to

⁸⁶ The eerie experience of thinking that a new situation had occurred before.

black out – she disappeared from view, leaving the other creature grasping nothing but air.

32.

When Alex finally began to come round, he opened his eyes and listened carefully. He was in a dark room, laid out on a cold, hard, stone floor. Hesitantly, he raised his head and peered around.

To his right, there was a heavy, studded door, and a small barred grill at about head height. To his left, a small barred window, high up on one wall let in a solitary shaft of light that shone down on the flagstones near the centre of the spartan cell.

And under the barred window, on a thin mattress, lay a huddled figure, visibly shivering from the cold.

Sensing immediately that this must be Jake, Alex pushed himself up and, his legs feeling unusually weak, he half staggered and half crawled over to the prone figure.

He reached out and touched the man's shoulder, and struggled to turn him over. It *was* Jake.

"Jake," he spoke gently and quietly, not wanting to alarm him. "It's me, Alex. You remember me from the Silver Circle?"

Jake grunted, though whether that was a 'yes' or a 'no' or just a delirious grunt, Alex couldn't tell.

"It's me – Alex – and I came here with Maya to set you free."

Jake was stirring now and, with a great effort and what help Alex himself could muster, he pushed himself up and leant against the stone wall behind him.

"Alex," the man muttered.

Jake nodded his head to the left and Alex followed his gaze. There on the floor was a large pewter jug and an old tin cup. And there was also an old zinc bucket in the corner of the cell, which was presumably there for their "convenience", to put it delicately. He crept over to the jug, poured some of the liquid into the cup and tentatively tasted it. It was water, and though slightly rancid, it was better than nothing.

His own throat quite parched, he took a deep swig of the water, almost immediately regretting this, since the water really did have a rancid taste. Still, he refilled the cup and passed it to

Jake, who downed the water in several rapid gulps and asked for more.

Jake peered around the cell. "Where's Maya? Didn't you say she was here, too?" he said at length.

Alex shrugged. "I really don't know. Perhaps she got away, perhaps they have her in another cell ... I just don't know."

"You damn fool," Jake retorted, with a vigorous shake of his head. "There's no way out of here. I've tried. Not for me, not for you, not for Maya."

Jake paused and leant forward, closer to him. "Not even for the vile creatures who run this joint."

Alex looked Jake in the eye. "These ... creatures. What *do* they want with us?" he asked, under his breath.

"Oh, they'll let you know, soon enough," Jake replied cryptically, and he pushed himself back, to again lean against the wall. "It's almost time for them to do their rounds. Maybe they'll take you this time, and not me, since you're a new arrival."

Then: "So, don't go wishing your time away, not knowing. Enjoy what peace you can, while it lasts. They say 'ignorance is bliss' – and they're right, you know."

Just then, Alex heard the dull, metallic rasp as a bolt was withdrawn. He leapt to his feet as the door swung open.

A short and stocky man, dressed in rags, entered and pointed to Alex's chest. "You. Follow me."

Alex was poised ready to leap forward and bowl the man off his feet, but even as the thought was forming in his mind and he took his first step, he tripped and fell headlong onto the cold, stone floor, banging his elbow and sending pins and needles shooting up his arm.

The ragged man just stood there, hands on hips, and looked at him with a mixture of perverse pleasure and disdain. "There's an easy way to do this, and a hard way, fellah. So make your choice. It's no skin off my nose, either way."

Alex got to his feet, stepped outside, and obediently waited for the man as he re-bolted the cell door, then followed him down a narrow corridor to the left.

The gaoler stopped at an open door on one side of the passage

and waved his hand. “In you go.”

Alex stood hesitantly in the doorway for a moment and then the man gave him a push to make his mind up for him, and closed the door firmly behind him.

Alex looked around. At the far end of the bare room, another man, dressed in a long white lab coat, got up from a chair behind a desk, came round the side and approached Alex. Alex had already noted the fact that a second chair at this side of the desk, and the desk itself, were securely bolted down to the bare stone floor.

The man consulted a clipboard that suddenly appeared in his hand.

“Alex Robert Knowles, I see. And how are you feeling today, Mister Knowles?”

Alex stood there, determined to ignore the man’s question, to blank him, but as he stood there, he felt strangely compelled to speak.

“I’ve had better days,” he blurted out, in spite of his earlier resolve.

“As one of my minions has already intimated, I gather, there’s an easy way to do this, and a hard way. So, again, Mister Knowles, make your choice.”

Then: “Do take a seat.”

Alex found himself compelled to shuffle across the room and sit down in front of the desk, and the man went to sit opposite him.

“Who are you?” Alex wanted to know.

“You can call me Harpocrates⁸⁷ for now. Or Harpo, if you really must, though my namesake Harpo Marx has much more of a sense of humour than I do. Who I am, or what I am will become clear in due course.”

The man straightened himself up in his chair and peered deeply into Alex’s eyes.

“Let me take you back in time, Mister Knowles.”

⁸⁷ Named after the Hellenistic god of silence, secrets and confidentiality; Horus.

In that instant, the bare room around him disappeared, and Alex found himself standing in the playground at his old infants school. Not more than six feet away stood a young boy with a distinctive and old-fashioned quiff and large front teeth, and he instantly recognised a much earlier version of himself. There he was in his short pants, grey socks and scuffed black shoes, and the brown and white woollen patterned jumper that his mother had lovingly knit for him. He couldn't have been older than five or six.

And yet here he was, standing beside Harpo, now twenty years of age.

Another child ran up to little Alex and pushed him so hard that he fell down on his knees.

Then a young girl stepped forward. "Don't let Dowey do that to you. Stand up to him," she yelled.

But no, little Alex got to his feet and began to walk away, and Dowey came after him and gave him a good push in the back. Little Alex staggered forward, but fortunately he didn't go sprawling this time.

Again, the girl implored him to stand up for himself, yet little Alex just walked sulkily away. You could tell that he was mad as hell, though, and seething with anger inside.

Alex stepped forward and tried to grab hold of Dowey by the collar, but his hand went straight through the boy, and the boy appeared oblivious to his presence. He went round in front of Dowey and waved his fist in the boy's face, and again there was no reaction.

Alex turned to Harpo in alarm. "They don't see me. Is there nothing we can do?"

Harpo turned around. "Wimp!" he yelled, and he pushed Alex hard in the chest, so that he was forced to take a step back.

"You fucking pussy!" Again, Harpo thumped him, and again he was pushed back.

"Stop it!" Alex yelled back and, without thinking, he blurted out, "I'll tell teacher."

"Tell-tale tit!"

Suddenly, he had that old schoolyard rhyme ringing in his

ears:

Tell-tale tit!
Your tongue shall be slit,
And all the dogs in the town
Shall have a little bit.

Over and over and over the words went on, and all this time Alex was getting more and more angry.

Again, Harpo pushed him. So hard this time, that he went sprawling on his back and hurt his butt.

Alex sprang to his feet, his hands making tight fists. "Do that again, and you'll get what's coming for you," he spat.

Harpo laughed out loud. "Oh, yeah? You and whose army?"

"I said do that again, and you'll get what's coming for you," he reasserted.

He aimed a swing at Harpo, caught him on the nose, and the man staggered back, clutching his face. So angry was he that he hit the man again and again – in the arms and the stomach, the chest and the face.

"Stop!" Harpo shouted, and Alex instantly found himself back in the room with the man in the white lab coat, sitting opposite one-another at the desk.

"And how do you feel now, Mister Knowles?" the man enquired.

Alex still had his fists raised, seething with anger, which pretty much answered that question.

His mind flashed back to the scene in John Carpenter's film, *They Live* where Nada (played by Roddy Piper) struts into the bank, heavily armed, having become aware of the aliens' presence and true nature. He stands there and calls out threateningly: "I'm here to kick ass and chew bubblegum ... and I'm all out of bubblegum."

"That wasn't a momentary reaction, you know, Mister Knowles. That was year-upon-year of repressed anger."

"It's more than that," Alex replied.

Harpo nodded. "Mixed-in, I would imagine, with year-upon-

year of self-loathing, though little Alex – the wimpy kid and tell-tale tit – got buried quite early in your life. You may have stopped noticing, but of course others still saw you as a st-st-stuttering, wimpy kid. And that added yet more layers to your protective armour.

“Instead of becoming more assertive, instead you became aggressive. Though, after taking your revenge by pulling off your assailants school caps and throwing them in puddles in the playground – for which you were severely punished and further humiliated – you learnt to bury your aggression, and instead became reserved and deceitful.”

Harpo paused as Alex attempted to assimilate this recent re-enactment and the man’s expert assessment.

“And what happened later in your youth?”

Again, the scene changed and he found himself seated at a small desk in the middle of a classroom. And there was his arch nemesis, Mister Pratt. “Pratt by name and pratt by nature”, as the students disdainfully referred to this disciplinarian.

Alex drifted off and he was looking out of the classroom window, idly daydreaming.

“Mister Knowles,” the man called out, slamming his blackboard eraser down on the master’s desk before him.

Alex nearly jumped out of his skin and jerked his head round to face the front of the class.

Pratt had done that before, breaking his heavy pointing stick on the edge of his desk. And on another occasion, he’d banged Alex’s head so hard with a textbook held in his hand that he’d cracked the spine. The spine of the book, that was, though it could have resulted in serious injury. Jonesy, the peculiar urchin who sat beside him, had been adamant that Alex report the assault to the headmaster, but Alex was keen not to get further into Mister Pratt’s bad books.

“If we could have a moment of your precious time, Mister Knowles,” Mister Pratt continued, “perhaps you would care to tell us what happens when you mix acid and alkali liquids?”

“A neutralization reaction takes place, and they produce a salt and water, sir,” Alex answered spontaneously.

Mister Pratt pursed his lips. He wasn't through. "And?"

Alex shrugged. "And heat is released, sir."

"In other words?"

"It's an exothermic reaction, sir."

Mister Pratt had to accept the answer, and consider the fact that perhaps youthful Alex really had been paying attention, after all, but he was not a happy man, and he still gave youthful Alex lines. He had to write out "I must pay attention in class" one hundred times and hand the lines in first thing the next day. And woe betide him if he'd over-counted. Pratt was a stickler for precision.

He remembered prefects' detention,⁸⁸ too, after being caught smoking behind the draft block, and having to write about "101 uses for a building brick".

"But that's not all, is it?" Harpo said to Alex, as he found himself back in the bare room.

Alex shook his head and averted his gaze. He reimagined the scene. All around him, everywhere he went in the school, pupils has started calling him names. In infants school it had been "Specky Four Eyes" after he'd been seen for the first and only time wearing his round-rimmed glasses, so that he could focus on the blackboard. John Lennon and, much later, Harry Potter could get away with such things, but not little "Specky Four Eyes".

He sighed deeply, too, remembering the time he'd wet himself in the middle of assembly, since he was too timid to stand up, speak to a teacher, and ask to go to the toilet. Little Mister "Pissy Pants". God, that was so embarrassing. And before that, perhaps the root lay in his medical (not religious) circumcision? Certainly, that's one reason that from the earliest age he would far sooner use a cubicle than a public urinal.

Right now, though, everywhere he went pupils were calling him "Mister Know-All", a cruel play on his real name.

Harpo addressed him on the subject. "You have to consider, though, that at that age you really were something of a 'know all' or 'know it all', Mister Knowles."

⁸⁸ A punishment in which a student must stay at school after others have gone home.

“I tried to play dumb for a while, but that just got me into more trouble,” Alex sighed.

“I guess I was just trying to compensate. I was looking for respect and acceptance. If not from my peers, then from adults.”

“Just another variation on ‘Teacher’s Pet’,” Harpo suggested.

Then: “And again, it all added to your persona – the false self that we present to the world, at the expense of our real self.

“Yes sir; no sir; three bags full, sir!” the man mocked him.⁸⁹

Was he a black sheep? He cast his mind back to the time an elderly aunt of his had unexpectedly referred to him as a “dark horse”, but never had found out what she had meant by that.

“Why are you showing me these experiences? Why are you telling me these things?” he asked, peering back into Harpo’s eyes. “Why have you brought me here, and brought Jake here? Are you working for the Opposition? Or are you an unwitting Dupe of Klingsor? And what have you done with Maya? She’s a fine, upstanding, and outstanding young woman; a scientist with our best interests at heart. And Jake’s a talented artist in need of inspiration. I very much doubt that either of them would harm a fly ...”

“They need not concern us just now, Mister Knowles. It’s you I’m interested in.

“To continue: on the outside, you bent over backwards to please other people, in the hope that they would appreciate and accept you, but on the inside, buried deep down, you were full of simmering inferiority, and resentment, and anger, and guilt, and shame.

“Does that picture remind you of something?”

Alex looked around the room, but the walls were bare.

“No, no. I mean the mental picture I have just presented.”

“Hell?” That was the first thing that sprung to mind. A fiery inferno.

“Hell,” he repeated, with conviction.

“Hell, indeed,” Harpo nodded. “If not for you, living your superficial, surface life, then for all of us in the depths, these parts of yourself that you buried and repressed.”

⁸⁹ A reference to the nursery rhyme, “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep”.

Alex was reminded of a quote by Joseph Campbell that he'd read only recently, but which had had no impact at the time. Now it made more sense:

Hell is the concretization of your life experiences, a place where you're stuck, the wasteland. In hell, you are so bound to yourself that grace cannot enter.

A wave of adrenalin coursed through Alex's veins and, had he not been sitting down just then, but standing, he would have been staggering and reaching out for something solid to cling onto.

"Not only the atrocious parts of yourself – your Shadow – but also many wonderful abandoned endowments – your Golden Shadow. A treasure trove in a cesspit, you might say."

A second wave of adrenalin swamped him in that moment of truth, when all the "ifs" and "buts" and "maybes" and other pathetic excuses collapsed around him like a teetering house of cards; a house built on sand; a folly; a phantasmagoria.⁹⁰

"You're trying to break me, aren't you!" he cried out, clutching the edge of the desk before him, fit to bust a blood vessel. "That's what you people do! That's how you get your kicks!"

And yet ... He tried to calm his rage.

Possessiveness, lust, betrayal, cruelty, neurosis ... All the little, once-isolated dots in your life had joined up and formed a coherent pattern – well, a whole network of meaningful, living relationships and patterns. Not one gestalt, but many. The one containing the many; the many being the one. Like fractals or holograms or Indra's net. Yet not static, not fixed in time and space, but living and moving. Forming and joining; dissolving and re-forming.

He could see it all now, as clearly as other people could no doubt see the nose on his face. Just like Pinocchio! He was – and deserved to be – amongst the lowest of the low, and to hold himself – and be held – in contempt. Some of these other people knew, too, yet still offered their help, as you might offer help and

⁹⁰ A constantly changing medley of real or imagined images (as in a dream).

brotherly or sisterly love to someone who was in need or ill. That concern and commitment was far more than he deserved.

“Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!” the cry flooded his head, each call emphasised by the noisy “bang!” of a heavy wooden gavel on its block.

Harpo’s voice broke through the internal cacophony. “We’re all in the same boat, Mister Knowles. We’re all in the same boat.”

The words of the last clue came back to him now:

O, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive!

It struck him forcefully that this clue might have been written especially with him in mind.

More words came to him now, but from whence they came, he knew not:

“Sister, let thy sorrows cease;
Sinful brother, part in peace!”
From that dire dungeon, place of doom,
Of execution too, and tomb,
Paced forth the judges three;
Sorrow it were, and shame, to tell
The butcher-work that there befell,
When they had glided from the cell
Of sin and misery.⁹¹

“I am the Opposition. I am the root of all evil.”

There – he’d said it, and let the cat out of the bag. The worms out of the can. Like some latter-day Pandora foolishly releasing all the evils of humanity.

“I’m sorry,” he replied silently. “I’m so sorry. I’m truly sorry, from the bottom of my heart. Thank you so much for forgiving me, as I forgive myself.”

“Try to rest now, Mister Knowles, and rather than torturing yourself with disapproval, shaming, and rejection, think instead

⁹¹ Sir Walter Scott, “Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field”.

of understanding, compassion, and self-forgiveness.”

His head swimming, Alex slumped forward across the desk, and the next thing he knew, he was waking up, and found himself back in the cold, dark cell with Jake sitting there against the wall with his knees pulled up and his hands wrapped round his shins.

Alex got to his feet, then staggered and sat back down again. Only then did he notice that they’d provided one minor comfort: a thin mattress over in another corner of the cell. So he crawled over there, lay down, shut his eyes – brim full and overflowing with nausea, guilt, and remorse – and tried not to think too much of what Harpo had led him through that day.

“Remember Émile Coué de la Châtaigneraie’s mantra,” Jake called across the spartan cell: “Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better.”

Alex repeated the autosuggestion over and over again, until thankfully he slipped into a light sleep, taking him away from the cares of the world for a time at least.

33.

Some time later, after Alex had awoken to find Jake gone from the cell, the gaoler in the rags came with some welcome food, albeit only a roughly cut wad of bread and a hunk of yellow and slightly mouldy cheese.

A few minutes after this, the man returned with Jake and the lad immediately dragged his thin mattress to his corner of the cell and curled up in a ball facing the wall, without any indication that he'd seen Alex, nor even a word, polite or otherwise.

"Up!" the gaoler commanded him, and Alex found that he could do nothing but comply. He couldn't even resist momentarily.

He stumbled out of the cell and waited until the guard had firmly re-bolted the cell door, then followed him down the passageway to the left, until they came to the door.

Only now did he notice that the room was numbered 101. Clearly someone here had a wicked sense of humour, and knew a thing or two about the subconscious and foreshadowing. He remembered the quote now:

"You asked me once," said O'Brien, "what was in Room 101. I told you that you knew the answer already. Everyone knows it. The thing that is in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world."⁹²

Strange that he hadn't noticed any numbers on the doors until that point.

It was the same bare room again – he could see the same ominous brown stain on the floor near the spot where his seat had been – but for some unknown reason, the desk and chairs had been removed. And not only that, there were no holes in the floor where this scant furniture had been bolted down. He wondered if

⁹² George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

this was all part of some “mind fuck game”⁹³ that they were playing with him.

He didn’t even have to look around to notice that the guy in the white lab coat with the clipboard, Harpocrates, wasn’t in the room with him. He was alone, and with a thud the door was closed, and locked, behind him.

Well, he was for a moment, but when he happened to blink, there was Harpo standing right in front of him.

“What do you want now?” he sighed with a hint of insolence. “You gonna tell me that my grandmother bit me in the womb or something?”⁹⁴

Harpo was not amused. “Have you learnt nothing, Mister Knowles?” he snapped, with a flick of his wrist.

It all came flooding back to Alex, and a wave of adrenalin immediately pumped through his system. Feeling unsteady on his feet, he sat down cross-legged on the stone floor, cupped his head in his hands and compulsively drew deep breaths, which he could not slow, and hoping that he wouldn’t hyperventilate.

“Okay, okay,” he groaned. “I get the message.”

The self-persecutory thoughts began to dissipate, and with them the adrenaline shock.

As his mind cleared, the features of the room began to dissolve before his eyes and he found himself wandering down a narrow track in a huge, hot cavern. Looking down, to the left, he saw a deep chasm with what looked like molten lava steaming forth and bubbling way down below, and he realised that he must be on a narrow ledge. Overcome by vertigo, he staggered away from the edge and hugged the warm stone wall.

Harpo was beside him now, and he grabbed hold of Alex by the arm, partly to keep him moving and partly, perhaps, to ease his concerns. If nothing else, Alex understood that he was in safe hands. Was this a sign of Stockholm syndrome?⁹⁵

None too soon, the ledge broadened out and they came to a large cavern, thankfully well away from the yawning chasm.

⁹³ A phrase used by the father of Gestalt therapy, Fritz Perls.

⁹⁴ Idries Shah, *A Perfumed Scorpion*, facetiously referring to Freudians.

⁹⁵ A condition in which hostages develop a psychological bond with their captors.

All around them now, he could see figures wearily wandering back and forth – men, women and children – some with hunched backs; some on crutches; others hobbling; some sitting on the ground swaying this way and that like under-stimulated and traumatised animals trapped in an enclosure at a zoo. A human zoo.

Alex stopped in his tracks and looked around at the pitiful people – he nearly referred to them as “creatures” and, to be honest, he wouldn’t have been far wrong.

“This surely can’t be my Shadow,” he said agitatedly, grabbing hold of Harpo’s arm. “Not all of this.”

Harpo shook himself loose and guided Alex off across the cavern. “These belong to the Collective Shadow,” the man explained. “All that groups and society has rejected, cast side, buried, and repressed.”

“Why are you showing me this?” he wanted to know.

“Because you need to see the scale of the problem faced in the modern world,” Harpo replied, “and to also realise that others have their difficulties with Shadow. So that the weight of this knowledge is better understood and more bearable. Each of us has contributed to this pitiful situation, and each of us must work within our own limited capacity and sphere to rectify the situation, to the best of our abilities.”

Alex cast his arms around. “How the hell do you even begin to rectify this?”

Harpo took his arm and hastened him on. After consulting his clipboard, he left the large cavern and led Alex through a warren of narrow passageways until they came to a small chamber, just off to the left of the passageway.

“Where are we now?” he asked Harpo.

Harpo clapped his hand on Alex’s shoulder and motioned to the occupants of the small cave. “These people here – they are all a part of your Personal Shadow.”

Alex sat down on a flat rock nearby and – with much trepidation – tried to take in the scene.

Over in one corner were a young boy and girl playing with an Action Man figure. Well, at least they had found a distraction

from the hellish nature of their environment.

“Who’s that?” he asked, pointing to the pair.

“The boy? That’s one of your early ‘prototype’ personalities.”

“I remember playing with Action Man figures as a child. Well, all I could afford was a cheap substitute that was made in Hong Kong. My father didn’t like it, though. Even though the figures were dressed for war, he still thought it was too much like girls playing with dolls. So that interest didn’t last long.”

“That interest didn’t last long?” Harpo parroted. “You can see for yourself that that aspect of yourself has been banished to these nether regions and lives on.”

Alex cast his eyes down. “But, I had no idea. How was I to know that’s what happens? All I thought was, you throw your old toy in the trash and that’s it – end of story. I didn’t know that aspects of your personality had a life of their own. That there were more characters in your inner life than the front man, the spokesperson, the ego.”

“Well, now you do know,” Harpo noted.

“And the girl?” Alex queried.

“That’s an early prototype of your feminine nature, it’s linked to your *anima*, but it’s a facet, perhaps a distortion, of the *anima*. And again, it’s something your father discouraged; something the whole culture discouraged at that point in time. But – and this is a big BUT – you can’t go projecting blame on your mother and father, or even your culture, for this. At this point in time, it is you – and you alone – who bear the responsibility for setting things straight in your own psyche.”

“So, what should I do?” Alex asked.

“Shadow abhors being ignored or scorned. You talk to them. You show them positive regard; unconditional love, if you prefer that term. They find acceptance. Where necessary, you negotiate a mutually-agreeable deal, by which I mean you don’t give them any bullshit, and you don’t accept any bullshit from them. It’s vital that you reach a fair and equitable agreement or, like the Treaty of Versailles, with extortionate reparations, you may end up with another, bloodier war on your hands. And finally, little by little, you integrate these entities into your Self, into your

psyche.”

Alex pointed to another child, a boy, sitting over in one corner of the cave, alone. He kept looking furtively about, and presumably when he thought that nobody was looking, he’d poke around with his finger up his nose, find a juicy bogey, pop his finger in his mouth and eat it.

“But that’s disgusting,” Alex frowned.

Harpo hit him lightly on the arm. “And that is precisely why this unfortunate being has been cast out down here, Mister Knowles. When you did that – and don’t lie to me, you know you did, and the evidence is plain to see – when you did that, your parents reprimanded you, telling you that it was a disgusting habit. And here you are now, telling yourself, through your internalised parents – your superego – that it is, indeed, a disgusting habit. The fact of the matter is that these sorts of habit come from our animalistic past, particularly primates, and may actually confer some sort of evolutionary advantage. Eating bogies, or playing in the dirt, may, for example, benefit one’s immune system.”

Alex shrugged. “But how on earth do I negotiate about that?”

Harpo laughed, for the first time. “That is your problem, not mine, Mister Knowles. But let me give you a clue: it begins with acknowledgement, with positive regard, with unconditional love – if you can manage that – and with plain, old acceptance. Simply being aware is half the battle: it’s amazing how resourceful the unconscious can be, when given something to work on.”

Alex noticed another boy, too, sitting all by himself, and he pointed the child out to Harpo. He was positively glowing, and writing away. Every now and again he’d dip his pen nib in a large pot of ink and write, then stop and scratch his head, before continuing with his writing.

Then all of a sudden, he’d look up sharply, the glow around him would fade, and he’d throw his pen down on the floor and tear his work into tiny pieces.

“And that,” Harpo told him, “is what I referred to earlier as a part of your Golden Shadow.”

That figured. “I can actually remember doing that. I’d been

writing a long story about a girlfriend I once had. In fact I'd spent so long up in my room writing that my father took offence, telling me that I was treating their home like a hotel. So, partly in a bad mood, I tore up every single page of the manuscript, filling half of a black rubbish sack, and tossed it in the bin.

"Mind you, I don't think that what I wrote was much good, in any case," he added.

Harpo nodded. "Well, again you need to avoid projecting blame on your father – which is not to deny that he was partly to blame, as I'm sure you were, too – and you need to avoid telling yourself that your efforts – in this case your writing – are no good. That nonsense gets fed into feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem. There has to be a trade off between being proud and haughty on the one hand and having debilitating or disabling low self-esteem on the other. We're looking for a dynamic golden mean here. Be reasonably proud of yourself and yet not carried away to either extreme.

"And in this case, you have to reclaim your creativity. Buy a book on writing; take a course – but don't get bogged down in the theory or the choice of the right word or phrase or the most apt quotation – just sit down and write. And above all, read others' work, whether it's good or bad. Read, read, and read some more.

"Do that, and you'll find that this little boy's glow will return, and he will join with you in the process. Just listen for his still small voice, and take careful and considerate note of what he has to say."

At this point, Alex noticed a large dark fluid-like sphere floating through the cave, full of what looked like curls of smoke. It reminded him very much of the Obscurus which he'd seen in J. K. Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts* films.

Although repulsed by the object, he stood up and ventured closer, but Harpo pulled him away.

"What's that?" he demanded to know.

"That, Mister Knowles, is a parasitic entity that contains all your repressed anger, resentment, and bitterness."

"And how can I tackle that?"

"Indirectly. If you take a direct approach, you may be

seriously hurt. Or suffer a worse fate. Much worse. The psychic energy involved in containing that entity – or capable of being released from it – is colossal.

“As I intimated just moments ago, you can form a working relationship with sub-personalities such as the young writer, and in doing so, you will find things like resentment, guilt, and shame recede, quite naturally and of their own accord, to a corresponding degree.

“And, if I might advise you, reducing your projections on your father, and showing him positive regard, will greatly benefit you, and him, and those around you.

“There are no instant solutions, no miracle cures, no magical cures, you understand. What you are embarking on is the work of a lifetime. Perhaps even several or numerous lifetimes. So patience and trust are two of the keys; taking personal responsibility is a third; and things like positive regard are, as I mentioned earlier, yet more keys.

“Hell, man. There you have it. I’ve told you about the locks and you have the keys – or if not you can fashion them. What more can you ask of me?”

And with that, Harpo placed his hand on Alex’s shoulder, and when he came around he found himself back in the cold cell with Jake.

34.

Maya sensed the Ghouls' presence a second before they struck. Some basic survival instinct kicked in and one of the Ghouls' sharp finger nails scraped her arm as she involuntarily leapt out of the way. She flipped up a level before she knew what was happening, and disappeared. She could see them, but they couldn't see her.

She spun round to locate Alex, but it was already too late. One of the Ghouls had hold of him and was dragging him down the aisle, and the other had abandoned her and rushed after them. Before she could do anything, they'd passed through a doorway into the next room and vanished from sight.

She dashed over to the doorway and probed it, but the portal had already closed, leaving no trace.

And down there, on the floor in front of the doorway was Alex's corporeal body, laid out on the cork floor tiles, groaning and looking blearily around.

Maya was already on the phone. There was no time to tap messages into the app. Stefan answered almost immediately.

"Stefan, I'm at the town library. We were ambushed and they've taken Alex's subtle body. You need to come and pick us up right away."

"Oh, God," he gasped. "Stay where you are. I'm still at the cottage and too far way, but I'll find somebody to pick you up. I'll try the major. He lives close-by."

Maya managed to manoeuvre Alex into a sitting position and then struggled to get him stood up.

"You have to help me here," she implored him. "You have to help me. I'm not strong enough to pick you up."

Fortunately, Alex was a little more aware than Jake had been, and he staggered to his feet.

One of the librarians had spotted the trouble now and he walked briskly over. "Is he ill?" the man wanted to know. "I'll call an ambulance."

Maya shook her head briskly. “No, he’s just had a minor fit,” she lied to him. “I just need to get him outside into the fresh air. We’ll sit on the steps until he’s back with us again.”

“Are you sure?” the man asked. He wasn’t at all convinced.

“Sure I’m sure. My husband has these little episodes every now and again and he’ll soon be up and on his feet. And I’ve already called a friend to come and pick us up in his car.”

“Well, if you’re sure. Can I help in any way?”

“If you could help me walk him outside.”

“Certainly,” the librarian nodded. He hooked Alex’s free arm over his shoulder and they walked Alex to the entrance and sat him down on the steps.

The librarian insisted on staying with them until finally help arrived. It was the major and, given his age and infirmity, Maya prevailed upon the librarian one last time to help get Alex into the back of the car. And, with many thanks for the assistance, she got in beside Alex and Arnold started the car.

“Where to?” the major wanted to know.

Maya was on the phone again, talking to Stefan.

“Professor Trelawney’s cottage in Hebden Wyke,” she said, and Arnold signalled and pulled away from the curb.

“I know the general direction,” Arnold told her. “But I wouldn’t know how to find the cottage.”

Maya nodded. “Don’t worry, I’ll direct you when we get to the village. I’m pretty sure I can figure out the way.”

Maya pulled out her phone, called Stefan again, and asked to speak to the professor. She asked for the address and postcode, then brought up the Google maps app, tapped in part of the address and picked the cottage from the list of possible matches.

“Got it,” she confirmed.

It was a long ride, and of course the major was full of questions, so she brought him up to speed on the most salient details.

“Good Lord,” he gasped. “Devil of a goings-on.”

Indeed, she thought, gently stroking Alex’s arm to reassure him. And that’s not even the half of it.

35.

As soon as they arrived at the cottage, Stefan spotted the car and went out to help them get Alex inside. Jake was still pretty much out of it, and they'd moved him to the spare bedroom and seated him in an armchair near the window. They were taking it in turns to look after him.

Seeing that they had their hands full with Jake, and with Alex's fresh arrival, the major offered to make tea. "Might as well make myself useful," he said, as he went round the room collecting used plates and cups and saucers.

Professor Trelawney was back in the room now, and once she'd checked Alex over and they were settled, Stefan asked Maya to tell them everything that had gone on.

"Okay," said Maya. "I'd better start back at the beginning, but since time is not on our side, I'll try to be brief," and she went on to recount the more salient details of what she could remember of the treasure hunt.

"It sounds to me that things were all going to plan until you reached the library," Stefan noted. "Then they pounced."

"Then they pounced," Maya nodded. She anticipated his next question. "But whether they got wind of us at the last minute, or it had been leading up to a trap all along, I couldn't say."

"So, where is Alex now? That's the question," Stefan noted.

"I don't know," Maya sighed. "They disappeared through a portal before I could pull myself together and reach them, and the portal snapped shut behind them, leaving no trace."

"Later," she said when the major asked about the portal. There was only so much that she could tell them about such things, and only so much that they'd be willing or able to take in.

"And, as we know, the last clue told us nothing, except in hindsight that our plans had been rumbled," she continued.

"Well, Jake's still pretty much out of it," Stefan told Maya. "So that only leaves Alex. Do you think he could tell us anything?"

Maya shrugged. "Well, we really don't have anything else to go on."

Professor Trelawney went over to sit in the armchair opposite Alex. "Well, Alex looks a little more aware of his surroundings that poor old Jake. I'm willing to give it a go, and to see where it leads. We really have nothing to lose. Well, except for losing hope, and that's a commodity in much demand and short supply right now."

She rose and pulled her armchair closer to Alex's, and when she was again seated, she addressed the lad. "Hello, Alex. I'm Professor Sheila Trelawney. You remember me, don't you? From the Silver Circle."

Alex had turned and lifted his head slightly as she began speaking, and his eyes moved from side to side, following her hand as she slowly waved it to-and-fro in front of her. She lowered her hand and his eyes were clearly fixed on her.

"You're safe here, with friends, Alex," the professor assured him, and she introduced the others, one by one. Alex's eyes did seem to follow her arm as she pointed them out and they stepped forward, greeted him, and waved.

The professor spent some time patiently establishing contact with Alex, as best she could, and establishing trust, then they took a short breather as the major went off to make a fresh pot of tea and Maya helped make a few rounds of sandwiches.

After the break, Professor Trelawney dived in a little deeper, reminding Alex of the treasure hunt, with some prompting from Maya who knew more of the details. And finally the professor broached the issue of the attack and abduction.

Alex must have been aware of what she was saying, and remember at least something of the abduction, because his eyes grew wide and his features contorted in fright. His breathing, too, was noticeably faster and deeper.

For the first time, he spoke. His words were slurred, but they could make out what he was struggling to say. "O, what a tangled web we weave," he mumbled, and the professor completed the couplet:

"When first we practise to deceive!"

Alex nodded his head, and they took that as an indication that he still possessed some awareness and understanding.

A quizzical look appeared on Alex's face. "What's that?" he asked, though they couldn't tell what, or to whom, he was referring.

He turned his head to one side.

"What are you doing right now, Alex?" the professor asked him.

"Shh!" he said.

"Is someone listening-in, Alex?" she queried.

"Shh!" he repeated, and raised his hand to his ear.

The professor nodded, getting the message, and she waited quietly and patiently until Alex spoke again.

"Sister, let thy sorrows cease," he blurted out at length, and the professor scribbled the phrase down in the notepad she had on her knee.

She glanced at Stefan and after checking the professor's wording, he was straight on his phone to see if there were any results for the phrase on Google.

"Can I speak?" he whispered to the professor, and she nodded her assent.

"It's from the same poem by Sir Walter Scott," he told them.

Professor Trelawney borrowed Stefan's phone and read the lines out to Alex, slowly, loudly and clearly.

"Sister, let thy sorrows cease;
Sinful brother, part in peace!"
From that dire dungeon, place of doom,
Of execution too, and tomb,
Paced forth the judges three;
Sorrow it were, and shame, to tell
The butcher-work that there befell,
When they had glided from the cell
Of sin and misery.

She hadn't got past the second line before Alex's eyes lit up. The professor had a sudden thought, and she went with it.

“Are you in a dire dungeon, a cell, Alex?”

Alex nodded as vigorously as he could, given his condition

“So, you’re in a building somewhere that has dungeons or cells?”

He nodded.

“The castle?” Stefan enquired.

Alex shook his head slightly and the professor agreed. “That’s too derelict,” she thought, “and it’s open to the public. There would be no hiding or privacy there.”

“Of course,” Stefan nodded.

“Still, it’s a thought,” the professor noted, “so let’s not discount any possibilities, but keep digging and see what we can unearth or what comes to light.”

Then, to Alex. “Is it an old building?”

“Yes,” Alex slurred.

“And are you there now? Can you describe your surroundings?”

Alex turned his head to one side and cupped his hand to his ear.

Again, the professor went with her gut. “Is someone telling you this?”

Alex nodded, then he lowered his hand, raised it again, and turned his head, as if listening.

Stefan chipped in: “So, you hear voices in your head?”

Alex moved his head vaguely, ambiguously.

The professor decided to continue along that line of questioning. “Are we getting warmer, Alex?”

Again he nodded slightly.

She sucked the end of her ballpoint pen. “Like a muse? A source of inspiration such as that possessed by poets?”

This time, Alex’s nod was more distinct. “Genius,” he slurred.

The professor pressed on. “A genius is a name the Romans used. The Greeks called it a daimon or daemon ...”

“A demon?” blurted out Deirdre who had joined them for the day, and she crossed herself. “Dear Lord, what have we let ourselves in for?”

The professor shook her head vigorously. “No, no. The Christians quite literally demonised the daemon. It’s a tutelary spirit – though it can also be something of a trickster – Christians call it a Guardian Angel. You might say it’s an ally. An inner ally.”

“Yes! Yes!” Alex blurted out, and he again raised his hand to his ear, before letting it drop into his lap.

A thought occurred to the professor. “Alex, is Jake with you now?”

Alex nodded.

“And what more can you tell us about the place you’re in? Where is the dungeon, the cell?”

Alex was staring blankly over her shoulder.

“Is it in town? Is there any point in going through an A to Z, calling out street names until you recognise the name?”

Alex brought his attention back to her, and he shook his head slightly.

Perhaps daemons don’t understand these things in the way we do, the professor thought. Maybe they understand image and metaphor better than cold reason?

“If I gave you paper and crayons, could you draw it?”

They tried that technique, and after perhaps ten minutes of effort, Alex had produced a very crude rendition of the cell. There were two figures in a bare room, sitting on what looked like mats; there was what looked like a jug on the floor; on one wall there was some sort of old, studded doorway; and high in the far wall was a small, barred window. But there was no indication of what lay outside the cell, and no clue as to what kind of building, let alone what particular building, other than that it was old.

The professor pointed to the little barred window in Alex’s sketch and tapped on it repeatedly.

“We need to know what’s through that window,” she told Alex. “We need to know what you can see.”

Alex was silent for a time, and then he picked up one of the crayons, turned the paper over, and drew a red circle with what looked like a question mark in it.

Then he pointed to the professor’s wrist.

She glanced down. “Oh, you’re asking what time it is?”

He nodded.

“It’s near enough one o’clock. One o’clock in the afternoon.”

Alex picked up a green crayon, drew a second circle, to the right of the first, drew a number 2 in it, and then drew an arrow between them, pointing to the 2. And finally, he drew what looked like an image of an eyeball and the little barred window. Again, he drew an arrow, this time from the eyeball to the window.

The professor got his message straight away. “You’re going to see what’s through the window, and you need time. You need an hour.”

“Yes!” Alex responded, dropping the crayon on the occasional table. “Need time.”

36.

Alex got to his feet and tried to reach the bars of the window to look out and perhaps get his bearings, but it was too high to reach, even if he took a running jump.

He went to the studded oak door and rattled it uselessly.

"I told you there's no way out of here," Jake said, getting up voluntarily for the first time that Alex had seen since he first woke up in the cell.

Alex looked again at the window and measured Jake up.

"Whatcha thinking now?" Jake asked.

"I'm thinking that between us we can reach that window."

Jake looked up at the window and tossed his head. "There's no way we could squeeze through that window even if we had something to saw the bars."

"That's not the point," Alex told the man. "All I want to do is get a look out of the window. Maybe I can spot something that would tell us where we are."

Jake scratched his chin. "Well, don't look at me: I don't have the strength to get you up there."

Alex frowned. "No, of course not. But I bet I could get you up there."

"I don't have a head for heights."

"As Maya would remind you: 'Oh, ye of little faith'."

Jake shrugged. "Okay, I'll give it a try. You're going to have to crouch down so I can get on your shoulders, and then you're going to have to power lift me."

"Just try sitting on my shoulders. That may give us sufficient height."

Alex got into position and, with some effort, Jake managed to climb on top of him.

"Ready?"

Jake braced his hands against the wall. "Ready when you are, Chief."

With some effort, Alex managed to get to his feet and lock his

knees. How long he maintain this, however, was anybody's guess.

"Still need to be a couple of feet higher," Jake advised him. "I can reach the bars, but I don't have the strength in my arms to pull myself up."

"Stand on my shoulders, then. Only make it quick, because I'm beginning to flag."

Jake pushed down on Alex's head and levered himself up, bracing himself against the wall so that he didn't topple over.

"What do you see?" Alex asked. Jake's feet were really digging into his shoulders.

There was silence for a moment, then: "I'm sure I've seen this place before, Alex."

"Seen enough?"

"Sure."

"Then down you come."

Jake managed to lower himself onto Alex's shoulders again, and as Alex bent his knees they both took a tumble, but fortunately neither of them was hurt. They collapsed onto their mattresses.

"You said you'd maybe seen this place before."

"Sure. From the outside, that is. On Gilmore something?"

"Gilder Road?"

Jake shook his head. Then: "No, on Hillmore Lane. Yes, that's it: Hillmore Lane."

Alex shrugged. "Sorry, that's a new one on me. I've led a sheltered life. So, what is this place?"

It was Jake's turn to shrug. "Blessed if I know. I've passed this building before. I don't recall a name on a sign or anything, but then I wasn't really looking or paying attention."

"I'm not sure what to do next, Jake. But listen: how did you get the clues to us? And can you do the same again?"

Jake was puzzled.

"What clues?"

"You – or at least you back in the land of the living, the everyday world – told us that you were having to speak in riddles, presumably because you'd be in trouble if your plan was discovered. And you sent us off on a treasure hunt with clues that

took us to various locations across town, and would have eventually led us here.”

Jake shook his head. “I really didn’t have anything to do with that, Alex. Or at least I wasn’t aware of doing it.”

“Maybe it was a ruse all along then, Jake, to get hold of me and Maya or whoever we sent on the treasure hunt. Certainly something had happened to the last clue, and that’s how we ended up here. As I say, maybe it was a trap all along.”

Then: “God, I’m scared for Maya as well. I wish I knew where she was and whether she’s safe.”

Jake nodded. “Sure. She’s a cool chick.”

Just then, Alex had a terrible thought, and he stared at Jake in alarm.

“You’re being looked after at Professor Trelawney’s cottage. But where the hell am I, for that matter?”

°Hang in there, Alex,° he thought someone whispered in his ear, and he recognised an inner voice that he hadn’t heard in a long time.

You’ve got to get us out of here, he urgently called back.

°Stay strong,° came the answer.

37.

They'd taken an hour's break and the professor was going to suggest that one of them go down to the village fish 'n chip shop to grab some necessary supplies, when they noticed that Alex had come out of his daze. Once again, they all gathered around.

Alex pushed the first sheet of paper aside and it fluttered to the floor, then he took up a green crayon and drew what looked like a bell-shaped curve or a hump. Then he waited.

"A hump," she suggested.

He nodded his head ambiguously.

"We're getting warm?" she queried. "Keep going."

He took up a brown crayon and drew two or three vertical lines nearby, then used the green crayon again to add circles to the top of the brown lines, and coloured them in.

"Trees," Maya deduced. "Then that's a hill," she concluded.

Alex dropped the crayons and clapped his hands together.

"Hill it is, then," the professor nodded. "Keep going."

He stuck up two fingers, but not intending it as an insult.

"Two words," smiled the professor, and Alex gave a little clap.

Alex moved down the page and drew a number 1 and to the right he drew a 7.

"Number 17?" the professor queried, but that was met with a firm shake of the head. He pointed to the 7 repeatedly.

Below that, Alex drew a small blue triangle, with a larger blue triangle to the right. This time he tapped his finger on the larger triangle.

"Larger?" Maya offered. That was met with an ambiguous nod of the head.

"But we're getting warmer," Maya deduced.

Alex responded with a nod.

Stefan was on his phone now. "What about this from Roget's Thesaurus," he suggested, and he slowly read out several words. They carefully watched Alex's reaction to each word.

Bigger. Largest. Better. Bulkier. Greater. Longer.
More. Most. Preponderant.

Each was met with an ambiguous nod, except for “more” which was met with a clap of the hands.

“Two words, you said. And we have ‘hill’ and ‘more,’” the professor pondered.

“Hillmore Lane!” the major exclaimed.

Again, Alex’s eyes lit up and he nodded his head.

Stefan was already searching through the A to Z and Maya had brought up Google Street Maps. She let out a little whoop! and held her phone up for the others to see.

“St Mary’s Hospital,” she announced. That has to be it.

“Dungeons?” the professor queried. “I thought we’d be looking for an older building than that.”

Stefan was tapping away on his phone. “St Mary’s used to be a psychiatric hospital before it was shut down,” he reliably informed them, “so it perhaps had secure cells for cases that needed to be isolated. It’s currently awaiting demolition and will be replaced by yet another blessed car park, and a number of dwellings.”

He scrolled down the page. “And actually it is an old building. Before it became a hospital, it was a workhouse, and there was a gaol adjacent to the site, ‘designed for 40 male, 16 female, and 6 debtor prisoners.’”

Maya was already on her feet. She crossed the room and planted a kiss on the professor’s cheek and then on Alex’s forehead. “This has to be the place. Thank you so much, you beautiful people.”

“So, what now?”

The major was on his feet, too, now. “Well, I guess we’ll have to call the police.”

Maya shook her head vigorously. “I’m sorry, but there are two major objections to that: the first is that the last thing we can do is try to explain things to the police. They’re going to think we’re a bunch of escaped lunatics.

“And the second objection is that they wouldn’t find anything

if they raided the place, and we might well end up charged with wasting police time. And, on top of that, they'd later discover that we've been keeping Jake and Alex here, and there would be questions about the state of their mental health, and what part we had to play in that. They're going to think that *we* abducted and drugged them.

"So, I'm sorry, but we're going to have to handle this ourselves."

The major looked puzzled. "What do you mean when you say that the police wouldn't find anything?"

"You'll discover that for yourself, if you came along, but What I mean is: Jake, Alex and their captors will be invisible to the police, and the place will appear deserted. We're not dealing with corporeal bodies here, but with subtle bodies."

"Ah, of course," the major nodded. "That makes sense now. So, the question remains: what's our next move?"

"I have to go to St Mary's," Maya told them.

The major had his finger in the air, and he looked like he was going to wag it. "Hey now, wait a cotton pickin' minute there, Ms Heslop. We've come too far together, and you're not going to hold us back now. Where one of us goes, we all go.⁹⁶ Well, those of us who wish to go." He scanned the room and they all looked eager.

Maya was about to object; to tell the others that there was nothing they could do to help; even wondering whether she should pull out her credentials and have them all pile on top of her when she revealed that she was a spy for SPIDER.

Just then, Alex spoke up. "The Royal Oak," he said, quite insistently.

Again, Maya was on the point of objecting.

"We all wait at the Royal Oak," he reiterated, struggling to rise from the armchair..

Maya couldn't quite fathom the wisdom of that, but she acquiesced.

"Take Jake and Alex, and – providing all goes well – we'll

⁹⁶ And no, that is not a disguised reference to the QAnon conspiracy cult. Absolutely not. So you can shove that fake red pill right up your pureblood ass.

meet again at the Royal Oak.”

“But not all of us have got the hang of lucid dreaming,” the major pointed out. “And how on earth are we going to catch any sleep with all these worries galloping around in our heads?”

Maya searched her mind for an answer to that, and in the end she could do nothing more than suggest that they simply head for the ancient oak in their Level 6 skinsuits.

Maya instantly regretted her lax choice of words, but like an arrow once fired, once off her tongue, her words could not be unspoken.

Alex would have loved that quote:

Three things cannot be retrieved:
The arrow once sped from the bow
The word spoken in haste
The missed opportunity.⁹⁷

The major was as astute as ever. “Level 6?” he queried, adding: “You know, I’m beginning to think that you know more than you’re letting on, Maya.”

Again, Professor Trelawney had pause for thought, as she remembered having seen Maya and Alex vanish before her eyes, the first time they left the cottage garden.

“Level 6 is just the term I use for the so-called ‘real world’ – the everyday world of concrete and glass, politics and sex,” she replied.

Alex looked at her with a sense of urgency and she hurriedly grabbed her coat and shoulder bag and started to head for the door. “We have to go,” she told them, turning back for a moment before dashing off down the garden path.

And again, as Maya passed through the crooked gate, Professor Trelawney, who had briskly strode over to the living room window, distinctly saw her vanish from sight. She didn’t know quite what had happened, but wherever Maya had disappeared to, it definitely wasn’t Level 6. And that, perhaps,

⁹⁷ Ali the Lion, Caliph of Islam, son-in-law of Mohammed the Prophet, quoted in Idries Shah, *Caravan of Dreams*.

answered the question of why Maya had had to go alone.

Arnold Frobisher was right: there was much more to Maya Heslop than met the casual eye. One day soon they'd have to spend some quiet time together, and have a little heart-to-heart.

38.

After the hop through the professor's garden gate, Maya emerged under the old town gate on Micklegate. She could have made landing closer to Hillmore Lane, but she really needed a little time for thought, and to calm herself, and there was nothing like a leisurely walk. Well, to be honest, this was nothing like a leisurely walk. It was a brisk and purposeful march.

What she should have done, really, is report in to SPIDER and talk with her superior. That was standard and time-honoured protocol. And they, in turn would talk to their own superiors, possibly right up the chain to the Executive. But she knew just how slow the bureaucratic cogs and pistons worked, when time was of the essence, and it might well not produce the desired resolution. Jake and Alex wouldn't be the first errant wayfarers to be left stranded deep and dry by The Powers That Be. She'd thought of having a word with Janus, too. But he was just as likely to put a spanner in the works by reporting the matter – or even reporting her – to his own line manager. And that way, even more shit would probably be dumped on her.

She really should have nipped this venture in the bud years ago, but Maya had become quite attached to Gwyn and Sheila and, more recently, to the others in the Silver Circle; and of course the Cross-Cultural Studies Institute had produced some sterling work. She'd always thought – and felt, really – that these people – these friends – had deserved a better deal. Well, for that matter, a great many Level 6 people were given short shrift by The Powers That Be, and they deserved a much better deal.

Did that make her a dreamer, an escapist, or a rebel? A renegade? Just the sort of person that SPIDER was commissioned to investigate, and if necessary, sanction. There was only one conclusion that she could reach, based on her self-knowledge, and that was a resounding “Hell, yes!” No doubt she'd be found out eventually, and dishonourably discharged. Perhaps even sooner, rather than later. But this was a calculated risk that she would

have to take. And in the meantime, she hoped to do a little good; to repay the culture and the cosmos for the many daily blessings she did indeed count and gratefully received.

Finally, Maya arrived at the gateway leading into St Mary's. The high gates had been removed, along with the sign, and dumped unceremoniously to one side. There were cracks in the tarmac drive, and here and there there were dandelions growing up through the cracks as Mother Nature made a start on reclaiming the land for herself. Maybe not this time around, with a car park and dwellings soon to rise after demolition, but She never gave in to the mass of humanity who were always so "busy making progress".

Maya drew a deep breath and, as she entered the gateway, she changed gear and slipped up a level to 5, then up a further level to 4. She just hoped to hell that Level 4 was beyond the sight and beyond the reach of the Opposition, as some referred to them. If it wasn't, then most likely she'd either be in deep trouble herself, or have desperate need to call in reinforcements. And then she'd have to explain the indefensible to the inconsiderate and intransigent.

St Mary's consisted of several buildings. To the left by the entrance gate was a hotchpotch of single storey building extensions and, according to a peeling painted sign near a doorway, it had served as a laundry. Well, it hadn't once been called a workhouse for nothing. She could well imagine the daily grind that the inmates must have had to endure, and for a pittance and supposed salvation.

Further up, there were two very large multi-storey buildings, set out in the shape of an "n" and a "u" with a wide gap between them, set with paths and flower beds, and a large open square in the centre.

Already she'd spotted a row of small barred windows quite low on the walls on the outside, but perhaps serving a dark basement, below street level, inside.

Starting at one end of the building, she walked from one barred window to the next, peering down into the gloom and hoping to catch sight of occupants.

Had she thought about it, she could have brought a flashlight⁹⁸ with her. That might have helped her penetrate the gloom inside. Indeed, the occupants, too, would have been able to see the light. She chided herself for not having the forethought. As for calling out to attract attention, though, not only could they not see her from Levels 6 or 5, they couldn't hear her either. In fact, even if she dropped down to Level 5, it was doubtful that she could shout loudly enough to be heard by the inmates through the thick glass, and not attract the unwelcome attention of any gaolers. It's possible, too, that the gaolers might use some of these rooms for makeshift offices or accommodation.

Well, she'd been round the first building and there were no corresponding small barred windows on the second (though all the other large windows above the basements were barred), so there was nothing for it but to go inside and take a closer look.

Maya found the main entrance into the first building and she discovered that the door was not locked, so she went inside. There was reception counter to the left of the door, and judging by the set of mugs on a work surface at the back of reception, it must have been in recent use. There was an unlocked door here, too, and she went in and had a look round reception. There was a steel kettle near the mugs, too, and it felt slightly warm to the touch, suggesting that it had been used some time earlier.

"A-ha!" she whispered to herself, spotting a flashlight under the counter at the front of reception. It was a long, heavy lamp, fashioned in bright yellow, rubbery plastic, presumably designed to survive being dropped, but it would double as a pretty hefty truncheon, should she need to resort to violence. She tested the switch and the lamp did, indeed, light up. It wasn't a particularly powerful beam, but at least it would allow her to see where she was going.

She left reception and quietly closed the door behind her. On the right-hand side of the entrance (and probably at each end of the long corridor) she found a set of stairs, leading up to higher floors, and down into the basement. So down she went and, as she

⁹⁸ An electric lamp, lantern, or torch, with a bulb and concave silver reflector, to direct a beam of light ahead.

descended into the gloom, she was really glad that she'd found the flashlight, since all the lights in the corridor were out and she dare not risk turning the overhead strip lights on. Not only would the light attract attention, so would the noise from all the starters.

Of course, if she used the flashlight, others would be able to see that, too. Maya let out a sigh. Okay, so she really hadn't thought this through, and she was winging it. What was it they said about novelists? That they were either planners or pantsers, the latter being those who instead of planning flew by the seat of their pants.

Anyway, she'd just have to chance it, and switch off the flashlight if she heard anything.

Ahead, at the end of the corridor, she could see that the corridor branched, and there was light coming from the right, so she turned off the torch and clutched it defensively. She peered round the corner and by her calculations she'd have to take a third corridor at the end of this one, to come to the row of cells.

Maya was halfway down the corridor when someone suddenly emerged from one of the rooms off to the side, and she froze. The figure – that of a small, stout man dressed in a ragged uniform – looked straight at her as he came out of the room, but he must have looked straight through her, for he turned away, carrying a metal tray, and headed down to where she hoped the cells would be.

She followed the man at a discreet distance and walked as quietly as she could on the hard marble floor, even though the chances of her being discovered at Level 4 were almost too remote to warrant caution.

The man stopped outside one of the heavy studded doors, placed the metal tray on the ground and opened a hatch in the door to peer inside.

"Back against the wall," he barked, after picking up the tray. Only now did he unbolt the door and fling it open with the sole of one of his heavy boots.

She crept closer, but the gaoler was already re-emerging from the cell, with a final request. "Eat up quick. Dr. Harpocrates wants to see you both within the hour. And if you give me any

grief, I'll make your life a living hell."

And with that, the man slammed the door shut, re-bolted it, and began to march back up the corridor towards her. He abruptly changed lanes and Maya had to quickly sidestep to avoid him.

As he passed by, the gaoler stopped in his tracks and sniffed the air, looking this way and that along the corridor, and Maya backed away as quietly as a mouse.

Whatever had attracted the man's attention, he shrugged it off and carried on down the corridor back to his room, tapping the metal tray against his thigh as he went, in time to his footsteps.

Only then, sniffing the front of her woollen jumper, did Maya realise that the gaoler had probably caught a slight whiff of her perfume or underarm deodorant. She hadn't considered it before, but scent was quite a subtle substance. Well, that was a close call, and a lesson that she wouldn't forget in a hurry. And that was one thing that she really should file a report about. Of course, more experienced operatives might already know this, but it wasn't something that had been mentioned in basic training.

Maya crept toward the door, pressed her ear against it, and listened. She could hear at least two voices in the room beyond, but they were too hushed to be able to make out what was being said.

If only she'd been more fleet of foot, she could have crept inside the cell while the gaoler was placing the tray on the floor. Why, heck, she could have dropped down to Level 5, booted the man up the arse, snatched Jake and Alex away and locked the door on the man. But then, she wasn't G.I. Josephine and this wasn't a Hollywood blockbuster.

Maya cast her eyes up and down the corridor and ensured that the way was clear, then she tried to quietly slide back the bolt and open the door. But the bolt was dry and rusty, and it made an awful noise in the bare corridor.

As she swung the door inwards and stood framed in the doorway, Jake and Alex were already on their feet, most likely thinking that the gaoler had come back earlier than expected.

They stood there for a few moments, Jake's head ducking right and left, waiting for someone to enter the cell, and only then

did Maya realise that they were oblivious to her presence. Already putting a finger to her lips, she dropped down to Level 5 and abruptly appeared before them. Both Jake and Alex leapt back in shock, but fortunately they had the presence of mind not to cry out. All the same, Maya spun round and pushed the door closed behind her.

Jake and Alex had by now recovered from the shock, but they were still in a state of excitement. They greeted her in hushed tones, then bombarded her with all manner of questions.

Maya put her hands up in front of her. "Questions and answers can wait," she hissed at them, shutting them up mid-utterance. "Right now, we have one task: getting you the hell out of here."

No sooner had the words left her lips than they heard the distinctive rasp of the bolt being thrown in the door, and she spun around sharply. She jumped up to Level 4, but the move was too late.

"He-he-he he-he!" she heard as the small hatch in the door slid open and she saw the gaoler's laughing eyes and broken-toothed grin. "Three for the price of one, eh? Dr. Harpocrates will be exceedingly well pleased with me. More grog⁹⁹ for me tonight!"

Maya instinctively reached for her hand-held device, but discovered to her horror that she had no signal and the screen was blank.

She flopped down on the floor, oblivious to the cold, hard stone flags, and she cursed out loud at her own foolishness.

Jake poured her a cup of water and held it out for her, and she drank a little before passing the cup back. It was so rancid that she almost retched and spat it out.

"Don't worry, Maya," Alex comforted her. "We'll get through this."

°Did she get my message?° the inner voice asked him.

"My invisible friend wants to know if you got their message," Alex informed her.

She nodded. "Yes. That was truly inspired." Then: "Oh Lord,

⁹⁹ Rum cut with water.

I had such high hopes.”

Jake looked like all the heart and soul had been crushed inside him. “I told you there’s no way out of here,” he reminded Alex. “They should hang a sign in the gateway of this place, reading ‘Abandon hope all ye who enter here’.”

“Who said that?” Alex asked.

“That would be from Dante, as he enters the gates of Hell.”

Alex passed the message on.

“Wonderful,” sighed Maya.

Moments later, the bolt was thrown again, the door slammed open, and the gaoler stood there. He’d brought an assistant with him this time, a younger man built like a pocket battleship.¹⁰⁰

“Right, out you come. Dr. Harpocrates wants to see the lot of you. And no funny business, if you know what’s good for you.”

At that point, Maya could have jumped up to Level 4 and made her getaway, but she decided against that idea. She couldn’t leave Jake and Alex behind. God knows what punishment would be meted out on them to cause her vicarious pain and suffering.

On the way out, the hulking assistant relieved her of her shoulder bag and, along with it, the flashlight, her phone, and her hand-held. The only saving grace was that only she would be able to operate the latter device. It would be useless to them.

Damn it! She should have jumped to Level 4, made her escape (assuming there was a signal outside the cells), and sent out a Mayday,¹⁰¹ even if she gave herself up immediately afterwards. By now the place would have been crawling with SPIDER operatives. Hell, for one of their own, they’d probably have brought in the ETS, the Elite Tactical Squad. But, of course, she wasn’t thinking straight. There was something awful about this place, or perhaps it was the dark presence, or even the psychic residue of former days. The sickening atmosphere seemed to be affecting Jake especially. Perhaps it was a good idea to demolish the site, after all.

They sullenly followed the gaoler down the corridor, with the

¹⁰⁰ A small battleship built to conform with treaty limitations on tonnage and armament (from 1925 to 1930). Small and squat, but still heavily armed and heavily armoured.

¹⁰¹ An internationally recognized distress signal sent via radiotelephone.

hulk following on in the rear, until they came to Room 101. The door swung open to greet them as they arrived, and Dr. Harpocrates stood to one side and ushered them in. Alex noted that the desk had been returned and on this side of the desk there were now three sturdy steel-framed seats.

Having introduced himself to Maya, and offered them a seat, Harpo went round to his side of the desk, and sat down, with his hands clasped in front of him and an excited expression etched across his face.

“Well, I must say this is a red letter day!” the doctor sang cheerfully. ‘Three for the price of one’, as Igor rightly informed me.”

Harpo leant forward and confided in them. “He’s not really called Igor, of course, but he reminds me so much of the late, great Bela Lugosi. In my spare time – what little I allow myself – I’m quite a fan of Gothic horror.”

“What do you want from us, Harpo?” Alex demanded. “You never did get round to giving me a straight answer. Surely, the Opposition has bigger fish to fry.”

The doctor smiled and shook his head slowly from side to side. “I was just having a little fun with you, Mister Knowles, and with Mister Horsley. Merely amusing myself with a little horse’s doover,¹⁰² as the British and Australian prisoners of war used to say, to whet my appetite for the main course.”

Harpo looked with affection toward Maya. “The main course being your good self, mademoiselle,” he explained, nodding his head in her direction.

The man turned back to Jake and Alex. “In Mister Horsley’s case, he was merely a sprat to catch a mackerel.”

“And in your case, Mister Knowles, you were merely a mackerel to catch a seal.”

“So, all that psychobabble that had me half-thinking that maybe you weren’t such a bad guy after all, that you actually had my best interests at heart – that was all a ruse?”

“Exactly so, Mister Knowles. A little ruse, a diversion, a good laugh, a dollop of faux altruism, and a double dose of confusion

¹⁰² Hors d'oeuvre: A dish served as an appetizer before the main meal.

and ulterior motives – all playing on your gullibility and vanity. Nothing more.”

Harpo leant forward and slapped his hand down on the table. “But here’s the kicker, Mister Knowles: you are not going to live long enough to gain any benefit from the self-knowledge you discovered during our little jaunts into the depths and our tête-à-têtes.”¹⁰³

Alex sighed deeply. So he’d been taken for a sucker, just like Neo had been taken in by the Analyst in *The Matrix Resurrections*.

Harpo must have read his thoughts. “Finally, we can talk like adults. I hate lying. I do. It exhausts me,” he taunted Alex.

Harpo tossed his head in celebration. “Don’t you think that the food chain is an apt analogy?”

“Why me?” Maya wanted to know.”

The man stuck his finger in the air. “Ah, but you see we’re not finished there. Because once we have our seal, we can again bait the hook for whales.”

Then he added: “You have to understand that I’m playing a long game here.”

“Why me?” Maya asked a second time.

“Are you sure you want Mister Horsley and Mister Knowles to hear this, Ms Heslop?”

“Alex and I have no secrets to hide from each other.”

Harpo flipped through the notes on his clipboard. “And Mister Horsely? Does he know that you work for SPIDER?”

You could see Jake’s jaw drop at this point.

“Does he know that since the early days of the Cross-Cultural Studies Institute (the CCSI), you have been spying on Professor Trelawney, and also on members of the Silver Circle?”

Jake’s jaw had dropped so far by now that it hit the floor with a thud.

Maya wasn’t having this. “As I explained to Alex a good while ago, I wasn’t spying. I was a monitor, taking a benign interest in their work. I’m genuinely fascinated by their work and their endeavours.”

¹⁰³ Tête-à-tête: A private conversation between two people.

“And does Professor Trelawney have a fascination for your own work, given that she was abducted by SPIDER in order to put the frighteners on her and on members of the Silver Circle?”

“I played no part in that,” Maya answered back. “If anything, I’m a dreamer, an escapist, a rebel, and a renegade, just like the good and decent people SPIDER was set up to investigate and sanction.”

Maya cupped her head in her hands, cursing herself for revealing so much; for revealing information that Harpocrates could use as leverage against her, on the one hand, and have her hung, drawn and quartered by SPIDER, on the other. And yet she had felt compelled to inform him of her position.

Harpo laughed out loud. “Clearly, Ms Heslop, you do not know the first law of holes.”

The doctor turned to Alex. “Tell her, Mr Knowles. Mr Know-All. You’re the keyboard wizard; the Google Scholar; the armchair expert; the one with a quote for every occasion. That’s your Hallmark, if you will excuse the jest ...

“Tell her, man!”

Alex tried to resist, but he could not. “The first law of holes states: ‘If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.’”

Harpo slapped his hand down on the desk. “And there you have it.”

Alex could see the danger now. None of them would be able to hold back, no matter what information Harpo wanted to extract from them. They would feel compelled to answer him. He glanced at Maya and he could see, by the frightened look on her face, that she had arrived at the same ominous conclusion.

And Harpo, in turn, had read their faces and he sat there, rubbing his hands together, and full of malevolent glee.

“You bastard,” Maya spat at the man. “You utter, evil bastard!”

Harpo again rubbed his hands together with glee. “Oh good, good. Give me anger. The more negative emotion, the merrier. It’s all grist for the mill, and we can work on that!”

The doctor sniffed the air, and savoured it, mimicking the cannibalistic Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*.

Harpocrates was a psychopath.

39.

Gwyn had sent out an all points bulletin, telling the whole group about the requested meeting at the Royal Oak.

The major was the first to arrive at the ancient oak, having taken Deirdre, the disabled charity volunteer, with him and picked up Harriet Moore, the author, on the way.

Stefan Grainger arrived moments later, having tailed the major all the way from the cottage. He took with him Jake and Alex. By this time, they trusted that the two of them would cause them no trouble.

Gwyn turned up five minutes later, bringing with her Dorothy Levine, the estate agent's worker, and Mary Oliver, the librarian.

Frederick Hackness, the railway worker, turned up a little later under his own steam, as did Stewart Holder, the tax inspector, Gladys and Michael Smith, the spiritualists, and Ruth Bentwood, the horticulturalist.

Alas, George Truman, the hospital porter, was working a long shift that day.

The only other person who didn't turn up was Brian Poole, the chef who had proved hard to please and who had left the group early on.

As they arrived, Gwyn briefed them all on recent developments, not sparing them any significant detail, then the fourteen of them seated themselves on the octagonal bench, around the tree, and they waited.

They didn't have to wait long. Within another ten minutes, a stranger walked down the winding path, past the ancient oak, and settled on a flat rock by the side of the duck pond. He didn't greet them, nor even acknowledge their presence, but he sat there facing away from the pond, surreptitiously watching them.

Alex, Professor Trelawney, and Jake were sitting on the section of bench facing away from the stranger, and as soon as Alex spotted the man passing the tree, he had become more animated.

“Do you know that man?” the professor whispered in his ear. Alex nodded vigorously. “Janus,” he told her.

“The Roman god of all beginnings, and doorways?” she queried.

Again, Alex nodded.

“You know this man? You’ve met him before?” It was more of a statement than a question, but she had to be sure.

“Yes,” Alex slurred.

“Should we talk to him?”

“Talk, talk, yes!” Alex implored her.

“Does he know about us? About the Silver Circle, I mean.”

Again, Alex responded in the affirmative, and he seemed to be struggling to rise to his feet. Seeing this, Gwyn and the professor took hold of him, with his arms draped over their shoulders, and they walked across to the stranger.

As soon as he saw Alex, recognised him, and saw what kind of state he was in, Janus was on his feet.

“I work for SPIDER,” the man told them, after Gwyn had given him a potted account of recent events.

The professor looked at him sternly, hands on her hips. “You’ll forgive me, but I still haven’t got over your lot abducting me, and scaring the members of the group silly.”

Janus apologised profusely and denied that he’d had a part in that affair. He made a special point of convincing them that SPIDER was not an arm of the Opposition, and they accepted his straight answer.

For a few moments the man tapped away on a hand-held device. “I’ve located Maya. She is indeed at the former hospital.”

Again he tapped away on the keypad. “... But she’s not responding,” he added ominously.

“Well, are you going to help us, or further hinder us, young man?” the professor demanded to know.

Janus said something about reporting in, and again brought out his hand-held device, but the professor pushed his hand away. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Alright,” Janus said after apparently losing himself in thought for a few moments. He put the device back in his pocket.

“You’ll help us, then,” Gwyn chipped in. It was a request, not a question.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I know what has to be done. But if I end up in trouble myself, then I tell you now, I will report in with my manager straight away.”

After another few moments’ thought, Janus told them to wait there for him. He rummaged in his coat pocket, produced a SPIDER business card, and scribbled a telephone number on the back. “If I’m not back within an hour, you really must phone that number. They’ll know what to do.

“Stay safe and well, and keep the faith.”

And with that, the man moved a few steps away, made a large wide circle with his right hand, stepped through a shimmering portal that emerged, and vanished from sight, which in itself caused quite a stir in the group. The professor was the only one in the group, other than Alex most likely, who knew such a thing was possible.

40.

Dr. Harpocrates was half-way through dismissing Jake and Alex, and had called Igor and the hulk into the room to escort the pair back to their cell, so that he could concentrate on Maya, when all hell broke loose.

Igor had opened the door to the room when Janus walked straight through the solid stone wall of the corridor outside.

Igor had darted away to cower behind the desk with Harpo while the hulk had turned to face Janus.

Janus pulled his arm back, then forcefully struck the palm of his hand against the hulk's chest. Such was the intention behind the blow that the hulk was thrown off his feet and went skidding down the corridor on his back.

The hulk lay there for a few moments, stunned by the hit he'd taken, but he staggered to his feet and came barrelling back up the corridor toward Janus.

At the last moment, Janus stepped aside, but the man caught hold of him by the arm and the two of them went down in a heap on the floor.

The hulk had him by the throat now, and he was constricting Janus's larynx so tightly that Janus could not take a breath.

Maya took advantage of Dr. Harpocrates's shock before it wore off and he gathered his wits together. She could see Janus outside on the floor, with the hulk on top of him, strangling the life out of him.

She ran forward and snatched up her shoulder bag which the hulk had left on a window ledge outside the room. Pulling out the heavy flashlight, she took a tight grip on it and repeatedly hit the hulk about the head with it, until he pulled himself off Janus and turned to face her.

Red in the face from the near-strangulation, Janus nevertheless leapt to his feet. He grabbed hold of the hulk by his collar and struck him a hell of a blow in the pit of his stomach. The hulk doubled up in pain and his head came down, and Janus

delivered an uppercut to his chin.

The hulk had him by the arm now, though, in an iron grip, and he swung Janus round like a strongman swinging a ball and chain. Thwack! went Janus against the wall and, momentarily stunned, he slithered down the wall and sat there in a daze.

Maya wasn't finished yet, though. She dropped the flashlight, ran to a nearby fire extinguisher, pulled it off the wall, pulled the pin, squeezed the trigger, and stood there for a full ten seconds, spraying foam over the hulk's face and in his eyes.

Janus made the most of that brief moment of respite. He grabbed the extinguisher from Maya and brought it down forcefully on the hulk's head, again and again and again, until the man collapsed in a heap on the floor and no longer stirred.

Janus tossed the extinguisher aside and headed for the door into the room.

Inside the room, Alex and Jake had managed to drag Igor out from behind the desk and they each had hold of him by one of his arms, but for all his diminutive stature, Igor was fighting like a madman (with apologies to benign fellow madmen), and Janus realised that if the man succeeded in breaking free, then he would bring out the long knife that he had in a scabbard fastened to his belt. And Janus foresaw what would happen.

Janus dashed into the room and swung his foot up sharply, like a soccer player delivering a penalty, catching Igor right between the legs. The man doubled up in agony and spewed his guts, then he went down on the floor unconscious.

Still not done with the man, Janus grabbed hold of him by the neck and raised him up a couple of feet. Then, with a sharp twist, and a revolting scrunch, he broke the man's neck and dropped him to the floor.

Alex was deeply shaken by this, and he stared at Janus with shock and incredulity etched across his face.

I did what had to be done, Janus's voice echoed in his head, though he did not see the man's lips move, and when Janus momentarily placed his hand on Alex's shoulder, he knew in an instant why Janus had been compelled to kill the man. He had

seen a fork in the man's fate.¹⁰⁴

Trust me, Janus called, and then they all turned to face Dr. Harpocrates, who was now standing behind his desk and still looking defiant.

Alex and Jake turned to face the man, and they were on the point of approaching him, but for some reason Alex's legs refused to move. Jake, too, appeared paralysed, and then Alex felt himself being forced down to the floor. It was as if he had a hundredweight¹⁰⁵ sack of potatoes on his back.

Maya entered the room at that moment and quickly took in the scene, but she, too, felt herself paralysed and fell to her knees, unable to move. Janus reached out to her and grabbed for her shoulder. In that instant she was lifted to Level 4, but she was still unable to move.

Janus suddenly saw the revolver in Dr. Harpocrates's hand now, and he was gravely concerned when he realised that the man could still see all of them.

He grabbed hold of Maya's shoulder and raised himself and her to Level 3.

Now Maya found herself free to move again and Janus saw that the doctor was looking round the room, searching for them. He was not deterred, though. He came round the side of the desk and approached Alex and Jake.

Again, Janus foresaw what would happen next, and he dived headfirst across the room and swept Harpocrates's legs from under him. The doctor did not know what had hit him, and the gun was wrenched free from his grasp and skidded off across the floor.

Maya was the first to reach the gun, while the doctor was still scrambling to his feet. Like Janus, she knew exactly what she had to do, whether she liked it or not. She aimed at the man's torso, squeezed the trigger and pumped three bullets into him until something told her to stop and the man lay there quivering. Then she dropped the gun and slowly sank to the floor in a gathering

¹⁰⁴ He was Master of the Option, "to do good or to do what has to be done."
See Idries Shah, *The Veiled Gazelle*.

¹⁰⁵ A British unit of weight equivalent to 112 pounds (around 51 kilograms).
Or a unit of weight equal to 100 kilograms in the metric system.

pool of blood.

PART 4: Return

An Essential Difference

“There’s a difference between knowing the path
and walking the path.”

~ Morpheus to Neo, in *The Matrix*.



“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

~ T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”.

41.

Maya and Janus left the room, gently leading Jake and Alex who had still not recovered from the shock of the confrontation. They walk through the corridors until they came to the main entrance, then stepped outside into the sunshine. Overhead were the most heavenly, clear blue skies, and Alex had Jimmy Cliff's song "I Can See Clearly Now" merrily playing away in his heart.

Janus walked to the centre of the square between the two buildings, waved his hand in the air in a wide arc, and they stepped through.

One moment Maya and Janus were in the grounds of the disused hospital, and in the next they were standing near the duck pond in Clement Gardens, not far from the Royal Oak. As for Jake and Alex, they were jolted back into their corporeal bodies faster than the click of finger and thumb.

As soon as they emerged, Gwyn spotted them and immediately saw that Jake and Alex were once again animated. She rose from the bench, grabbed hold of Jake and Alex, called to the others to attract their attention, and trotted over to Maya and Janus. Within moments, they were surrounded by well-wishers, and Maya had to step out of the excited throng to get some space.

"I have to report this," Janus informed Maya, taking her aside and out of earshot.

She knew this already, deep down, and she shrugged her shoulders in resignation, turned away, and discreetly wiped a tear from her eye.

Maya turned back. "You can't do this to these people – to my friends – our friends. Not now."

Then again, why postpone the inevitable? "Alright, alright. You must do what has to be done."

He'd already thought-typed the document, and all was prepared. Hesitating for a moment, as he watched Maya walk off to join the others, he closed his eyes and hit "Send". Then he pocketed the device and walked over to the side of the pond to

quietly watch a pair of geese engage in some sort of ritual.

Gwyn and the professor had come over to join them now, having escaped the jubilant jam. Gwyn embraced Maya and then turned to Janus, who offered his hand to shake.

Gwyn smiled and addressed them both. "I want to tell you how grateful we are for all your help. I don't know how you did it – and I won't ask more than you are prepared to tell us – but we are all truly thankful."

Maya let out a deep sigh, knowing that Janus had sent in his report. "We were more than glad to help," she replied. "But with power comes responsibility, and I fear that we've overstepped the mark. Well, I certainly have. My colleague, Janus, has had to send in a report to The Powers That Be. I will be sanctioned, that's for sure, and will probably have to put in my resignation before I'm dishonourably expelled from the ranks. Chances are, they'll reject my resignation and discharge me all the same, so that I will always have a large black splodge on my records."

Again, Maya sighed deeply, and cast her hands before her. "I'm not sure as yet where this escapade leaves you, but I would imagine that, like supposedly naughty children, you will be 'grounded'. And yet, if anyone is to blame for bringing about this fiasco, it's me."

"Grounded?" the professor queried.

"Confined to this mortal coil, Level 6. Denied access to the higher levels. And I mean forcefully denied, with no right of appeal."

"No more lucid dreaming or jaunts into the imaginal realm," Gwyn proposed. "Just when things were getting interesting. Well, except for the unfortunate turn of events for poor Jake and Alex."

Maya shook her head sadly. "I'm sorry, but no."

Just then, they heard a distinct ping and Janus retrieved the device from his coat pocket.

"You got a reply?" Maya asked.

Janus nodded, scrolling slowly through the reply for some time, before again pocketing the device.

Maya peered into Janus's eyes. "Trouble?" she suggested.

Janus pursed his lips and sucked in his breath.

“The group is to disperse, and we are to both report to Maidstone’s office within the hour.”

Maidstone was in charge of internal discipline and, reporting directly to the Executive, he could wield near-unbridled power.

“Disperse?” thundered the major, who had come over to find out what was going on. “Disperse? After all we’ve been through together, and with all we have come to mean to one-another? The hell we will!”

He spun on his heel, returning to the huddle, and told the others what he’d managed to glean. All eyes were now on Maya and Janus.

Janus put his device away and stepped toward the group. “You all have to disperse, now,” he demanded, though Maya noted that his voice was not as forceful as the major’s, and that perhaps he did not relish relaying such commands.

The major stood facing him, chest puffed out, and finger wagging. “Now you listen to me, you two-faced dog. I don’t care who you are nor who you represent. We have every right to freely associate, and every right to be here. And we are not going anywhere.”

And with that, the major marched over to the octagonal bench, folding his arms defiantly in front of him. Everyone was consulting with their neighbours now, and moments later they all headed for the bench to sit down, leaving only Gwyn and the professor standing with Maya and Janus.

“Well,” Maya observed at this unexpected resistance. “It looks like we have a mutiny on our hands.”

“*Vive la résistance!*” the professor called out defiantly, and catching hold of Gwyn’s arm, she marched over to join the others, leaving Maya and Janus standing there alone.

Maya felt split in two, and she mentally tossed a coin to help her decide what to do. It came down tails. “Oh, well,” she said, turning toward the group. “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

She had taken one step toward the tree to join the others on the bench in solidarity, when Janus caught her by the arm, though not roughly.

“Don’t be a fool, Maya,” he advised. “You’re only going to

make things harder for yourself. They might bust *you* down to Level 6. It's happened before."

Maya reached out and tugged his hand away. "I've made my decision, and if The Powers That Be don't like it, then they can damn well lump it!"

And with that, she went over to sit with the others, between Gwyn and the professor.

Janus put his hand over his eyes, lowered his head and shook it slowly from side to side. Things were now going from bad to worse.

Pulling himself together, he tapped in a four character code and hit the "Reply" button. This was way above his pay grade and his manager would know what to do.

Mere moments later, another figure emerged from a spot by the duck pond and approached them. Janus had been expecting Molly Davenport, his line manager, but he was shocked to see that it was Maidstone himself. He must have been patched in to the message thread.

As he approached, the man glanced from one to the other of the assembled group, spotting Janus straight away and heading toward him. He caught sight of Maya, too, and with no more than a wave of his overstretched hand, he commanded her to join him. She clung on to the edge of the bench for a few moments, but unable to resist, she felt compelled to comply. She stood up and shakily walked over to join Janus.

The major was on his feet now, and was about to follow Maya to remonstrate, but with a click of his fingers, Maidstone forced him back down on the bench, and the major sat there, as if turned into a pillar of salt by some Medusoid gaze, thankfully able to breathe, yet unable to move.

After conferring with Janus for a few moments, and pointedly blanking Maya, much to her annoyance, Maidstone turned again to the group, waved his arm, and compelled Gwyn and the professor to join them.

Maidstone turned to Gwyn and the professor and laid a hand on each of their shoulders. In that instant, they became painfully aware of what was in the man's mind, and they both cast their

gaze down and clutched their hands before them, like penitent sinners. "It's very simple," Maidstone told them, though they already knew. "Either you disperse, or else all related memories, and certain acquired abilities will be erased, and then you will disperse of your own accord, in any case, utterly oblivious of what has gone on and with no knowledge of deeper matters."

"You can't do this!" Maya protested, in spite of her own fright.

Maidstone looked at her. "You know as well as I do, Ms Heslop, that I must do what has to be done. Whether you – or even I – like it or not. Such is the nature of Necessity. As for you, I will deal with you later."

He turned to Gwyn and the professor. "Now, do I have your cooperation, or do I have to line you all up, one by one, and compel these people to disperse?"

Maya cursed him under her breath.

She hadn't moved her lips, but Maidstone had heard her quite distinctly. "Very well," he replied. "You leave me with only one option and no choice."

The man turned momentarily to the rest of the group, and with the flick of his wrist, he compelled Alex to come over and join them.

"No!" Maya yelled, as she suddenly realised what Maidstone intended. This was doubly cruel.

As Alex approached and obediently stood there, Maidstone raised his arm to place his hand on Alex's shoulder.

He didn't quite get that far, though. Without warning, Alex took two steps back.

Maidstone spun round to face the duck pond. Coming towards him was a woman in a mid-length tweed skirt, matching jacket and lacy white blouse. Maya instantly recognised her as Molly Davenport, Janus's line manager.

"What is the meaning of this insolent insubordination?!" Maidstone thundered, marching toward the woman. "How dare you subvert my authority?!"

The pair of them met half-way and for a few moments they engaged in a heated conversation, then Maidstone became quiet,

walked slowly toward the duck pond, and – in a bright flash – he disappeared from sight, without uttering another word.

Molly Davenport approached them now. She waved her arm in the direction of the group and one by one they got up and came over to cluster around her.

“There has been a change of plan,” she confidently informed them.

“Change of plan?” Janus echoed, pulling out his device. Maya, too, fished her device out of her shoulder bag.

“Fresh orders,” the woman replied.

“Which are ...?” Janus wanted to know.

Maya was already pulling up the group records. Gwyn, the professor, Alex ... the whole group, as far as she could see, showed Level 5 access. She checked her own. There was no black mark. No mention of “pending dishonourable discharge”. She still had regular Level 4 access.

“I put in an appeal to the Executive, to whom Maidstone reports directly,” Molly Davenport explained. “And, after much careful and earnest deliberation, and an almost unanimous decision, they issued fresh orders.

“In summary, Ms Heslop is acquitted on all charges and will receive remedial training. You are to receive an honourable mention in despatches; and the members of the Silver Circle have been granted Level 5 access, and may at a later time gain promotion to higher levels, based on the merits of each individual case.”

And, once they’d taken in the momentous nature of this new accommodation from on high,¹⁰⁶ the members of the group were full of high-spirited delight.

As for Maya, she was excited for them, and relieved for her own sake that she had not been hauled up before Maidstone at a disciplinary hearing, to be demoted or cast out. The last thing she was looking for from The Powers That Be was a pat on the back, let alone a medal.

¹⁰⁶ A settlement of differences.

42.

Molly Davenport took Maya and Janus aside for a moment and whispered something in their ear. Then, without so much as a fond adieu, she walked toward the duck pond and vanished.

Maya called the whole group together now, and she had them form a circle, holding hands. She and Janus stood in the centre of the circle and waited until they were all in position and settled, then he spun on his heel and inscribed a wide circle in the short grass.

By the time he'd completed the circle, the scene had already changed around them.

The grass beneath their feet was much longer now, and so green that it actually fluoresced, and it was liberally strewn with wild flowers of every colour. Not far from where they stood, they could see the ancient oak, but it was wider and more majestic than they recalled. The brown-painted octagonal bench was gone, and in its place was a well-polished circular bench made of rosewood.

The duck pond, too, was far more expansive now. It was a wide lake with a tall, wooded island in the centre, with carefully laid paths going all round the edge of the lake; an ornate wooden bridge across to the island, and narrow, fenced paths leading up to the summit of the island on which stood a small building like an oriental temple. And as well as ducks and geese, there was a pair of pure white swans gently swimming along, with several cygnets in their wake.

Everything here was on a larger scale, the colours were so much more vivid, the scent from the many flower beds was much richer, and the sky was a vivid, clear blue, with just a wisp of feathery, white cloud. And, perhaps above all, the song of hedge sparrow, chaffinch, great tit, goldfinch, nuthatch, and song thrush was everywhere and more melodious.

Following Maya and Janus, they wandered along one of the paths that ran clockwise round the lake, and they came to a little

putting green, and a wishing well. Then round to the left they took a path that led away from the park, alongside a narrow, bubbling beck, and they walked for a long while up through a delightfully wooded glen.

Finally, near the top of the deep ravine, they came to a stone flagged square. There was a wide octagonal lily pond here, with the marble statue of a winged Hermes in the centre, which acted as a fountain to help circulate and aerate the water. And there were several large, ornate orange fish swimming around in the water.

They sat there for some time: some on benches and some on the low stone wall surrounding the pond, drinking in the atmosphere.

Then Maya called them together. “Well, you’ve had a gentle introduction to the imaginal world now. As you get to know it better, you’ll find that it’s full of strange and miraculous things and experiences, and surprises. The strangest things, much like Alice discovered when, once upon a time, she tumbled down the rabbit hole.”

Even as she spoke, a little gnome in red trousers and matching braces, a white shirt, and bright yellow pointed felt hat passed through the square, pushing a squeaky, little brown wheelbarrow.

“Good afternoon,” the gnome greeted them, pausing momentarily to raise his hand and touch his hat, before continuing on his way and disappearing into nearby bushes.

“The more open-minded you are, the more imaginative, and fascinating, and bizarre will be the response,” Maya added.

She walked across to a sundial that stood on a marble plinth nearby, and after consulting it, she brought the group together again. “Well, you’ve had a gentle foretaste of the delights to come – providing you practise your exercises, that is – and now I think we should return to the everyday world.”

She had them form a circle again, this time around the sundial, and they once again found themselves back in Clement Gardens, in a circle around the ancient oak. They thanked Maya and Janus profusely on their return, and then Janus went on his

way.

The major stepped forward at this point and proposed a motion. “What an excellent adventure! The events of today call for a celebration,” he proposed, “and I think we should adjourn to the Green Man. Do I have a seconder?”

Alex’s hand shot up. “I second that,” he grinned.

Maya raised her hand, too. “And I third it.”

“So, who’s in favour?” Gwyn asked, and all hands went up in the air.

“Carried unanimously!” Gwyn beamed, and they all set off for the Green Man, full of animated conversations about their first jaunt into the imaginal world.

As T. S. Eliot said, “The journey, Not the destination matters...”. And, not least, sharing good company along the way.

The End

The ishraqi institute

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The Imaginal Veil

By H. M. Forester

Alex, a young adult finds employment and, after attending a lecture on the Imaginal World by Professor Sheila Trelawney, he joins one of the groups run by the Cross-Cultural Studies Institute, the Silver Circle, and he transitions from an interest in theory to practical pursuits.

Here, then, is Alex's story, the story of the group, and about them getting a little more than they bargained for, in their work.

Genre: Psi-Fi.