

The Scent of Reality

and other short stories



H. M. Forester

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By H. M. Forester

Genre: Psi-Fi.

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Front cover image: *The Sense of Smell*, by Philippe Mercier (1689–1760).

Dedication

Dedicated with many thanks to you,
dear reader and fellow psychonaut.



*“We live in a world where there is more and
more information, and less and less meaning.”*

~ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.



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A. The Scent of Reality

1. The Gathering

“[I]t is in this transformation of perception that we find the healing of that great schism that split the West—the rift between thought and being. It is by means of the Creative Imagination ...”

~ Tom Cheetham, *All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings.*

Eno stood for a few moments, hovering in the doorway, and dithering; wondering whether to be brave and enter the room or to briskly turn tail and head back home.

He'd half turned away when an elderly lady stopped momentarily and sidled past him. She wore a thick, burgundy-coloured woollen coat, in spite of the clement spring weather, and long, dry grey hair tied back in a neat bun, with a burgundy trilby hat, replete with pheasant's feather, firmly pulled down on top. And she wore a wonderful rosy scent. Judging by the pleasant aroma, it was not some chemical concoction but the real thing.

“My metabolism isn't as high as it once was,” the lady explained in answer to his unasked question, “and I feel the cold even in spring.”

“Oh, I do beg your pardon,” he apologised, and stood aside.

“Good to have you with us,” the lady smiled, and before he had a chance to do otherwise, she had taken him by the arm and guided him into their midst.

“First things first,” the lady said, stopping abruptly on the spot, letting go of his arm, turning smartly through ninety degrees and making a beeline for the bar.

Not knowing quite what he was doing, Eno followed her and surveyed the pumps.

“What can I get you, squire?” asked the portly landlord, as Eno fished in his jeans' pocket for his wallet.

Eno gestured to the elderly woman. “This lady was before

me,” he smiled.

The landlord nodded and turned instead to the woman. “Sorry, my dear. What can I get you?”

The lady stroked her chin thoughtfully, and gave the landlord a cheeky grin. “Well, I was going to say a sweet sherry, landlord, but I think I’ll treat myself: a large brandy and Babycham, please.”

The landlord chortled, and turned away to reach over the bar to find a suitable glass, before filling it at the optic.

“And whatever takes this young man’s fancy, sir,” Gladys called after the landlord.

“The name’s Morris.”

Eno raised a hand and tried to gently remonstrate. “No, no. If anyone should be paying, it’s me,” he tried to say, though he must have put the wrong set of teeth in his mouth earlier that day, and the words didn’t come out as fluently and eloquently as he would have hoped.

“Gladys Merrywether. That’s very gentlemanly of you, Mister ...”

“Enoch Josephs,” he returned, “but everyone calls me Eno.”

“Well, that’s very gentlemanly of you, Eno, but I insist. Besides, the last thing I want is to pull a fast one on you by emotionally blackmailing you. That wouldn’t do at all.”

He realised, after a little more gentle to-and-froing that Gladys was firmly set on buying the round, so he gracefully conceded, thanked her again, and settled on a pint of lager. He usually drank a small Guinness, but today he could do with the extra alcohol content to loosen him up a little. Well, quite a lot, really. He had to break free from the steely grip of self-conscious inhibition, to be frank.

Eno noted how the old lady carefully counted out the coins, whereas he usually got in a bit of flap, especially at supermarket checkouts, and ended up with a pocketful of change; even a large jar full of pretty-much worthless coppers.

°Take care of the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves,° an inner voice prompted him, and there was some folk wisdom in that.

“Anyhow,” said Gladys after she’d paid the landlord. While he had hoped to find a quiet nook, the lady took his arm and marched him across the bar toward a large old oak table to one side of the log fire. They’d perhaps light it in the evening as things cooled off.

Over the fireplace was a large painting. In the old town, he’d have expected a seascape with a large sailing vessel battling through waves, but saw that it was a rural scene depicting two couples, safely behind glass. Going closer, he read the words on a small brass plaque: *The Sense of Smell*, by Philippe Mercier (1689–1760).

There were three others at the table already, and it looked like she was expected, as all eyes turned their way.

“This your first time, dear?” she asked.

He didn’t answer immediately, as two of the middle-aged men at the table rose from their seats and went over to a similar large table nearby and moved it so that it butted up against the first. Clearly, they were expecting still more new arrivals, because the two tables could comfortably accommodate a dozen, or even more if people shuffled up.

Eno was still mulling over Gladys’s question, but his reply would have to wait until the people in the gathering had greeted the lady and she had introduced him to them. As there was only the one of him and four of them, they wouldn’t have any problem remembering his name, but it was all a bit too brisk, and he too flustered, to take in their names and remember for more than a minute to which face each name belonged. So, there was Gladys, a single, tall, slim gentleman by the name of Bart, and a petite couple a little older, Carole and Christopher. As to who they were or what they did for a living, which was the usual basic biographical exchange, that would no doubt follow once he’d settled himself in, though he was already anxiously rehearsing a short speech. He didn’t like to be caught unprepared, because if he was put under any pressure, either the words would come out wrong, or his subconscious would get him to say something foolish and embarrassing, or else his mind would simply blank. And this in turn would further exacerbate his self-consciousness

and his social anxiety. That was the upside of preparation; the downside was that it caused its own, often unnecessary anxiety, and blunted his imaginative and spontaneous faculties – the magic of the moment, as it were, which he could only enjoy while drunk, stoned, or in well-established, understanding, and considerate company.

°Worry is a cloud which rains destruction,° the voice reminded him. That would be a quote from Idries Shah.

°*Seeker After Truth*,° the voice reliably informed him.

°I know, I know. ‘My philosophy is that worrying means you suffer twice,’° he returned. That would be Newt Scamander in the film *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, the first in a series based on screenplays by the novelist, J. K. Rowling.

°Well, don’t expect any congratulations from me until you actually do something more about these hang-ups that worry about them,° came the sharp retort.

It turned out that Gladys and the couple, Carole and Christopher, had met as a group on one previous occasion, and that like him, this was Bart’s first time. That’s all he knew, and it would stay like that for a while longer as five other newbies came to join them in the next few minutes, making ten attendees in total.

Finally, Gladys held her gold wristwatch up to her eyes and adjusted her spectacles to see the tiny hands more clearly, and announced in a lilting voice that they should perhaps begin.

“If there are any stragglers, I’m sure we can try to ‘bring them up to speed’, if you’ll forgive the buzzword.” She laughed, using her arms to mime quotation marks in the air, “... and forgive the newfangled term ‘buzzword’ itself.”

Gladys was sitting on a couch along the wall beside the fireplace and she immediately turned to him, sitting in a padded chair opposite her.

“Perhaps you’d like to start, Eno?” she half-asked and half-requested. He could feel something, or someone, inside himself pushing past his everyday persona to comply.

Eno looked askance at the lady. “Wouldn’t it be better if you introduced the group, and told the reason for the gathering?” he

enquired, hoping that he wouldn't come across as too pushy.

Carole tossed her head back and laughed at this point. "That's what Christopher and I said last week. But that's not how it works, apparently. It's up to each of us newcomers to tell the group their own story of how they arrived at this place, and the reason for us each being here will hopefully become apparent as the group progresses."

This was becoming curiouser and curiouser. Maybe he'd blundered into an Agatha Christie-themed whodunnit? Maybe it was a covert psychological study? Or maybe it was for an episode of *Candid Camera* and they were being secretly filmed?

°And maybe you should quit playing games and start paying attention,° the voice prompted him, and he straightened himself up on the chair.

The elderly lady nodded in agreement. "It will all make sense eventually, Eno: you'll see. And since we have seven new arrivals, those of us who were here at the first meeting, last week, will again retell their story." She paused and looked toward Carole and Christopher, and they nodded in agreement.

"Would you like to go first, Eno?" Gladys asked again. "What drew you to our meeting today?"

Before he had time to bite his tongue, he felt the urge to quickly reply: "Oh, I was just passing," and then he had a momentary chortle to himself, recognising the bizarre origin of the exchange in *Fantastic Beasts*, which he'd watched a few months back.

The main protagonist of the wizarding world, Newt Scamander had been asked that very question by a religionist, Mary Lou, who was head of the fundamentalist Second Salemers, a group which was vehemently opposed to the practice of magic; and that had indeed been his reply.

Gladys waited a moment, peering over the top of her glasses and searching his face, and then she startled him with her response.

"Are you a seeker? A seeker after truth?"

Eno sat up sharply and gazed back into Gladys's eyes, which had a distinct twinkle, as if the old lady knew exactly what sort of

trick she had pulled.

That had been Mary Lou's very next question in the film.

Of course, Newt had replied that he was more of a chaser, really, with his fervent work to discover and study "fantastic beasts", and to educate a largely hostile wizarding world. But what could he say about himself?

And then came the second question now crossing his mind, which he simply could not come out and ask: had he blundered into some kind of fundamentalist cult?

Then again, the assembled people hadn't come across as what he imagined cultists might be like, though of course they could simply be harmless or ignorant. Or perhaps they were spiritualists; spiritual mediums?

In the end, what could he say, except to admit: "I'm sorry, but I really don't know what brought me here, except perhaps some largely-unconscious urge to connect. I have to admit that I've been leading something of a hermetic life."

"Did I say 'Hermetic'?" Well, that was another surprise in itself. "I meant I've been living like a hermit."

Gladys said nothing, but merely smiled and raised her eyebrows. Chances were, she had spotted the Freudian slip, and he'd unwitting divulged something more about himself; much, such as his social anxiety, being no doubt all-too obvious to those assembled.

"Humour an old lady," Gladys said at length, after taking a sip of her brandy. "And trust me for now. Or rather – and much more to the point – trust yourself."

But where to begin?

"I know it's a hackneyed phrase, but begin at the beginning," the old lady replied, yet again anticipating his thought processes. "Let's just 'go with the flow', as they say, and see where it leads us. You've already made a fine start."

And then she added: "I'm a writer myself in my spare time, and when I see a blank sheet of paper in my hand or fed into the typewriter, I just start anywhere, writing down my thoughts – well, I say *my* thoughts, but they just appear out of the blue – the important thing being to get the old imaginative juices flowing.

And before I know it, I'm in full swing. You have nothing to lose, so why not give it a try."

Stranger and stranger. Here he was, and until mere minutes ago, she didn't know him from Adam, and yet – unless of course this was wishful thinking on his part – she already had him down as a writer. Not a very good nor overly-successful writer, but a writer nonetheless. So what did that make Gladys – a shrewd cookie, a people watcher, a mind-reader, a clairvoyant? That she might have carried out background research on him beforehand, like some charlatan, really didn't seem plausible in this instance.

Well, there was only one thing for it: and so – for better or worse – he began his tale to see where the warp and weft of the threads of his life might, indeed, lead. Even if he didn't much relish where those threads might lead: in that respect, and at the same time noting his own inner reluctance and resistance, perhaps he *was* a seeker after truth?

2. Eno's Story

"I'd say that good art means the ability of any one man to pin down in some permanent and intelligible medium a sort of idea of what he sees in Nature that nobody else sees. In other words, to make the other fellow grasp, through skilled selective care in interpretative reproduction or symbolism, some inkling of what only the artist himself could possibly see in the actual objective scene itself."

~ H. P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters, Volume 2*.

Eno wasn't sure whether it was the correct protocol to stand while reciting one's story, but acutely aware of how he would not be able to restrain the unconscious urge to squirm self-consciously, he chose to remain seated, taking two large gulps of his lager, and keeping his glass close-to-hand, before he began.

"Well, if I'm to start at the beginning," he began, "then I guess I need to tell you that I was a sensitive infant, though at the time I was pretty outgoing – I wasn't really self-conscious in my early years; indeed it wasn't until I'd had children and was into my thirties that I really began to mature emotionally, rather than just socially and intellectually. And if we're talking spiritually, that only really began around that time, and progressed in small steps."

Oh, God. He'd foolishly jumped down a ruddy rabbit hole here, and he was tumbling head first.

"Once upon a time, I would have blamed my father's autocratic management style for my later self-consciousness and introversion, but looking back, I'm sure he was a good-natured man and did his best for us as a family. All the more so because he came from a pretty poor (I won't say humble), working-class family well-practised in the noble arts of 'mend and make do' and 'soldiering on' in the face of uncertainty and hardship, having experienced the Second World War and the austerity of the post-war years. He had to leave school at fourteen, and though largely self-educated, he could turn his hand to all-manner of practical

trades.

“I don’t know how it came about, but even though I’ve mellowed after my rebellious, foolish, at times utterly stupid, and troglodyte teenage years, I still feel something of a let-down, and I am riddled with guilt, shame and remorse; wounds that never fully heal, and that burst open every now and again.”

Dear Lord, what was he saying? He’d probably have been more reticent at a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, or with the vicar at confession, for that matter.

“If it helps, Eno,” chipped-in Gladys: “remember that we are all in the same boat.”

He bowed his head in appreciation. “Thanks.”

“But perhaps that’s not the sort of thing I should be talking about, nor what you really want to or need to hear. I’m glad, actually, that I am finally free of a punishing perfectionist, workaholic streak, and a driving need to succeed. What I say to myself these days is that ‘Good is good enough’, though I still don’t find that totally convincing. I still ask myself from time to time: ‘Yes, but *is* my good really good enough?’ The spiritual materials I’ve studied don’t exactly flatter or pander to the ego.”

“I spent more years than I care to remember studying spirituality – note the word ‘studying’, rather than practising. And, as you can see, I show few signs of having made any tangible progress, nor do I even have any paper qualifications to show for it. Okay, sure: in the second half of my life, it’s helped in developing a real conscience, to develop my intuition – at times, it’s more like inner-tuition, and the pun is intended – and what started off as very sporadic flashes of inspiration have become more frequent and trustworthy. It sure as hell didn’t help with my perfectionism, though.

“Indeed, it made matters worse. I became impossible to live with, both for myself and for others, and I ended up divorced.

“Fast forward fifteen years – what I not-so-fondly refer to as my wilderness years, though also years of independent self-work – and at last I’m beginning to find my feet and blossom. That’s when I embarked on an abortive but fruitful course training to be a counsellor, a therapist; when ‘good is good enough’ began to

kick in a little. When I'd first started studying spiritual matters, all my former interests had become sidelined; now I was once again broadening my interests, and deriving benefits from this. Looking back, I would say that I swapped unhealthy and one-pointed perfectionism for a more benign wholeness of being; and had gone from 'talking the talk' to make my first steps in 'walking the walk'. Baby steps, I guess, but real steps nonetheless.

"Okay, so that's more than sufficient backstory. Maybe too much. Maybe way too much. You're really wondering how I happen to be here, right now, in this room with you; and you're not alone in wondering this. I'm asking myself the same questions. Maybe each one of us is? There's a joke featuring the wise fool Nasrudin about that ..."

Even as the words came out, Eno knew that he would only botch things if he attempted to recount the tale.

"Sorry, I forget where I read it: one of Idries Shah's books."

Gladys laughed. "If I'm not mistaken, in *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*."

Well, there was a surprise. Scrape your jaw off the floor, Eno Josephs.

"I'll take your word for it, Gladys. And I hope you can remember the words, because having mentioned it, I realise now that I've forgotten them, and would only make an ass of myself trying to recite it."

"Well, if this is the story you're referring to, it goes something like this, and I may be paraphrasing here:"

One day Nasrudin was walking along a deserted road. Night was falling as he spied a troop of horsemen coming toward him. His imagination began to work overtime, and he feared that they might rob him, or impress him into the army. So strong did this fear become that he leaped over a wall and found himself in a graveyard. The other travellers, innocent of any such motive as had been assumed by Nasrudin, became curious and pursued him.

When they came upon him lying motionless like a

corpse, one said, “Can we help you — why are you here in this position?”

Nasrudin, realizing his mistake, said, “It is more complicated than you assume. You see, *I* am here because of *you*; and *you, you* are here because of *me*.”

Dear Gladys was certainly brim-full of surprises, and overflowing; added to which, she had saved him from the embarrassment of the cerebral cogs and pistons seizing up and his mind going blank.

°Your studies have left you plagued with self-doubt,° he was prompted, out of the blue, and he couldn’t quite be sure whether Gladys had said this to him or if it was a voice somewhere deep inside himself. Whatever: the thought was expressed with an unmistakable air of sincerity and certainty.

To which came the prompt retort: °If you’re looking for sympathy, you’ll find it in a dictionary, between ‘sex’ and ‘syphilis’.°

Without thinking, he looked down the table toward Bart, and the man’s face immediately flushed and he cast his eyes down.

“Sorry,” Eno felt the urge to reply, suddenly struck by the way in which his talk must be coming across. Bart must already have him earmarked as a classic loser.

Gladys looked from one to the other and peered into Eno’s eyes momentarily, but passed no comment. Whereas he perhaps had an inkling of what was going through people’s minds that afternoon, he suspected that Gladys was aware of a whole lot more. If you’ll forgive the vernacular, there were no flies on her.

The phrase °ego contamination° popped into Eno’s mind at that moment, and if he recalled from his studies, that would be the Parent and Child intruding into the boundaries of the Adult ego. Yes, that made more than a little sense. In spite of his many years spent studying the Sufi Way, he was not convinced that the answer lay in the flagellation, dissolution and death of the ego, but was more taken by Western traditions, Jung’s depth psychology, and Iain McGilchrist’s neuroscience and philosophy that though the ego made an abysmal master, as it had become since the so-called Enlightenment – which others would rather

refer to as the Endarkenment and the disenchantment of the world – it made a perfectly good and necessary servant.

°Time to stop sliding, and get a grip, young man.°

Young man? Chance would be a fine thing.

He took another large swig of lager and some slow, deep breaths. To bail out now would be another major defeat.

Gladys anticipated him yet again: “I believe it was the author, Tom Peters who once wrote: ‘If a window of opportunity appears, don't pull down the shade.’”

Yeah, yeah. Feel the fear and do it anyway. Who said that?

°Susan Jeffers,° he was reliably informed, perhaps by the sharp-witted duty clerk of the “Miscellaneous Information Department”. As for trivia, that went in one ear and straight out of the other, at least for him, but this must be a snippet of information stored away in some forgotten moment God knows where and when, of potential future relevance, along with a great many embarrassing childhood memories.

Gladys kindly brought him back to the here and now: “You must have some inkling, however faint, of why you are here and what brought you here, Eno.”

There was that word again – inkling – and also an acknowledgement that he was leading them all round the island, rather than “cut to the chase”, as the director might say of a movie.

Actually, as an aside, would J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield and friends be mortally offended if they were to name this new group “The Inklings”, because that seemed rather appropriate, really.

°Cut to the chase,° the inner voice strongly advised.

Seriously, what was he afraid of? Being imperfect, fear of saying something inappropriate, or doing the wrong thing? Fear of the unknown? Fear of failure, or of ridicule?

He was reminded of Professor Dumbledore's reply to Harry in the *Harry Potter* series when asked where he thought they were: “My dear boy, I have no idea. This is, as they say, your party.”

“I had a dream,” Eno blurted out at length, forcing himself to

venture further into this unscripted territory.

“I found myself lost in a strange town at night. Well, I say strange, but in actual fact I remember having been there on countless occasions in the past. I knew I had to get home, but I also remembered that it was frustratingly difficult to get all my ducks lined up and make it home from that location, for some reason.

“Anyhow, I was determined to get home, so I set out across the town and found myself in a network of narrow streets and alleyways.

“I became aware of a melodic sound somewhere ahead of me, like a high-pitched flute, and since I had made no progress of my own volition, I followed the sound of music as best I could, until finally – having pretty much given up on my quest – I realised that the flute had stopped playing. I could, however, hear the sound of voices and, looking around, I saw the lights of a public house nearby, and my attention was drawn to the slow creak of a wooden sign swaying in the breeze above the open doorway: a bright pink pig standing on his hind legs playing a flute, and the name of the pub written in an arch above it: ‘The Pig and Whistle’.

“Anyhow, I ventured inside and actually managed to order a glass of Guinness and count out my change to pay the bartender. At that point, however, I had the urge to visit the loo and I left the bar and wandered off down the corridor to find the gents’.

“I passed a guy on the way and he enquired ‘Have you lost your way?’, to which I replied straight off the top of my head, ‘Yes, I have actually.’ I sensed that he had used the phrase advisedly, rather than making casual conversation.

“At which point he walked up to me, nodding ‘I thought as much’ and clapped his hand on my shoulder. And in a ‘whoosh!’ I found myself back in bed in my apartment, wide awake and in desperate need to visit the bathroom and point my own pennywhistle at porcelain.”

“Later the next day – this very morning, in fact – I decided on a whim to have a wander around the town centre, mostly to get some fresh air and clear my mind, having spent weeks beaver-

away at home working on the typescript of a novel.

“I’d visited most of the usual shops and had drawn a blank, not that I was looking for anything in particular: I was just looking for anything, really, that might catch my eye or tickle my fancy.

“And then, something inside me suggested that I forget about tramping up and down the beaten path and just follow my feet wherever they led. And it’s true: something, or someone, inside me knew exactly where they wanted my feet to go. It was as if my conscious mind and its self-elected front or spokesman was on autopilot, or I was like a tramcar on invisible rails. So I just relaxed and went along with it.

“Well, I say relaxed, but what happened next made my heart lurch. I was walking along a short side road that crossed between two of the main shopping streets when a lady emerged from what appeared to be a day centre for the elderly.

“As I passed the bottom of the stone steps, she was coming down, lost her footing, and started to tumble forwards.

“Without any conscious thought whatsoever, I instinctively leapt forward and caught her in mid-flight.

“Fortunately, though she was rather shaken, she was otherwise unharmed. Then another lady appeared and we took the elderly lady across the road to her house. After a while, seeing that she was in good hands, with her friend making her a nice hot cup of tea, I left and continued my walk. I have no doubt in my mind whatsoever that this was not mere luck, but that I was meant to be there at that moment.”

Gladys gave a little chortle. “Right time, right place, right people” she smiled; a phrase with which he, too, was familiar, and to which he usually added “and right circumstances”.

Gladys nodded.

“Anyhow, later that day – just after noon – I continued my walk, meandering down here into the old town. And, ‘lo! and behold!’ as I wandered down one of the narrow, winding streets, I saw that sign again and the self-same words: ‘The Pig and Whistle’.”

The pub had been set back in a small cobbled square, with a

small, gnarled cherry tree facing it in the centre of the square. He'd actually relieved himself against the trunk of tree, having checked that there was nobody else around, but he omitted that detail from his account.

Bart coughed into his hand, presumably to attract his attention, and all eyes turned to him. "Of course, it's quite likely that you've passed this way before, or read the name in an advert in the *Evening News*, or perhaps heard someone refer to the pub, Eno ..."

Eno nodded in agreement, though he was not convinced that this would entirely account for the bizarre nature of his day: "Yes, that's quite possible."

"All I'm saying," Bart continued, "is that we shouldn't discount other, more plausible, and perfectly rational explanations in favour of metaphysical 'woo'. Occam's razor and all that jazz, my friend. Sometimes life gives us cherries, and more often than not it gives us lemons, and what we tend to do is remember the cherries and discard the lemons."

"I've taken that into account, Bart," he reiterated, hoping that his tone didn't sound too irritated. If anything, he put aside the cherries in his life, and was stuck with the many lemons. He actually took a lot of convincing. Indeed, it was entirely possible that there was someone out there aghast at his thickheadedness, crying "For God's sake, man! How much evidence do you need? Will that damn penny ever drop?"

Bart pressed further: "In scientific circles it's a well known phenomenon they call the 'file drawer problem'."

"And yet here we are," he replied, mimicking Morpheus's remark to Bugs on their reunion in *The Matrix Resurrections*, another film that had had a big impact on him.

"Here we are, indeed, Eno," Gladys returned, clapping her hands together. "And I am delighted to have you with us."

"Thank you, friend, and bravo! We appear to be on the same wavelength."

Should he put that to the test? He really needed an answer, one way or the other,

Eno waved his hands in front of him, palms uppermost,

looked pleadingly into Gladys's eyes and asked her straight out, with another line pulled out of *The Matrix Resurrections*: "I've had dreams that weren't just dreams. Am I crazy?"

Without hesitation, nor batting an eyelid, Gladys replied, just as the Analyst had to Thomas Anderson in the film: "We don't use that word here."

Gladys was as sharp as an eagle.

And finally, before turning to Bart to hear his story, she leant across the table and whispered to him, "And as the Oracle might point out, what's really going to 'bake your noodle' later on is: would the lady have still fallen if you hadn't been there?"

°If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?°

°Not exactly, but not a million miles away.°

"Anyway, Bart: the floor is yours," Gladys lilted, turning away.

Bart put his hands up defensively, perhaps wanting to first work out what he was letting himself in for before committing himself.

"If you don't mind, Gladys, I'd rather pass for now. Give one of the other newcomers a shot first, please. I'm in no rush."

"As you wish, Bart," the lady conceded. "How about you, Melanie?"

3. Melanie's Story

*"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."*

~ Khalilullah Khalili in Idries Shah, *Learning How to Learn*.

Melanie looked like she was in her mid-twenties and still pretty much into the glamour of young adult life, with long curly, henna-dyed hair and a mid-length floral dress. Yet perhaps something of a rebel, judging by her choice of Doc Marten boots, though in her case the heaviness was offset somewhat by the brightly-coloured flowers painted up the sides of the heavy work boots. Perhaps this was a play on the old Cockney rhyming slang for boots: "daisy roots"?

Whatever: she was making a statement about her identity. Well, don't we all, really? Even being a dedicated non-follower of fashion, or taking the road less travelled, is making the same basic statement, just from a different angle or from the perspective of a different subculture or tribe. Can any of us be truly original and independent anymore? Or, put another way, is there anything new under the sun?

°That's a phrase borrowed from Ecclesiastes,° an inner voice reliably informed him.

Right.

°The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.°

Thanks for that.

°Now, sit upright and do pay attention,° the voice requested, and, somewhat chastened, he dutifully complied. °Daydreaming and idle speculation is egocentric and disrespectful, you know. Not to mention sexist, you superannuated, flabby, baldy bonce.°

Indeed it was, and – ouch! – that hit home.

Melanie took a sip of her large tankard of real ale, gracefully

dabbed her lips with a napkin to erase her frothy moustache, and introduced herself.

“Hi everyone, and thanks for being so inviting,” she began.

“My name’s Melanie Clearwater. I earned a BA (Honours) in Philosophy and Psychology. Since graduating, I’ve been training as a nurse and am currently working on the wards of a psychiatric hospital with a view to work in that field, and I’ve recently embarked on a part-time course in counselling. I’m hoping to follow that up with a diploma course in integrative psychotherapy, and perhaps later embark on a career in private practise when I’ve built up sufficient knowledge and practical experience.”

She took a pause for breath,

“In my free time – what little I am currently permitted, or permit myself, for that matter – I enjoy camping, backpacking, pushbike riding, and girly nights out. I’m not a natural bookworm, but the nature of my work has given me a vast treasure trove of books to study, though as yet I’ve only just begun to skim the surface, and I can already see that this will be involve a lifetime’s continuing education. Always on the road and never quite arriving, you might say.”

“That’s not a bad place to be,” Gladys chipped-in. “Enjoying a fruitful journey and having some good companions along the way.”

Gosh, this young lady had it all mapped-out, while at her age – total clusterfuck that he’d been – he’d have been wondering in a daze where his next smoke of wacky baccy, or square meal, was coming from. What he wouldn’t give for some of that clarity and confident poise. A little more functional grey matter wouldn’t go amiss, either. Not to mention the chance of a smoke.

°Coffin nails!° the voice reminded him brusquely. °Suicide by instalments, as you know fine well. And if you don’t, then you’re a bloody fool, Eno Josephs.°

“What brought me here?” Melanie asked herself. “Well, I have to be careful how I word this, due to patient confidentiality, but if you can imagine me going through and redacting certain details and even whole blocks of text, it goes something like this:

“Where I’m training, we have a patient who’s coming up for retirement now. I’ll call her Zee for simplicity. Despite her heavy medication, and even given the advances in pharmaceuticals over the years – and not least the abandonment of some pretty grotesque and barbaric medieval treatments – she’s been in every few months for decades now, so I’ve been told. When she comes in, she’s wildly delusional, and yet when she’s away she can be remarkably sane and lucid for weeks at a time. I saw her once on my first assignment to the psyche wards, I’ve sat in on some of her therapy sessions several times since, and I’ve seen and spoken to her out and about in town, and you would never think that a woman like that could actually be suffering from recurring psychotic episodes so acute that they require hospitalisation, heavy medication, and occasional restraint.

“Of course she’s been the subject of many biochemical tests and also long series of talking therapy, but the medics and the therapists have never been able to find out the root cause of her difficulties, nor come up with any medical regime to keep her well.

“The funny thing is – oh, I’m so sorry: the strange thing is – she has not been admitted once in the last two years, though she’s continuing with her talking therapy even when in apparent good health. Of course, we did wonder whether she has perhaps finally learnt how to mask or hide her symptoms, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. The consensus is that she has undergone a radical change or somehow ‘outgrown’ her condition, the only other option being that she’s found some ‘miracle cure’.

“Of course, ‘miracle cure’ is not something the doctors are at all comfortable with, but that is what Zee herself has repeatedly claimed during therapy sessions, so I feel that this should be followed up as a potential ‘lead’, if nothing else. Whether it’s literal or metaphorical, it’s still something to go on, especially when all other avenues have hit a dead-end thus far. Well, drawn more than a blank. You remember those buzzers that the judges on *The X Factor* press when they give an act a resounding thumbs down? Or Simon Cowell’s brutal sarcasm? Well, that’s the level of confidence I would assign to the various theories that the

doctors and consultants have come up with. A big fat ‘Durr!’ And, no, I don’t think for one moment that that makes me better than them: it’s just that they won’t admit their current defeat.”

“Now, maybe this one case on its own would not have gained so much of my attention, but – and I’m placing my trust in what Zee has confided in me here – she tells me that she has seen comparable results in other people she knows who have suffered difficulties in their lives, in areas other than their mental well-being. I mean things like the practicalities of life; the whole shebang. Not a fulfilment of desires, you understand, but certainly a fulfilment of chronic need.”

Gladys gently patted Melanie on the hand. “Such things are possible,” she nodded. “And I say that having seen it with my own eyes, and in spite of my own initial doubts. The writer and thinker, Idries Shah once remarked that ‘miracles have details’, of course, so a lot of thought has to go into such ‘miracle cures’, if you are not averse to calling them such, if only out of utter astonishment, if not reverence. What’s the word you youngsters use, these days?”

“Gobsmacked?” Melanie suggested.

“Yes, gobsmacked, indeed. Thank you, dear. And again, it’s said that ‘the devil is in the detail’, so pulling it off is no mean feat.

“And then there are some cases that genuinely surpass all attempts at intellectual understanding,” she added. “The tale is too long to share with you now, but if you’ve a mind, try Googling ‘The Story of Mushkil Gusha’, remover of all difficulties.

“But anyway, if I were asked to sum it all up in one single word – an impossible feat in itself – it would be ‘transcendence’: by which I mean it is entirely possible to transcend any amount of life’s difficulties, if we approach them in the right way. Well, I say way, but I really mean ways, since those are as innumerable as the poor souls suffering affliction. The psychologist, Jung was on the trail when he spoke of the ‘transcendent function’. That is, a means of resolving or reconciling, and hence transcending, what you would call a dialectic: some great, apparent conflict,

opposition or duality that resists conventional means of resolution. And, of course, others have spoken of similar transcendent ideas before Jung, such as the Russian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff with his Law of Three, and much further back (and also to this day) the alchemists speak of the chemical marriage between Sun and Moon.”

Bart was already on his feet.

“I think I’ve heard just about enough!” he half-spat across the table and half-stammered.

Gladys herself appeared to be on the brink of standing up to face the man, and she leant forward on her seat and glared down the table at him.

“Oh, do sit down before you make a fool of yourself, Bartholemew Grimshaw!”

Eno heard the words quite distinctly, and he realised that they had emanated from Gladys, though she could surely have not said the words out loud.

“How do you know my name?” the man stammered, flopping back down in his seat. Then: “My wife’s put you up to this, hasn’t she? And you’ve been doing some clever clandestine research of your own! Spying on me! Well, I’m no James Randi, but you don’t fool me for one minute with your cheap parlour tricks.”

“Cheap parlour tricks!” Gladys replied, tipping her head back and laughing out loud. “Might I remind you, Bartholemew Grimshaw, that I am not the one who won £500 betting on the horses this morning; that I am not the one who decided not to tell the ‘little woman’ since in revealing your win you would have to reveal your sordid little habit. And I am not the one who went back out on the town to celebrate on your own.”

Bart had risen again from his seat and at this latest barrage of truth, he flopped back down, quite deflated.

“Gobsmacked,” Melanie reiterated.

“Indeed,” Gladys chuckled.

Again Bart rose from his seat, somewhat unsteadily this time, and Eno cringed as he half-imagined what might come next.

“Thank you, Bart,” she smiled. “That’s very kind of you. I’ll have a sweet sherry, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Bart's jaw nearly hit the floor, and he put his hands up defensively: "Alright, alright. I admit that in an effort to make amends, and to take back my hasty and thoughtless words, I was about to ask if I might buy a round."

Fishing out a notepad and pen from his pocket, he somewhat soberly collected their orders and hurried off to the bar with his tail still between his legs. Christopher kindly went in his wake to help carry the order, while others took advantage of the brief interlude to excuse themselves and visit the loos.

Well, that was certainly a turn out for the books.

When they had all reassembled, Melanie concluded: "And so that's what I'm doing here: following up on the lead that Zee gave me, and to find out more about this 'miracle cure'. It goes without saying that my supervisor and the doctors might not look favourably on such private enterprise."

Gladys patted Melanie on the shoulder. "It also goes without saying, my dear, that what is brought up within these four walls – short of criminality or endangerment – stays here, just as it does in a therapy session," she replied reassuringly. "And, given the mission you're on, do give some thought to 'The Story of Mushkil Gusha' as retold by Idries Shah. I really do believe that this story will give you the useful sort of 'lead' that you're looking for."

Gladys raised her finger in the air, as if she'd just had a brainwave.

"Just a brief aside while we're on the topic of transcendence," she said, rummaging in her shoulder bag, producing a diary, and adjusted her reading glasses on the bridge of her nose: "Here's a short extract from Idries Shah's *Learning How to Learn* that I've been set to study by my own 'supervisor' or mentor, for want of a better term."

She added: "I should say at the outset that I'm not a Sufi, but the enterprise from which I originate finds a use for such materials."

The Ceiling

Q: Can you give me an example, in parallel or parable terms, of the area in which Sufi teaching

operates, and how it is done?

A: Our teaching speaks of, and exists partly in, 'another world', a 'higher realm', a 'different dimension'.

Here is a parallel of what this means, in one significant way, and what the object of the Teaching is.

The Unknown Ceiling

Suppose we have a house with walls, ceilings, floors, and we are inside that house. Let us say that through long-established custom, people can touch and deal with only the floors and walls. If someone were to walk in and say: 'Look at the ceiling,' the people would be incapable of doing so—rather like a child which often cannot see something, certainly cannot observe it, unless it has been demonstrated to it.

Suppose, further, that the custom of generations was to hang things on walls and not to have anything on the ceilings. Objects on the ceilings might then be 'invisible' to the people at large. So it is with our teaching. We frequently and abundantly assert that people do not think things through, that they make assumptions (such as 'there is no ceiling') which they do not attempt to verify. But, like the intelligent man who would be trying to point out the existence of the ceilings, we do more than constantly draw attention back to the theoretical postulate ('there may be ceilings').

We provide, in instructional courses, meetings, contact with teachers, observation materials, exercises, call them what you like, the practical means to establish and maintain for the community which is being addressed the experience of the existence of 'ceilings'.

Gladys put away the book and peered over the top of her reading glasses.

"So, who's next?" She cast a glance in Bart's direction, though not unkindly.

"Thanks," the man replied, "but not just yet. I'm still working on it." He tapped his chest.

Gladys scanned the table. "Well, I'm saving Carole and

Christopher for later, since they were here last week. And I'm not sure as yet what I myself might be able to usefully add. Any more newcomers? We'd love to hear why you are here and what brought you to us."

There was a long pause, but Gladys did not hurry them.

"Yes, Gordon?" she prompted at length, spotting the man with half-opened mouth, on the verge of speaking.

4. Gordon's Story

“Active imagination requires a state of reverie, half-way between sleep and waking [hypnagogia].”

~ Carl Jung.

Gordon wiped his sweating brow with a napkin, absentmindedly brushed the remnants of a packet of crisps from the lapel of his jacket, adjusted his blue and yellow striped silk tie, and brought out a large red comb to quickly make sure that his shiny black forelocks were suitably presentable and not in his eyes.

°Keeping up appearances,° Eno was advised, though he'd already worked out that much for himself.

Once upon a time, Eno had been the same: his performance anxiety written all over him in beads, even rivulets, of sweat. Had he worked on stage under the spotlights, even his underpants would have been thoroughly drenched. But these days, that wasn't a problem. Maybe it was because his metabolism had slowed somewhat after middle-age; partly because of his medication. And partly because he'd learnt to mask some of the physical symptoms. One symptom he had not learnt to control, however, was a breathless quivering in his voice when subjected to shocks. Emotional shocks, that was, not electrical shocks.

The man drew a deep breath. “I'm sorry, I feel a little like a fish out of water here, folks – but please note that this is not a complaint, as I hope you'll discover if you'll bear with me.

“Gordon James,” he introduced himself. “Thank you for having me here tonight, and for your wonderful contributions. I'll try to be brief and to the point. And again, that is in no way a complaint: I've been royally entertained thus far.

°Drag Queen coming up next, mate.°

Shhh!

“I come from a comfortably well-off middle class family, and thanks to an inheritance I launched my first real-estate business twenty years ago. Since then, I've watched that grow and prosper, and I've since become a shareholder and joined the board of three

other companies.

“And, really, I should be the one buying the next round,” he added, stifling a little chortle. “Don’t get me wrong. By which I mean I can easily afford it.”

“I’m happily married and we have two teenage children – a girl and a boy – who will both shortly be flying from the nest and heading off to university.

“So, all-in-all, I’m pretty pleased with my life – with our life – and though I don’t have a religious bone in my body, I’m grateful for the bounty and blessings that life has sent our way.”

He paused briefly to take a sip of his Vesper Martini (a cocktail devised by James Bond in the film *Casino Royale* that became something of a real-life fad for fans), and to wet his lips.

“However, approaching the turning point in my life, and already beginning to experience some of the symptoms of a pending mid-life crisis, and facing the prospect of our children moving away, I’m beginning to think, or to realise, that in the immortal phrase, ‘there must be more to life than this’, at least to the untrained or untutored eye. And the more I listen and drink-in, the more certain I am that that there really is more to it than that.

“How can I put it? I’m beginning to realise that most of our lives have been lived on the surface or at least not far from the surface, and I’m looking for ways to delve a little deeper and find real meaning – not that there isn’t meaning in marriage or raising children. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not in any way complaining about my lot.

“So, what I’m saying is, I’m looking for fresh options, not only for me but also for my wife. Louise said she was willing to come along, too, but in the end we decided that we’d see how things went with me, and we’d both come along to the next meeting, presuming that all went well with my initial recce – my reconnaissance, that is.

“As to how I arrived here this afternoon, let me see if I can put my words together in the right order. I see now that there’s a different sort of language, or lingo, to these things than the everyday and often superficial language we generally use.”

He paused for quite some time, perhaps struggling to express

himself in the right way.

“That’s fascinating, Gordon. There’s a writer and analyst by the name of James Hollis who, following on from C. G. Jung has many useful things to say about the meaning crisis and the second half of life.”

Gordon broke into a grin and nodded repeatedly and slowly.

“You couldn’t have known – or, then again, perhaps you could? – but that’s actually how I found my way here. Following a hunch, I had a good look through the shelves of the local public library, and quickly decided that the usual self help books weren’t going to be of much use to me. Indeed, I do wonder if the only benefit people actually derive and follow-up on from reading self help books is to go in search of more self help books. And yet it’s become something of an industry.

Eno laughed. Once upon a time, wanting to be a writer was a minority interest, but with the advent of self-publishing (once it had overcome the stigma of ‘vanity publishing’ among the populace, if not the publishing world and mainstream media), there must be tens of thousands of budding authors out there. He had over 4,000 followers on his Twitter account, and yet maybe as much as 95% of those were fellow authors, and everyone (him included) was more interested in hawking their wares than buying books. His Twitter feed was like a never-ending classified ads section in a local snoozepaper.

“Anyhow, there I was, scanning the shelves through increasingly blurred and tired eyes, when I noticed a lady by a set of shelves not far away, with her head tilted to one side, like an owl, silently watching me – you’ve all seen the cute photos on Facebook, right? Or in *National Geographic*.” The man tilted his head and widened his eyes appropriately as he spoke, so they got the picture.

“Noticing that I’d seen her, the lady came across, and she introduced herself as Kim, a trainee librarian. ‘You appear to be at a loss,’ she volunteered. ‘Are you looking for something in particular?’”

So I blurted out an abbreviated version of my story, about how mid-life was looming; about my beginning to see that there

must be more to life than the everyday humdrum existence; and she actually volunteered the term ‘crisis of meaning’. I said, yes, that’s the sort of thing I mean.

“Anyhow, she led me to another set of bookshelves, pulled out one of James Hollis’s books ... let me think ... Yes, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life: How to Finally, Really Grow Up*, if I’ve got the subtitle right, and handed it to me.

“That book turned out to be exactly what I was looking for, and it opened doorways that I never knew even existed.”

Gladys raised her glass toward the man.

“And one of those doorways proved even more unexpected, Gladys. In the back of the book I discovered a small white adhesive sticker, on which were printed the words, in ornate calligraphy: ‘Harvey’s Esoteric Book Emporium’, along with an address in town.

“At the time, I thought it more than a little cheeky that someone had put the sticker in the back of a public library book, advertising a service.

“But I was curious, and eventually found the book store down one of the narrow lanes in the old town not very far from here. Again, unable to find what I was looking for, I found myself recounting my story to the lady who runs the store.”

“This, too, is the story of Mushkil Gusha, remover of all difficulties,” Gladys chipped in, with a smile.

“And she wasn’t after selling me any of her books,” Gordon continued, “though I actually did spot an intriguing sci-fi book by Daniel F. Galouye as I was speaking to her, and bought that. It was called *Simulacron-3*. The film *The Thirteenth Floor* was loosely based on that book. *The Adjustment Bureau*, *Dark City*, *The Matrix*: that’s my favourite sub-genre.”

Eno smiled, only now realising that he’d found a kindred spirit in this “suit”.

“But that’s an aside.

“Instead, she very kindly pointed me toward this meeting, and hence to you. So, as it turned out, she provided me with yet another doorway or window of opportunity.

“And here I am.”

Gladys echoed: “And – God bless us one and all – here we are.”

Before concluding, Gordon offered this: “One last thought: perhaps I’m woefully astray here, but it struck me the other night, as I lay in bed musing over recent events, that there is a whole network of people, perhaps many networks, operating in this world – how can I put it? – below the radar of everyday folk and the authorities.”

Wow! Even more of a kindred spirit. Business suit or not, Eno liked this guy.

Gladys laughed. “You know, Gordon, that’s not such a wild guess, and certainly not woefully astray. You see, when we say that something is esoteric, we don’t mean that it is deliberately hidden from the general population or the supposed Powers That Be – though there are, of course, such secret fraternities – but rather it is hidden from people because they lack the subtle or keen perception to see what is standing there under their noses or before their very eyes. In that respect, we might call it an ‘open secret’.

“So again I say: welcome, welcome, and thrice welcome, friends.”

Gladys looked once again toward the newcomers. “Anyone else? Jayne? You *will*? Oh, jolly good for you. The stage is yours, my dear.”

5. Jayne's Story

“What the self-imagined mystic seeks only in his meditation is visible to the Sufi on every street corner and in every alleyway.”

~ Idries Shah, *A Perfumed Scorpion*.

Jayne had shoulder-length mousy brown hair, big green cat's eyes, and a fair complexion so silky and blemish-free that she need wear no artificial make up, yet wore too much of it all the same – at least for Eno's own taste, not that it was really any of his business.

And yet Eno sensed that she didn't think kindly of her looks, perhaps imagining herself to be the archetypal “plain Jane” who would attract little attention from romantic suitors. Perhaps he was projecting his own shortcomings on the young lady here (he possessing the vast majority, of course). And then again maybe he sensed some kindred elements at work here.

Stylish, Jayne was not, wearing a baggy cerise fleece zipped up to the neck; a pair of tight, elasticated jeans that revealed more of her skeletal frame than lush curves, and a pair of shiny new leather cowboy boots with high heels and slightly pointed toes.

“Hi, I'm Jayne Stephany Miller (and I'd much rather have been called Stephany Jayne. It would roll off the tongue far more easily), and I'm very much enjoying being here this afternoon, thank you,” she introduced herself. She glanced at her wristwatch. “Yes, it's still afternoon.”

Eno discretely looked at his own watch, as did several others. Indeed, it was almost half past three. How the time had flown, though it looked like they'd easily get through these introductions before people had to leave. He could stay until closing time, if needs be. And either way, rather than go to the trouble of cooking an evening meal, he'd most likely grab something quick at a local chip shop or pizzeria. He couldn't really interrupt the proceedings by ordering a meal in the pub.

“I don't know what to say about myself, really. I haven't led an interesting or exciting life unlike many of you here.

“My granny sometimes takes me to the local spiritualist church: once a week to the hymn singing and ‘reading’ sessions, and once a week to the development circle that my Aunt Patricia runs. So, though I’m not religious, I am open to spirituality.

“I’m not really the academic type, and so I left school at sixteen and started working in a small, family-owned greengrocer’s until that had to shut down, and then I ended up working in the local supermarket. It’s not a large shop, so we end up rushing to fill the shelves and freezers between dashing to the tills to serve customers every time the queues build up and the bell rings. I once saw a documentary about dogs salivating every time a bell rang, because they associated it with being fed.”

“So I can imagine. Pavlov’s dogs,” Gladys added.

“That’s only part-time work, though, since that saves the employer a lot of money, so I also worked at a local tobacconist’s to help me save up to rent a flat and leave my parents’ house. But then the government changed the regulations on the display of smoking products, so that customers wouldn’t even know the little shop actually sold tobacco, trade began to dwindle, and they decided to shut down. So, to cut a long story short, I’m still stuck living at my parents’.

“– Well, I shouldn’t say stuck there, because they’re not well-off by any means, they’ve been really good to me, and I love them heaps. But I’m sure you know what I mean.”

Jayne paused for a moment.

“That’s it, really.”

Gladys smiled at the young lady and clasped her hands together. “Thank you, Jayne.”

“Am I doing alright?” she enquired. “Sorry if I’m not coming across very well.”

“Very nicely so far, though a gentle hint; well, two, actually: firstly, you really don’t have to be apologetic; and secondly, you might give some thought to the idea of being ‘stuck’. But that’s for another time. For now, maybe you could tell us why you’re here this afternoon and what brought you here? And there’s no rush.”

Gladys had silently scanned the attendees, perhaps wondering

if any of them had any pressing business and would have to leave shortly, but seemed satisfied.

“I decided to take up art quite recently, or maybe pottery, since I seem to be so much better working with my hands than my head. So I took a night class in ceramics at the local technical college, and I’m just about to begin a course in art. It’s called Art 101, which means it’s just an introductory or foundation course for beginners, though if I like it and if I turn out to be any good at it, there are more advanced courses available. I’m very lucky, because the courses are affordable and my mum’s helping me out with the cost, anyhow. At first, my dad was unhappy that I’d left school early and ended up in low-paid work, but he’s ‘slowly coming around’, as my granny would say.”

“And are you painting already?” Gladys queried.

“I’ve had a dabble,” Jayne replied.

She laughed. “It’s quite a leap from primary school stick people to proper painting, though.

“Anyway, having spoken to the man who’s taking the class, Mister Crookshank, he’s already suggested some ideas for working at home – what paints and equipment to buy; a couple of book suggestions, and a visit to the gallery on Cherryblossom Lane – so that when the course begins I can get off to a flying start and make the most of it.”

“You sound excited, Jayne.”

Jayne nodded vigorously. “I am. And I won’t let people down. I’ll work long and hard.”

“I’m sure you will, especially since your heart is in your work, Jayne. And I look forward to seeing your creations.”

“Well, in a funny way, that’s why I’m here, Gladys. You see, when I was wandering around the gallery on Cherryblossom Lane, I was really taken by a painting of your own.”

Gladys raised her eyebrows. “You mean they actually have one of my paintings on display? Gosh, that’s news to me.”

Gladys held out her hands. “I’m sorry to say that I haven’t painted anything in the last five years. As I’m sure you can see, I’ve developed a tremble, and some of my joints are becoming arthritic.”

"I'm sorry to hear about that, Joyce," Jayne replied.

"Oh, it's all part and parcel of life and growing old, Jayne, and you won't hear me complaining." She retracted her hands. "So, tell me more."

"It was a woodland scene."

Gladys stroked her chin thoughtfully.

"Something about Eros and Psyche," Jayne prompted. "I'm sorry: if I'd only thought, I could have taken a snapshot. Tell you what: I'll take my camera and get a photo, and I'll bring it to show you next time."

"Wonderful. That's very kind of you."

Gladys stuck a finger in the air: "Ah, yes. I can picture it now. Gosh, that work is going back more years than I care to remember. And displayed in the gallery, you say? My word."

She laughed.

"Which just goes to show how much of a success I was as an artist. By which – I hasten to add, lest you think I'm bragging – I mean not very successful at all. Nevertheless, that phase of my life served a purpose. And again, I should clarify that things don't have to serve a *useful* purpose to be worthwhile. The technical term for that is 'utilitarianism', and since the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, it has really helped make a fine mess of Western tradition and culture."

Then: "So how on earth did you manage to find your way from an old painting at Cherryblossom Lane to here, this afternoon?"

Jayne fished in her shopping bag and held up a mobile phone. "I Googled you," she beamed. "There was nothing in the phone book."

"No, there wouldn't be: I don't like being pestered by snake oil salesmen and scam artists, so I'm ex-directory. That means it's not listed in the phone book."

Jayne seemed as pleased as punch. "I searched through the registry office online database."

"Ah, I see: marriages and deaths, though thankfully as yet not the latter."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I can see that could be a sensitive subject. But

I had to be sure.”

Gladys nodded. “You did right, Jayne. No need to apologise and no offence taken.”

“Anyhow, I got a hit. So I did a bit of phoning around and managed to look through the parish records. There you were, all right, but then the trail went cold.”

“Yes, I’ve moved house several times since my marriage,” Gladys nodded.

“Anyhow, I did some more research checking through the old microfiche records at the public library. You know: transparent film used to record the pages of old print newspapers. And I asked around: people like my granny who’s lived in the town for donkey’s years. But still no luck.”

“Gosh, and you went to all this trouble? Might I ask why?”

“Well,” Jayne replied. “Your painting spoke to me, though I couldn’t say how, exactly.”

“Well, I can see that you are a determined and resourceful – and technically savvy – young lady. Please don’t ever again say that you’re no good using your head. If we end up taking on staff and volunteers, rest assured that your name will be at the top of the list.”

Jayne blushed and cast her eyes down momentarily.

“And yet here you are,” Gladys prompted. “Somehow or other, in spite of your earlier setbacks, you came up trumps.”

Jayne laughed. “One of my teachers once said I was as determined as a bloodhound, once I’d caught an interesting scent.

“All the same, by that point I’d almost given up, and I would have if I wasn’t so determined to succeed.

“Then one evening, when I’d temporarily forgotten about the search, my granny and I were at the spiritualist church and one of the mediums, a young student, started talking about a painting she could see with her inner eye, and when she started to describe the painting, having almost nodded off, I came-to with a start when I recognised the details that she was describing.

“At this point she was casting around to see if anyone in the congregation could identify with what she had to say.

“I know that sometimes the less experienced mediums run

through a few names until inevitably someone identifies with an “Aunt Hattie” or “Uncle Tom”. I’m not that naïve. But on this occasion, the girl described the woodland in the painting, and mentioned two figures, though she didn’t identify Eros or Psyche, simply that love was somehow involved. And it’s important to point out that I hadn’t mentioned any paintings to my granny when I quizzed her: just your name.

“As soon as the girl spoke the name Gladys, I knew – just knew – that here was a message for me.

“Someone else in the audience spoke up at this point, thinking that it was perhaps their grandmother, Gladys Someone-or-other, and he was ready to accept the message, but thankfully the girl caught sight of me and I took the message instead.

“The medium didn’t have a surname, not that I would have expected her to, and I was hugely relieved to find out that it wasn’t you speaking from the other side ...”

“Likewise!” Gladys laughed.

“Instead, it was a message from someone else about you. There was a bit more to-ing and fro-ing, and the girl mentioned that the painting was something to do with the mind and with love. That was close enough to Psyche and Eros for me.

“I guess now comes the test, Gladys: I’d already discovered that your husband was called Francis, so I was actually glad that this wasn’t the name that the medium came out with, since that might have been the sort of detail that she, too, could have located. Instead, the girl said that it was Hubert who was speaking.”

“Well, bless my soul,” grinned Gladys, as the tables were turned on her.

“Do you know anyone by that name?”

“Good Lord, yes, though this is going back to a time long before the painting. So perhaps we do live on, not least in people’s memory. Hubert was a young man I met when I was in my final year of high school. I’d almost turned eighteen and since I looked old enough to drink, Hubert offered to take me out for a drink and a dance. He was a lovely, thoughtful guy, and quite smitten with me, but – as is the way of life and love – he went off

to University and I ended up marrying someone else. My word, though, it would have been wonderful to have met up with him again. Who knows? We might have even married once I'd finished mourning Francis; not that I have ever really got over his untimely loss. Perhaps in another life, hey?

"But anyway, please do continue, Jayne. This is riveting stuff and it has my heart aflutter."

"Would you like another brandy?" Gordon enquired.

"Thank you, Gordon. Once Jayne has finished, perhaps. Do go on."

"The girl told me that Hubert was showing her a picture of a dancing pig, of all things, though alas at that time none of us could make sense of that part of the message.

"And then, just as we were leaving, granny stopped in her tracks, stuck her finger in the air and lilted: 'It's not a dancing pig, it's a pub: 'The Pig and Whistle!,' bless her.

"Anyhow, again to cut a long story short, I found out the address of the pub and hurried here to find it. A few days ago, I mean, not today.

"So I asked around. I couldn't describe you, of course, since I'd never met you and had seen no photographs of you. None of the locals, nor the landlord, knew of you by name, but the landlord said he'd keep an eye out for you, if only based on your age and first name, and he took my phone number, promising to call to let me know the minute he found out anything.

"Last Tuesday, I received a phone call to say that a lady by your name had been in to make enquiries about holding meetings in the back room of this pub, and that you'd agreed on Thursdays at 1pm. Well, in my excitement I forgot to ask if he'd taken details from you, like your address, and then I was unexpectedly called into work at the supermarket last Thursday.

"But today, here I am, and here we are!" Jayne gushed.

Gladys reached across the table and squeezed Jayne's hand fondly. "Here we are, indeed! And that is a tale to trump Sherlock Holmes's creator: Freemason and spiritualist, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself. Perhaps he, too, was looking after you.

"My word, Jayne. Thank you so much! And, should the need

eventually arise, the job offer still holds.”

At this point, Gordon temporarily purloined Bart’s notepad and arranged another round of drinks. Another minor celebration was in order.

“And on a related note,” the old lady mentioned, taking a sip of brandy and Babycham: “It just goes to show, as the mystics say, that ‘truth is closer than your jugular vein’, or to use another metaphor, we are like the fish swimming in the vast ocean who asks ‘what is water?’” She cast her arms around and rapped her knuckles on the oak table: “This is where it’s at. Right here and now.”

At length, Gladys turned toward Bart once more. “So what’s your story, then, Bart? You know, I wouldn’t have taken you to be the archetypal shrinking violet.”

6. Bart's Story

“As the first step in engaging the transcendent function, the ego turns to the unconscious with an open and receptive attitude. Given this ego attitude, the next job is to find a way to give a voice to the unconscious entity, so that its position and information may be accessed.”

~ Jeffrey Raff, *Jung and the Alchemical Imagination*.

Bart put on a tight-lipped smile and resolutely shook his head from side to side.

“Why are you here, and what is it that brought you here?” Gladys probed, though more by way of a gentle prompt than a request that he comply.

“There’s nothing to tell, really,” the man replied, but his twitchy body language suggested otherwise. He was unconsciously scraping the nail of his left index finger with his teeth now.

Bart waved his hands in the air. “As you noted earlier, I was out on the town this afternoon, and I just happened to end up in this pub. I thought that it would be quieter in this back room, as I didn’t fancy the noise in the public bar, nor all the toffee noses in the select lounge.

“Then you all filtered in and made a bee-line for this table, and I did think that perhaps I should move and find a quiet nook elsewhere where I’d be undisturbed, though I didn’t want to appear rude or standoffish. In the end, I decided that I might as well stay here. I was curious to find out what this meeting was all about, so I just played along.

“So, that’s it, really. End of story.”

Gladys peered at him over the top of her reading glasses. “That’s your version of the events, to the best of your knowledge, Bart. But I assure you, it is not the whole story. Not by a long chalk. Nor is it the end of the story, though it makes for a good opening scene.”

Bart looked puzzled. “Hey, lady: don’t you think I know my

own mind?”

“Sadly not,” came the reply. “But please let me reassure you that there is still hope.”

“I’m doing well enough, Gladys, though thank you for your concern.”

“So, you struck lucky today, Bart.”

Bart puffed out his chest and fingered his bright red braces. “I’m working on a system, and it’s already begun to pay dividends.”

Gladys shook her head: “If I had a pound for every time I’ve heard a gambler boast about their infallible system, Bart, I would be a rich lady.”

“I didn’t say it was infallible, Gladys, but it gives me a distinct advantage. I don’t have to be a champion: all I have to do is be a little smarter and more savvy than the average punter, since the odds are based on the choices and performance of those dullards. If the odds are 3:1 and my odds are 4:1 or 5:1, then in the long run I’m going to come out ahead.”

Again Gladys shook her head. “Bart, you know as well as I do that the odds are always stacked in favour of the house or the bookmaker. And they place limitations on successful gamblers.

“What was it you said earlier, in response to Eno’s experiences?” She scratched her head as if searching her memory banks. “Ah, yes: ‘what we tend to do is remember the cherries and discard the lemons.’”

“Well, that’s what people do. As I said, it’s the ‘file drawer problem’.”

Gladys continued unabashed. “... And though you used the term ‘we’, you were actually projecting your own behaviour on Eno. Projection is a psychic self-defence mechanism we use to avoid having to feel pain.”

“That’s bullshit!” Bart retorted. “You can keep your psychobabble and your metaphysical woo, and cram it up your ass, lady.”

Several in the group began to speak up at this point, but Gladys raised a hand and continued. “Today you struck lucky and won £500. But how much have you lost over the months?

£5,000? £10,000? Am I getting warmer?”

Bart visibly squirmed, and Eno got the distinct impression that Bart’s losses were substantially higher even than that.

°You’re sweating like a pig,° an inner voice remarked and perhaps Bart heard it, too.

Bart pulled a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and mopped his brow.

“How much longer will it be before you have to consider remortgaging your house; your home?” the lady pressed. “And how are you going to square that with your wife, Audrey? Or do you intend keeping yet another sordid secret from her? Don’t you think that Audrey deserves more than that.”

And she wasn’t finished yet. “As I said before, your wife has done her homework and she knows about your habit. And the question then is: how much longer is she going to put up with it, or what are her options following on from that.”

Bart gulped.

Almost as if someone had clicked a switch, Gladys brightened up. “I’m sorry that I pushed you, Bart. I intervened in order to bring you to your senses before it’s too late, and to save you and your wife much regret.

“As I said before: in one way or another we are all in the same boat, and it is our sacred task to help one-another whenever we can.”

She paused to allow her words to sink in.

“So, please don’t try to deflect us with your assertion that ‘there’s nothing to tell, really,’ and that your being here today was mere coincidence or happenstance, when the story is so clearly written all over your face.”

Bart cast his eyes down, then forced himself to look at the lady.

“Think it over in your own way and in your own time, Bart,” Gladys said at length, and gently. “And whenever you feel the need to reach out, please remember that we are here to share and to willingly help one-another in whatever way we are able.

“As Nasrudin rightly pointed out, if you remember, and if I may borrow from his work: *we* are here because of *you*, and *you*

are here because of *us*.”

Again, Gladys paused, then asked rhetorically, sweeping her arms around the table to acknowledge the group’s presence: “You’re a betting man, Bartholemew Grimshaw. So, tell me: what do you think of the odds of this? A racing certainty, is it not?”

“Thank you for being here, Bart,” she concluded, before once again scanning the group.

“Yes, Kate? You look like you’re dying to dive in. Good show.”

7. Kate's Story

"We link consciousness with the ego, but 'the Eastern mind has no difficulty in conceiving of a consciousness without an ego.

Consciousness is deemed capable of transcending its ego condition; indeed, in its "higher" forms, the ego disappears.'"

~ David Tacey, *The Darkening Spirit*, quoting Jung.

Kate was dressed in a neat black skirt and waistcoat and a particularly well-ironed white blouse, and this, her black tights and sensible black patent-leather shoes suggested that after the meeting she was most likely on her way to work. Her long auburn hair was down, but Eno could imagine her tying it back.

°No shit, Sherlock,° piped up that inner voice.

"Yes, my dear?" Gladys prompted. "You've been waiting here so patiently."

"Well, that's my job," Kate laughed.

Gladys looked over the top of her spectacles and then, in a fit of surprise, she beamed at Kate. "Of course, you were one of the staff at The Olive Grove just last night. I'm sorry if you'll forgive an old lady her poor memory and inattention."

"Well, my colleague Jules was waiting on you, but I came and cleared your plates away later, so it's surprising that you remembered me at all."

Well, that confirmed Eno's first impressions.

"Close your eyes and make a wish," Kate beamed, and though surprised, Gladys did as Kate suggested.

Kate rummaged in her pocket and brought out a tissue. She held it in her palm and carefully unfolded it. "Okay, you can open your eyes now," she smiled.

"Oh, my word ..." gasped Gladys.

The old lady took the ring from Kate's outstretched hand. "Thank you so much, my dear. That's very honest and kind of you. You know, there's nothing rare and valuable about diamonds: that's just a scam, and all that 'Diamonds are Forever' nonsense that they pushed into the media and film is blatant, concocted

propaganda.” She sighed. “And at the same time, I have to say that this ring does hold a great deal of sentimental value for me, reminding me of the bond that my dear husband, Francis and I shared, not that he is ever out of my mind for more than a brief moment.

“So, thank you once again, my dear.”

Kate dipped her head, happy to have been of service, and yet clearly she still had questions playing on her mind. Or at least that was the impression that Eno had, watching the two of them from across the table, and noticing the furrow that had appeared between Kate’s eyebrows. He had an intuitive feel for such body language.

Gladys fished in her purse and produced a shiny new £20 note, and she pressed it into Kate’s outstretched palm, but Kate took the note and pressed it back into the old lady’s hand. “No, really, I couldn’t accept your money, kind and generous as you are, Gladys, and that is not at all the reason I have for turning up here to return your ring. The generous tip your party left after you’d eaten was more than enough compensation, I assure you.”

The old lady smiled and tucked the note back into her purse, not wishing to engage in a tussle. “Thank you again, Kate,” she beamed.

That still didn’t answer Eno’s question about the micro-expression that he’d detected, but the answer was soon forthcoming.

“One thing that puzzles me, Gladys, is why you should have taken off the ring – especially given its enormous sentimental value – in the middle of a dinner party. Unless, of course, you did it unconsciously.”

Gladys smiled. “I did, indeed, slip off the ring unconsciously,” she agreed, “and then I caught myself in the act. At that point I had two options, the first of which was to chide myself for being so foolish, and the second, to go along with the unconscious urge – or prompting, if you will – and actually leave the ring on the table.”

The furrow between Kate’s eyes deepened. “I can only presume, then, that you deliberately chose to leave the ring. But

why?

“As a test?” she enquired. “I haven’t heard from my boss as yet – asking questions, I mean – and I would have expected that one of the first places you’d look, having lost a precious ring, would have been the restaurant.”

Gladys nodded. “As a test to me, and also I suppose, a test for you, my dear, though it was not intended as such.”

Kate’s eyes widened. “Good Lord, that was quite a chance you took. I’ve seen similar rings in the window of jeweller’s shops, and I won’t embarrass you by revealing how much it might be worth.”

“Well, that was my test,” Gladys reiterated. “All I could do was place my trust in good nature and providence. Sometimes, especially in my line of work, we are called upon to grit our teeth and take a leap of faith.

“But as for your part in this, Kate, the ring itself is inconsequential: what matters more than anything is that you have managed to get the ring back to me, and that you are here with us today. That in itself must have been no mean feat.”

“You can thank Jules for that. We had no name or address, just a snippet of conversation Jules overheard – in passing that is, we don’t deliberately eavesdrop on our customers. Just the name of a meeting at this pub. So I got on the phone to the landlord, he recognised your description and, to cut a long story short, here I am.”

Gladys nodded in appreciation. “Well, my dear, you have passed with flying colours. And should we at some point require the services of office staff, I will most certainly think of you. I couldn’t guarantee you any tips, but the basic hourly rate would be significantly more than I imagine you earn at The Olive Grove.”

“One last thing,” Kate enquired, “and I do hope this doesn’t sound cheeky, but now that I’m here, do you mind if I stay a little longer in your meeting. I don’t have to get to work until six o’clock this evening, and I must say that I’m rather enjoying the company.”

Gladys clutched Kate’s hand. “Of course you may, my dear.

And it's not cheeky at all. If anything, this is the whole point of our being here today. Not least, scouting for talent."

At this point, Gladys turned to Christopher, who was perched on the edge of his seat, leaning forward, and looking like he might burst at any moment,

What was it Idries Shah had quoted from Rumi?

°If you're thinking about the lion, it's from Sanai's *The Walled Garden of Truth*, not Rumi,° came his inner prompting.

All mankind is asleep
living in a desolate world;
the desire to transcend this
is mere habit and custom,
not religion – idle fairy tales.
Stop bragging in the presence
of men of the path:
better consume yourself
like burning chaff.

If you yourself
are upside down in reality,
then your wisdom and faith
are bound to be topsy-turvy.
Stop weaving a net about yourself;
burst like a lion from the cage.

°And,° the voice added, °it's quoted in *The World of the Sufi*.°

°Alright, Mister Smarty Pants,° he retorted, though in truth he was glad of the offering.

8. Christopher's Story

“So many of us today are concerned about the extinction of all the species that the western world is wiping out. But there’s hardly anyone who notices the most extraordinary threat of all: the extinction of our knowledge of what we are.”

~ Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*.

Christopher flew out of the traps like a Greyhound bus, dispensing with any preliminary statements.

“You know, I can’t help thinking there’s Some Weird Shit going on here,” he began, and instantly all eyes and slack jaws were on him. He even appeared to have taken his wife, Carole by surprise. “And I have to wonder whether or not we really are living in a simulation. I mean, is it just me or what?”

“And I’m not just talking about the crazy conspiracy theorists, or the elected Idiocrats and the Wingnuts and Retards that follow and elect them, or even just plain Old-Fashioned Common Sense, Decency and Compassion. Post-Honour, Post-Truth, whatever you want to call this Abomination – not that these things aren’t of vital importance.”

Christopher banged his fist down on the table, so hard that it rattled the menu stand and set off ripples on the surface of their drinks. “I’m talking about the whole damn Fabric of what we think of as Reality.”

Boy, this must have been bubbling away and building-up for some time.

Eno sought to momentarily ground some of the charge. “Jean Baudrillard had a great many things to say in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*,” he mentioned.

Christopher frowned: “I struggled with that book when I was at college. Much as it grieved me, I had to toss the book aside before I was a third of the way through. He’d use a hundred words when perhaps six or seven might have sufficed, and I found myself having to read and re-read passages every couple of pages, and still I failed to get a grasp of what he was talking

about. And yet, having said that, he gets rave reviews, so who am I to say. He was certainly onto something Big.”

The book had made a similar impression on Eno. “I think, like Henry Corbin his work makes a better read in translation. By which, I mean his work benefits from an interpreter. But then, as he did with the Wachowskis' film, *The Matrix*, he'd no doubt complain about the inadequacies of the interpretation.”

“What's a simulacrum when it's at home?” asked Melanie.

Christopher thought before answering. “Give me a moment,” he requested, picking up his mobile and tapping away at the keyboard.

“Ah, here you go. This is what Wikipedia has to say, since I haven't a cat in hell's chance of getting the definition right:

“Simulacra are copies that depict things that either had no original, or that no longer have an original. Simulation is the imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system over time.”

“Another keyword you can check out is what he calls ‘Hyperreality’. His point was that all we're left with are copies of copies; that we can no longer tell the difference between the copies and reality – indeed, they appear more real; that we can no longer approach reality; even denying that there is any such thing as Reality. Which to my way of thinking means that we're right up the Proverbial and Stinky Creek without a paddle.”

Well, the man had got the gist of it.

Gladys grimaced. “Ah, well, that's where my own views would differ from Baudrillard,” she remarked, “though I would largely concur with his assessment of our predicament. Especially our current predicament. And I'm also hoping that this post-truth thing will be at best a passing fad and at worst an era, rather than some great Age.

“Having said that, my assessments are by no means infallible, so I stand perfectly willing to be corrected.

“But do go on, Christopher. I'm intrigued, and the stage is yours.”

Christopher took a swig of his malt whisky and rolled it around in his mouth for a moment before gulping it down.

“Baudrillard, *The Matrix* – that’s the Bigger Picture. But what I’m talking about is closer to Home. I’m actually talking about Right Here and Now. In this very room. In this group. In the very people sitting here at this table. And I’m talking about you, Gladys.”

Eno wasn’t quite getting where Christopher was coming from.

“I mean, things like this don’t happen in Real Life, that’s what I’m saying. All these Messages from the Great Beyond. And all that Mind Reading. Everything wrapped up neatly and tied with prissy silk bows and all that jazz.

“Real Life isn’t like that. It’s all messy and ragged, with lots of loose ends that go nowhere; I mean ‘possibly’ and ‘maybe’, not with some Absolute, Infallible Certainty.

“So that’s what I meant when I said: ‘I can’t help thinking there’s Some Weird Shit going on here.’”

Wow! That was quite a statement.

Christopher waved his arms around him. “And what I’m saying is: this just does not feel Real to me. In fact, I would go so far as to contend that it is *not* Real. That it surely *cannot* be Real.”

He paused for a moment and took a second swig of whisky, all fired up.

Meanwhile his wife, Carole, was feverishly taking notes, presumably keeping a record of the man’s every word.

“Again, ‘I have to wonder whether or not we really are living in a simulation.’ I mean, Right Here and Now. And again I ask: ‘Is it just me or what?’

“Now, there’s one place where everything is neatly wrapped up and tied with pretty silk bows, and you know what that is? Fiction. And Theatre. And Film.”

“Hey, wake up Sheeple!” interposed a mischievous voice from deep within.

“This is a Little Game, right? Because it sure as Hell doesn’t seem like Real Life to me.”

Wow, and wow again. Eno was reminded yet again of those immortal lines from *The Matrix*:

Morpheus: “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.”

Neo: “What truth?”

Morpheus: “That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage. Into a prison that you cannot taste or see or touch. A prison for your mind.”

He turned toward Gladys, to gauge her reaction, and with so many of his own questions jostling for pole position in his mind.

Eno was anxiously waiting for Gladys to launch a spirited rebuttal of Christopher’s allegations, but she merely sat there and smiled, not without an air of respect, saying only:

“And these many questions you have jostling in your mind right now, Christopher,” she spoke softly: “In what way are those all neatly wrapped up, with pretty silk bows, or are they just as messy and ragged, with lots of loose ends?”

°What we have here is a distillation of experience,° the inner voice informed Eno. °The very essence of reality. Like malt whisky, it’s an acquired taste, it’s inebriating, and it packs a helluva punch. It can be quite a shock to the system once it really kicks in – providing, that is, you don’t blot it all out.°

This wasn’t really an answer, at least not the authoritative answer that he, let alone Christopher, was looking for, or hoping for, and yet as these words from Gladys were gently spoken, Christopher slowly sank back down in his chair, had a little sip of whisky, and passed the baton on to Carole; looking strangely calmed rather than crestfallen.

And it all had something to do with ‘presence’.

°Presence with a capital ‘P’. And Truth with a capital ‘T’°

9. Carole's Story

"There is more in a human life than our theories of it allow. Sooner or later something seems to call us onto a particular path.

You may remember this "something" as a signal moment in childhood when an urge out of nowhere, a fascination, a peculiar turn of events struck like an annunciation: This is what I must do, this is what I've got to have. This is who I am."

~ James Hillman, *The Soul's Code*.

"Well, I'm not quite sure how I can possibly follow that," Carole tittered, perhaps to cover her embarrassment, and Eno did wonder whether the couple might have words once they'd got back home and firmly closed the door and left the world on their doorstep.

The lady stood up and adjusted her two piece tweed suit, then promptly sat down again.

For a fleeting moment, something mischievously reminded Eno of Dolores Umbridge, a character in the *Harry Potter* series. And, having had such uncouth thoughts, like Dobby the House Elf he would have to go and iron his hands or flagellate himself.

This was all quite surreal. Who knows: perhaps Christopher really was onto something? Maybe not quite what the man had in mind, but onto something nonetheless.

He wouldn't have been surprised in the least to see Dolores gently prompt them to pay attention by raising her hand to her mouth and affectedly squeaking out an "uh hum".

Carole waited a moment until Bart had stopped fiddling with his pocket calculator – I know, the mind boggles – before continuing. That man was odds-on favourite in the Bankruptcy Stakes at Aintree.

"Before I begin, I should point out that Christopher and I have carried out extensive research into the current state of the world before arriving at our carefully-considered conclusions ..."

°Ah, we are blessed to have two Google Scholars in our midst,° chipped-in the voice snarkily, interrupting Eno's attention, so that he missed what she had to say next.

“Well, I say we,” Carole said, clasping her hands together and turning to her husband, “But really it’s dear Christopher here who is our guiding light.”

Christopher blushed and cast his eyes down. “Oh really, Carole, you do flatter me. There’s no ‘I’ in ‘team’, and we do make a remarkably good team.”

°Dolores Umbridge and Gilderoy Lockhart? Well, I certainly didn’t see that one coming.°

Shhh!

“I’m sorry, dear. Is there something you wish to say?” Carole asked, looking piercingly in his direction.

Eno shook his head vigorously and wiped the mischievous smile off his face. He wasn’t a religious man, but that would cost him another six Hail Marys.

“So tell us,” Gladys asked at length, breaking the tension of the moment: “Why are you and Christopher here? For the benefit of the newcomers, you understand. We can talk about our reactions to today’s meeting later on, or next week, if you like.”

Carole looked a little flustered and half-turned toward Christopher, perhaps hoping for some backup.

“Well, if you must know, we were summoned here, Gladys.”

“Summoned?” the old lady queried.

Carole cast her eyes around, and nodded affirmatively.

“Yes, but by whom?” Gladys pressed.

Again, Carole looked toward Christopher, but he remained mute.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I’m not at liberty to say. It would betray a confidence, and might put me in danger. Well, put us all in danger, for that matter.”

Gladys looked puzzled.

“How so?”

°He Who Must Not Be Named!° the inner voice whispered in Eno’s ear.

Again Carole scanned the room, bent forward, and answered quietly. “The Illuminati have their eyes and ears everywhere,” she confided. “It’s not safe to talk about such matters.”

“Ah, I see,” Gladys nodded. Then: “Is there anything you can

say about our meeting that does not involve, um, You-Know-Who?”

Carole still looked unsure.

“I mean, how’s about we start out with simple, innocent things like whether or not you caught the six o’clock bus, or read about the meeting in the left-over tea leaves? Things like that are surely not going to incur the wrath of the Ill ...”

Carole put her hand up to her mouth.

“... of You-Know-Who,” Gladys corrected herself.

Eno was puzzled, because as far as he was aware, the couple had been at the first meeting with Gladys, and yet surely they must have had this conversation before, and already handled it in some way.

Gladys herself looked puzzled. “But this isn’t what you told me last week. I’m sorry, but I don’t quite understand, Carole. Christopher, can you shed any light on this subject?”

Christopher stopped lolling in his chair and sat upright. “Just between us and these four walls, I’ll be honest, Gladys: we weren’t sure how much we dare divulge on our first meeting.”

“Ah, I see,” the old lady replied. “Well, if it’s such a delicate issue, then please don’t let me interfere and place you in a compromising position.”

Christopher appeared relieved. “Let’s just say that we received a summons, and leave it that, then.”

“Thank you.”

°Well, I’m glad we cleared that one up,° he was prompted, and he saw a vision of someone in his field of vision rolling their eyes.

Sarcasm does not become you, he shot back.

10. Resistance, and the Dark Side

“We are in the midst of a sea change. Receding from view is materialism, whereby physical phenomena are assumed to be primary and consciousness is regarded as secondary.

Approaching our sights is a complete reversal of perspective. According to this alternative view, consciousness is primary and the physical is secondary. In other words, materialism is receding and giving way to ideas about reality in which consciousness plays a key role.”

~ Imants Barušs and Julia Mossbridge, *Transcendent Mind: Rethinking the Science of Consciousness*.

“Where to begin?” Gladys asked herself as Carole yielded the stage and went back to her glass of shandy and incessant note-taking.

“Perhaps the topic of resistance?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“I believe it was the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung who told us that whatever you resist persists. And one thing we especially resist, even if we allow ourselves to remember it, is what he called our Shadow. That is, everything we consider unworthy about ourselves, or inferior, or dirty, and seek to hide, deny, and eventually almost-completely repress. And just as we have our personal Shadow, so too, groups and societies have their own collective Shadow – as you can no doubt imagine unless you spend all your days in Cloud Cuckoo Land or glued to Fox News.

“The thing is, though, these things have a habit of coming back unexpectedly (if predictably), and when they do, they very often bite back hard, like the proverbial (if misogynistic) woman scorned.

“So, it’s folly, really, to deny these parts of ourself, or our cliques, or our culture, in the first place. For where does this lead us? Well, as Robert A. Johnson writes in *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche* – and this perhaps addresses points made by both you, Christopher, and

Carole:”

We are presently dealing with the accumulation of a whole society that has worshiped its light side and refused the dark, and this residue appears as war, economic chaos, strikes, racial intolerance. The front page of any newspaper hurls the collective shadow at us.

“And other ways of denying our own Shadow would be the psychic self-defence mechanisms of projection and splitting. If there is something about ourselves, or our group, or political party, or society that we don’t like, the knowledge of which might cause us embarrassment or pain, then we project it on others, so that we can blame and scapegoat them instead for our own shortcomings and failings. And that goes hand-in-hand with splitting, where we make a binary split between Us and Them (or so many other things), so that we can look kindly on our own group and demonise the Other, whatever that Other might be.”

Gladys turned toward Christopher and Carole at this point. “Like it or not, and to a greater or lesser degree, we all have our share of You-Know-Who – or You-Know-What – within us, and we’d be far better off if we didn’t recoil in disgust and attempt to disown it.

“Perhaps you recall those old Hammer Horror films in which a vampire is finally exposed to sunlight and dissolves into a heap of harmless dust.” She laughed: “though of course as some bright sparks have pointed out, these creatures of the night have a love of moonlight ... which is, of course, nothing other than reflected sunlight, itself.

“But that’s merely an aside.

“Really, this sort of thing should be taught in every school, if only as a Psychology 101, which is – as Jayne rightly mentioned earlier – an introductory course for beginners, or those known in certain religious, mystical, spiritual and fraternal circles as neophytes – newbies, as they call them on the Internet, or so I have been informed by my young granddaughter. She being the technical wizard in the family.”

11. Angels and Daemons

“True imagination has a transformative power; it can alchemically transmute information from the senses into symbols to be deciphered or language to be translated. In essence it turns ‘facts’ into ‘meaning’ by linking parts into wholes. It does not ‘construct something unreal’ – that is the business of fantasy – but ‘unveils the hidden reality’.”

~ Gary Lachman, *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*.

Carole rose to her feet and wagged a finger in their general direction.

“Now you listen to me. There’s a demonic presence in this world,” she asserted, “and we won’t have anything to do with it!

“If you want proof, Christopher can give you dozens of links to investigative research on YouTube.

“J.F.K.; the moon landing; the Twin Towers; mass surveillance; memory implants; chip implants; nanotechnology; blood-sucking reptilian overlords and paedophilia; fake news; economic migrants; Sleepy Joe Biden; the swamp; gay rights; COVID; 5G antennas; Ukraine – you name it – it’s all part of the master plan, don’t you see?”

°There’s a name for this kind of cerebral diarrhoea, Eno: conspirituality.°

He mentally nodded in agreement.

“You mark my words: bad things are in store for us. Terrible things we can scarcely imagine. That our parents and grandparents, and even the likes of H. P. Wells and George Orwell and – what’s his name? – Beauregard could never have dreamt-up.

“Now, if you want to embrace your dark side – foolish as that may be – then that’s your right,” the woman concluded, forcefully sitting back down and crossing her arms to emphasise her resolve. “But you can most certainly count us out.”

The woman was not quite finished: “And as for all your talk

about *The Matrix*, you wouldn't know Reality or Truth if it jumped out of your alphabet soup and bit you on the nose."

°Say *what?!°*

Dear Lord, he wouldn't know where to begin answering her – he'd have more luck knitting spaghetti – and he sincerely hoped that Gladys would somehow be able to rise to the challenge.

"As I said earlier, and still vehemently maintain: 'There's a demonic presence in this world,' and you'd better believe it."

Gladys took a small sip of her brandy and Babycham and took a bite out of the glazed cherry as she composed herself.

"Perhaps we might turn to the subject of angels and daemons," she began at length. "And, no, I don't mean Dan Brown's conspiratorial and fictional work."

"Dan Brown knows more than you can imagine," Carole chipped-in, but the old lady chose to ignore her.

°The woman's clearly bought-into the whole, deluxe package deal.°

Indeed she has. She'd swallowed the bait along with hook, line, and sinker.

"As I think Eno remarked earlier," Gladys noted: "There is a huge difference between 'talking the talk' (which really is ten-a-penny'), and actually 'walking the walk'".

"In one of his essays – 'The Theme of the Voyage and the Messenger', I believe, the Illuminationist, Henry Corbin writes:

"To be a philosopher is to take to the road, never settling down in some place of satisfaction with a theory of the world, not even a place of reformation, nor of some illusory transformation of the conditions of this world. It aims for self-transformation, for the inner metamorphosis, which is implied by the notion of a new or spiritual rebirth. The adventure of the mystical philosopher is essentially seen as a voyage which progresses towards the Light."

"And you need to know that what Corbin thinks of as philosophy – which would include spiritual alchemists and mystics amongst its ranks – is drastically other than what we nowadays think of as philosophy or, indeed, what it has sadly

become. That is to say, twisted beyond recognition and greatly impoverished. And Corbin was not a mere academic or theologian, but an Ishraqi mystic himself.

“As for the theories of the Google Scholars and the YouTube celebrities and zealots: really, at least in those lines of enquiry, their efforts do not even begin to compare – even to the most humdrum contemporary philosophy.

“Saadi of Shiraz writes, as quoted by Idries Shah in his early work, *The Way of the Sufi*:

For one unshaped one in the community
the hearts of the wise will suffer pain –
As if a pool had been filled with rose-water,
and a dog fell in, polluting it.

Carole did not like that quotation at all, and sat there screwing up her nose as she continued to take notes.

“I’m sorry if that sounds unfashionably pithy, but it is nonetheless a fair reflection of the sad and undeniable truth.”

Gladys paused for a moment as they digested that juicy mouthful.

“But I digress. Back to the angels and daemons.

“Nowadays, we’re accustomed to think of angels as benign beings and demons as the bad guys, but we didn’t always see things this way. Once upon a time, before the split and their banishment, the daemon (or daimon) was seen as elusive, contradictory, shape-shifting, to borrow from Patrick Harpur’s work. Perhaps something of a trickster, but also often playing a tutelary role. I’m talking here of their providing both tuition and also watching over us and providing protection, a task since appointed only to what have become known as officially-enfranchised saints and ‘Guardian Angels’.

“And just as we have our personal daemons, so, too, they are associated with locations, such as springs, wells, sacred groves of trees, and other aspects of Nature. To Plato and the Greeks – or for the contemporary author, Philip Pullman, for that matter – this was the daemon; to the Romans, the Genius; and to poets and others of a creative or Romantic inclination, the Muse. The Jungian analyst and author, James Hollis also speaks, as Jung

himself did, of being driven by his daemon. And for the Christians – bless their cotton socks – like so many other things (though rightly or wrongly), they became quite literally demonised. Oh, and I should point out that like the soul, though Real, they are not to be taken literally, if you can get your head, or your heart, round that.”

Again Gladys paused for a moment, as if sending out feelers to assess how her words were being received.

“Patrick Harpur writes in *The Philosopher's Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination*:

Without soul, without imagination and its daimons, the world is laid waste. And this is what Eliot fears has happened to the modern world. *The Waste Land* implies what William Blake foresaw: that ‘the apocalypse that kills the soul of the world is not at the end of time, not coming, but apocalypse now; and Newton and Locke, Descartes and Kant are its horsemen.’

And Tom Cheetham writes in *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*:

It was [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 world ... [Corbin] warns us that the history of the West has been the theater for the battle for the Soul of the World.

“So, you see now at least a smidgin of the way in which such knowledge has been twisted or altogether lost, and how far up the proverbial creek we actually are, and without a paddle, as Christopher correctly observed earlier. Indeed, such is the scale of these problems that the major task before us is not learning, but for the most part *unlearning* what we think we know, or believe

we know, or even feel we know.”

“What a load of old codswallop,” laughed Christopher, rising to his feet. He turned to his wife. “Come on, Carole, it’s time we were leaving.”

“No, no: stay and hear the lady out,” Bart insisted, casting aside his pocket calculator and unexpectedly coming to Gladys’s aid.

°Now that was a hopeful sign, if ever there was,° Eno mused.

°‘Hope is born of lack of hope,’ as Shah once remarked,° came the still small voice in reply.

12. The Imaginal Realm

“I believe that the disenchantment of the modern universe is the direct result of a simplistic epistemology and moral posture spectacularly inadequate to the depths, complexity, and grandeur of the cosmos. To assume a priori that the entire universe is ultimately a soulless void within which our multidimensional consciousness is an anomalous accident, and that purpose, meaning, conscious intelligence, moral aspiration, and spiritual depths are solely attributes of the human being, reflects a long-invisible inflation on the part of the modern self. And heroic hubris is still indissolubly linked, as it was in ancient Greek tragedy, to heroic fall.”

~ Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View*.

Gladys held her wristwatch close to her face and adjusted her glasses. “Well, time is getting on, and I’m sure that some of you will need to move on.” She glanced at Jayne in acknowledgement.

“But before we go, perhaps I might make mention of one last thing; a key piece in this jigsaw we call life. And that is the imaginal.”

“More fantasy,” sneered Christopher, looking down his nose at her.

“On the contrary, Christopher, Henry Corbin was at pains to point out the differences between real or true imagination, and mere or childish fantasy, which is, sadly, what most have us have been led to believe or come to see as imagination. I guess Jung did himself no favours in using the term fantasy, when he, too – a fellow speaker at the conference venue, Eranos – was really talking about active imagination.

“And, as an aside, it is perhaps best encountered in that state halfway between waking consciousness and sleep which we call the hypnagogic (or during that which we experience when waking from sleep, which we term the hypnopompic).

Again, Gladys studied her watch.

“As I say, time is rapidly running out for us in this all-too-brief window of opportunity, so I would strongly suggest that you follow-up on these things and do your own research. Follow the trail of breadcrumbs, as they say. But don’t take my word for it, and do your own homework. This nothing to gain in merely borrowing someone else’s crib, nor in half-hearted study. Above all else, however, don’t just grimly go through the motions. This should be fun as well, so enjoy the ride. ‘All work and no play makes Jill a dull girl,’ as they say.

“Where was I? Now, do pay attention, Gladys, dear. Oh yes ...

“Anyhow, to avoid the aforementioned confusion, Corbin coined the term *mundus imaginalis* or ‘imaginal world’ to describe a realm intermediate, and mediating between, the physical world that we mistakenly think of as the ‘real world’ and that of spirit. In Islam and in Sufism, it’s known as the ‘*al am al-mithal*, and sometimes referred to as a *barzakh*, though the imaginal world is not an obstacle or barrier, and it’s far more than mere ‘limbo’.

“It’s a meeting place,” she added, casting her arms around the room, “just like this. And at the same time, it’s also the state or station of people and souls, or angels, who are meeting.”

“As Tom Cheetham writes in *Green Man, Earth Angel*:

On Corbin's view all the [catastrophic] dualisms of the modern world stem from the loss of the *mundus imaginalis* [realm of the *anima mundi*, the World Soul]: matter is cut off from spirit, sensation from intellection, subject from object, inner from outer, myth from history, the individual from the divine.

“As Angela Voss tells us in ‘Becoming an Angel: the *mundus imaginalis* of Henry Corbin and the Platonic path of self knowledge’:

Alchemy for Corbin is essentially the inner, spiritual work of attaining union between the human soul and its [individualised] heavenly counterpart within the mysterious ground of the ‘hidden secret’ pointed to by the

symbolic image. This is the intermediate place between spirit and matter, the *mundus imaginalis*, where the spiritual world assumes an objective reality, and where the transmutation of the *prima materia* of the human psyche into the subtle or spiritual body is the work of an alchemical opus that involves encounter with an angelic presence through the faculty of the active imagination.

“Perhaps by now you have a glimpse of the way in which all these individual threads of warp and weft weave themselves together to form a magnificent and complete fabric? Indeed, the fabric of the cosmos itself.”

Gladys studied her watch for a third, and perhaps final, time. “And let me leave you with this before we have to leave one-another and go about our business ...

“It’s a short poem from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley:”

Oh, come to me in dreams, my love!
I will not ask a dearer bliss;
Come with the starry beams, my love,
And press mine eyelids with thy kiss.

’Twas thus, as ancient fables tell,
Love visited a Grecian maid,
Till she disturbed the sacred spell,
And woke to find her hopes betrayed.

But gentle sleep shall veil my sight,
And Psyche’s lamp shall darkling be,
When, in the visions of the night,
Thou dost renew thy vows to me.

Then come to me in dreams, my love,
I will not ask a dearer bliss;
Come with the starry beams, my love,
And press mine eyelids with thy kiss.

“I’m sorry to have gone on at such length, dear friends. There was really so much to cram into today’s session. So, if we can agree a time to meet next week, we can perhaps begin that session

with any questions, queries, observations, intuitions, and feelings that you have following-on from this meeting?

“Oh, and one final and essential point before I forget. I’ve just remembered why I tied a knot in my handkerchief ...”

°A Remembrall!° the inner voice laughed.

Eno suddenly became aware that someone was watching him. Perhaps he’s unwittingly laughed out loud?

He could almost feel the faint and not unpleasant sensation of eyes burrowing into the side of his face.

He rose to his feet, feeling a sudden urge to point his pennywhistle at porcelain. “If you’ll excuse me,” he said. “I need to pay a call.”

He turned sharply to his left to see that Gladys did indeed have her gaze fixed on him. Indeed, as he scanned the table, he saw that, for some unknown reason, all eyes were on him. But, of course they would be since he’d just stood up in their midst.

“You see!” called out Christopher, nudging his wife, Carole with his elbow. “I told you so. Didn’t I try to tell you, but you wouldn’t listen, would you? You had me marked down as a Goofball. I mean, how much more Proof do you need? Wake the Fuck up, Sheeple!”

Everything was beginning to shimmer now: people’s faces, the walls, even the table that stood between them. The whole scene. Everything.

The last thing Eno heard, as if emerging from a tunnel from a long distance, were the words: “Oops, we’re losing him,” and then, as they might say in some hackneyed crime thriller, ‘the lights went out and he knew no more.’

13. Sunken Hopes

“[S]ince the Industrial Revolution, but particularly in the last fifty years, we have created a world around us which, in contrast to the natural world, reflects the left hemisphere’s priorities and its vision. Today all the available sources of intuitive life – the natural world, cultural tradition, the body, religion and art – have been so conceptualised, devitalised and ‘deconstructed’ (ironised) by self-consciousness, explicitness and the systems and theories used to analyse them, that their power to help us see intuitively beyond the hermetic world that the left hemisphere has set up has been largely drained from them.”

~ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World.*

Robert Llewelyn George woke with a start and leapt out of bed.

“Oh, fuck!” Louie cried out, slumping back down on the edge of his bed and clenching his fists in the air.

“How could you do this to me, after you had gone to such lengths to convince me that I’d found something real and meaningful, you cruel trickster?” he cried out to some unseen authority. He pounded his fists against the mattress. “Fuckity, fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Though feeling thoroughly deflated, he absent-mindedly wiped away a tear, pushed himself up from the bed and headed with some urgency toward the loo, then went through to the kitchen to roll a couple of cigarettes and make a strong coffee.

So, it had turned out to be nothing more than a dream, after all that. And yet he was strongly reminded of the Muggle, Jacob Kowalski in *Fantastic Beasts*, who had remarked to Newt Scamander: “I don’t think I’m dreaming... I ain’t got the brains to make this up.”

Surely, something far in excess of his own, threadbare and jaded, secondhand imagination had been at work – or in play – here.

Louie had an idea. He simply had to see if The Pig and

Whistle really did exist. The chance of that being the case was pretty remote, and yet he did feel a sense of excitement, and he was wondering whether to skip having a shower and get there all the sooner, but thought better of it. Wolfing down his breakfast cereal and swilling the remnants in the sink, he pulled on his jacket, made doubly sure that he had his precious tobacco, papers, lighter and wallet with him, and hightailed it.

Slim chance it may be, but Louie knew that he would be unsettled until he knew one way or another whether the pub was real or not. Just as nature is said to abhor a vacuum, he could not live comfortably with loose ends, though he'd had to do so when it came to his Sufi studies: the many loose ends, especially in the teaching stories, were not a bug but a deliberately planned feature, designed in part to wear out emotional and intellectual approaches to the Work.

Louie was halfway down the narrow alley between the houses when he suddenly had a better idea, and he stopped in his tracks, swivelled through a hundred and eighty degrees, fished out his keys and returned to his flat. Since it actually was Thursday, and he recalled that in the dream they had met at one o'clock, then – daft as it might seem – that was the time he should aim for finding The Pig and Whistle.

Once back inside, he fired up his old steam engine – an affectionate reference to his ageing PC – and Googled The Pig and Whistle: something he should have thought of doing earlier.

He let out a long sigh. Though the name turned up in his searches, there was nothing by that name in Walstead-by-Sea. Well, it had been a long shot. All the same, he wouldn't be happy until he had seen for himself, providing he could still remember the route he'd taken across town. The old town was a warren of narrow lanes and alleyways, so best allow plenty of time for a search, and allow a few more minutes for good measure.

In the end, Louie spent over an hour zigzagging through the old town. He'd lived in Walstead-by-Sea for many years, of course, so he sort of knew his way around, but he had seldom ventured into the old town, except to visit an exceptional chip shop after having a wander along the beach and seafront.

And then an idea popped into his head, remembering a crucial detail from the dream, and he did his best to relax and just follow his feet.

After a few minutes, he spotted something up ahead, his heart leapt, and he made a bee-line for it. He'd found the old cherry tree, and noted that it did indeed stand in a small cobbled square. Taking a deep breath, he crossed the square. Again his heart leapt as he spotted a pub on the far side of the square.

Alas, he was sadly disheartened to see that the pub wasn't quite as he imagined it, though it was indeed a quaint, olde-worlde hostelry, built of stone and blackened oak timbers ... and he was further disheartened to discover that this wasn't The Pig and Whistle, but rather The Black Swan.

°Damn and blast it!° he cursed under his breath. Presumably, at some time in the past, perhaps as a child on a walk with his parents, he must have come across the place and stored the memory in the dusty archives of his "Miscellaneous Information Department". Yes, that figured.

Louie spotted a wooden bench seat around the trunk of the cherry tree, and he went across, sat down on it, and began to roll a cigarette. Perhaps later he'd venture inside the pub, if only to drown his sorrows.

As Louie sat that, staring blankly at the facade of the old building, he didn't notice the young lady approaching until she was looming over him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was miles away and didn't see you there," he automatically blurted out.

The lady smiled and gestured toward the seat. "Do you mind?"

He shuffled up. "Not at all: it's a public seat."

"It's a lovely old building, The Black Swan, and there's a wonderful stillness about this square," the lady ventured after a time. "I often come here to chill out. What brings you here?"

Louie cast his hands in the air. "Oh, I had a dream about the place, and I decided to see if I could actually find it. I must have been here with my parents many years back, and mostly forgotten about it. I guess the memory was half-buried in my subconscious

mind.”

“Mmm,” the lady nodded. “That’s how these things work, and the subconscious can be quite tricky at times.”

She gestured toward the old building, its tiled roof bowed with age, just like he was bowed with life’s cruelty. “I’ve been researching The Black Swan in the library. Local history is an occasional hobby of mine, you see. Is it how you pictured it?”

Louie studied the building. “If anything, it’s more quaint and has more character than I remember in my dream,” he replied. “But I was foolishly hoping that I’d got the name right in the dream, too. I know that sounds daft, but it was a very vivid dream: so vivid and lucid, indeed, that at the time I thought it was real. I mean, even more real than the concrete and glass, sex and politics of the everyday, so-called ‘real world’.”

“And what name did it have in your dream?”

Louie wasn’t sure how much to tell her, in case he came across as a crazy old man. He laughed. “Well, in my dream I was following my feet, letting them take me wherever they chose, rather than imposing my own will. And for a time I followed what I thought was the sound of a flute – well, more high-pitched than that, actually.”

“A tin whistle?” the lady suggested.

“Exactly,” he concurred.

“And then I spotted a tree very much like this, the pub, and the wooden sign above the door. And, hearing voices, I ventured inside.”

The lady smiled. “As I said, I’ve been researching the old town. The locals call The Black Swan, ‘The Mucky Duck’. And did you know that it used to be called The Dancing Pig?”

Louie raised his eyebrows. “I guess I must have half-remembered a visit to the place, after all, then.”

“Oh, I very much doubt that,” the young lady responded, with a shake of her head, “since it was renamed The Black Swan over a hundred years ago. Only the very elderly would know of The Dancing Pig.”

“Their parents might have once mentioned it to them, and their grandparents would have still-earlier memories than that,”

Louie gently countered. "I remember my father still referred to one of the local roads as 'Penny Black Lane' a great many years after it had been renamed."

The lady shrugged. "Yes, I suppose that's possible, but that still doesn't detract from your dream, Mister ..."

"Robert Llewelyn George, but I much prefer the name Louie."

"Kimberly Hopkins, but I should point out that I hate that name. Most people, other than my mother, my boss, and officials – and especially people who do not wish to incur my wrath – call me Kim," the young lady returned, and they shook hands.

Kim looked at her wristwatch, and Louie casually checked his own. It was just coming up to one o'clock. "Why don't we go inside," she suggested, rising from the bench and brushing herself down, "and maybe we can talk some more."

"As for Penny Black Lane, you must be talking about Trafalgar Street West. That's something only locals would know."

"That's the one," he concurred.

The pub had the same olde-worlde look and feel that Louie had earlier imagined, and had clearly changed little over the years, except for a decent carpet on the floor rather than bare floorboards, spit and sawdust, and one or two newfangled intrusions such as a brightly-coloured slot machine and a retro-styled but now-digital jukebox. However, the layout of the pub was different.

There was no split between public bar and 'select lounge', though there were seats and tables further back in the building. It looked like this area was public most of the time, but occasionally reserved for family and group functions, as there was a rope barrier nearby that could presumably be deployed to segregate the area.

It was only to be expected that there would be padded bench seats around the walls, and antique oak tables. In the cosy nooks, large barrels served as tables, which was a nice touch. "There used to be a cooperage next door," Kim remarked.

Once they had bought drinks at the main bar and had wandered through to the back and found themselves nice seats by

a bay window, looking out over a beer garden, they engaged in preliminary conversation, as they weighed one-another up and got a better feeling for which angles to work.

For a moment, Kim looked lost in thought, as if unsure of where to take the conversation. And then, out of the blue, she abruptly asked. "I'm going to go out on an exposed limb here, so either get ready to catch me, or to duck out of the way, if you can't."

"Gosh, that sounds ominous," he retorted, half-joking and half-serious.

"What I mean is: how real do you want this conversation to get, Louie?"

"I'm game, Kim," he nodded, though not having a clue about where this might lead. "So, who's going to make the first move?"

"I just mentally tossed a coin, and it came down heads. Your move."

Ha ha!

"I see. And I don't mean to sound patronising here, but do you work in a supermarket?"

God, he could have kicked himself for posing that patronising question.

Kim puckered her lips, but it turned out she was only feigning disapproval. "I used to work in a greengrocer's. Close enough?"

"And a tobacconist's?"

She nodded. "Have you been stalking me, mister?" she laughed. "Thankfully, I found a job as a librarian and work at the public library up town."

"Hence the research," he noted.

"Hence the research."

Then: "But trust yourself and try something bold. And no, I really don't mean ask me out on a date," she laughed.

Ha, chance would be a fine thing.

"I mean, tell me something you shouldn't know."

Louie stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Are you a spiritualist?"

"Pretty warm, Louie. My gran has been a spiritualist for many years. I used to go to the Spiritualist Church when I was

younger, but I went off the idea.”

Louie sucked the end of his index finger.

“Okay, then. And this is a wild shot ...”

“That’s what we’re here for, Louie.”

“Does the name Stephany mean anything to you?”

Kim laughed. “Maybe I should ask *you* if *you’re* a medium, Louie. Stephany is my middle name.”

“Okay, my turn, Louie,” she decided. “Does the name ‘Leo’ mean anything to you.”

That was a shame. He shook his head.

Kim stuck her finger in the air. “What am I saying? I mean Eno.”

Louie took a large swig of his Guinness. “As I said earlier, I had a long and lucid dream last night, and it feels to me as if this conversation is about to become very real, Kim.”

She nodded. “I know. It’s bizarre, isn’t it? And yet something is urging me on, in spite of my everyday reservations. I had a dream, too. The best ever.”

Then she sighed. “Except a lot of it is very blurry and sketchy now, and a many of the details have either faded away or become terribly confused.”

Louie decided to stop beating about the bush. “I met with several other people last night, in the spitting image of this pub. At the time, I was convinced it was real, and then I woke up and my hopes and dreams were cruelly shattered.”

“Yes,” she nodded vigorously.

“So, here we are, Kim.”

“Here we are, indeed, Louie. So what happens next?”

These words were followed for a time by silence – a tranquil and welcome silence – and there was a faint, but delightful aroma of roses emanating from somewhere close-by. Perhaps it came from outside, though Louie noticed that the doorway leading out to the beer garden was closed. Though there was no more than a wisp of cloud in the bright blue sky on that fine, spring day, there was quite a chilly offshore breeze. Being a heavy smoker, his sense of smell was not the most acute, and this delightful and divine fragrance took him back to the innocent days of his

childhood, and the joys of first discovering nature, before what you might call his fall from grace. He instinctively reached inside his jacket pocket for his pouch of tobacco. And then remembered, of course, that you were no longer allowed to smoke indoors in public buildings. No matter: in any case, he really should attempt to curb, if not kick, the stupid habit.

As they sat there, wondering what to do next – even what to say next, for that matter – Kim looked up sharply. Seeing this, Louie looked up, too.

Standing before them was an elderly lady with long, silvery grey hair. “Do you mind if I join you?” the lady asked.

“Is that you, Gladys?” Louie asked, on the off-chance, though the lady didn’t quite seem the same in real life as the old lady he’d imagined in the dream.

The lady looked askance and shook her head, but sat down all the same, and held out a frail hand: “Elizabeth Kavanagh,” she introduced herself.

Louie wasn’t altogether surprised, and he felt distinctly let down.

“Most people call me Lizzy,” the lady continued. “But my friends call me Zee.”

Louie had been taking a swig of his Guinness at that very moment and his heart leapt. He exchanged an excited glance with Kim, and they both turned and stared at the old lady.

They exchanged introductions.

“And some people – sadly, though knowing no better – refer to me as The Crazy Lady,” Zee added.

“We don’t use that word here,” Louie beamed.

Kim was on the edge of her seat. “Humour me, Zee,” she requested, “and tell us why you are here and what brought you here.”

Louie stood up and fished his wallet out of his pocket. “First things first: let me buy drinks.”

Zee was fishing in her own purse, but Louie placed his hand on hers. “No, no. This is my round. I owe you one.”

Zee raised her eyebrows.

“Seriously, Zee: it will all make sense in a few minutes.” At

least, he very much hoped it would, or he would end up with egg all over his face.

“My guess is that you’re going to suggest a sweet sherry,” he added.

Zee smiled. “I was, indeed.”

“But on this occasion, perhaps you’re wondering whether to treat yourself to a brandy and Babycham.”

The old lady put her purse away and peered into his eyes. “You must be a mind-reader, Louie.”

At that moment, Zee froze, with her mouth opening and about to speak. “Oh, my,” the old lady gasped, and then: “It’s all coming back to me now.”

Louie hurried off to the bar to get Zee her brandy, to calm her and also so as not to miss out on any of the conversation.

“You know,” Zee remarked, as Louie returned. “I had an inkling that something like this was going to happen, and so it has. But the next question that arises is: where are all the others?”

Kim leant forward across the table and announced excitedly: “It’s early days as yet, but trust me, I’ve caught the scent and I’m working on it, Zee.”

Zee nodded and clutched Kim’s hand. “I have every confidence in you, Kim. And, as you may or may not recall – and even my recollection is hazy – the job vacancy is still open, and your name is at the very head of the list. Don’t worry if you don’t remember all the details right now: things will become clearer little by little for all of us.

“You know, last night was a test. But today, and the days ahead – this is when we’re faced with the real test. I’m not a gambling woman, but this is, as they say, where we have to ‘put our money where our mouth is’ ...”

Louie was reminded of Morpheus’s advice to Neo in *The Matrix*, that: “There is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.”

Zee continued. “... Or at the risk of mixing my metaphors, this is the point at which – paying due attention to our inklings – it is requested of us that though we can talk the talk well enough, now we have to learn how to walk the walk.”

That lady had not lost her mojo, he mused.

“Here’s to the Inklings,” Louie proposed, raising his glass.

“To the Inklings!” they each rejoined as one, and clinked their glasses together.

“And thanks be to Mushkil Gusha,” Zee reminded them: “the remover of all difficulties.”

B. Mistaken Identity

1. Duncan Xing

*“When I wake up, how do I know that I am still **me**?”*

~ Unknown.

Duncan Xing loped down the stairway, taking the stone steps three at a time, rather than have to ID himself to access the elevator. He was anxious to be away from the scene, his heavy footfall echoing against the cold, graffiti-scrawled concrete of the stair well.

Stopping for a moment to glance furtively around to make sure his hasty exit would not be seen, he hurried away from the squalid tenement building.

In his hand he still clutched one of Bella’s sheer black nylon stockings and he stuffed this guilty trophy in his trouser pocket as he ran toward his car. With the other wrapped tightly around her neck, the slack bitch wouldn’t be needing it where she was fated to go.

As he reached the battered old Solaris Angelique, Xing bent down and swiped the lock with his wrist implant to open the door, and the car rose a few inches in the air before coming back down again with a bump.

Xing cursed under his breath. For God’s sake, that’s the last thing he needed right now!

In that moment he was shocked by a sudden heavy blow to the back of his head and a blindingly white light flooded his vision. Then everything abruptly went black as he slumped to the floor, and he knew no more.

2. Martin Young

Martin Young was sitting with his wife, Jessica; Frobisher, the group's chairperson, Doctor Schneider and his wife, Rose, at a table close to the stage in the club's main hall. They'd finished their meal, the tables had been cleared by the efficient staff and all too soon the chairman would be calling upon him to deliver his after-dinner speech.

"I could go a brandy to steady the old nerves," he said, rising to his feet and pulling out his phone. "What can I get you all?"

"No, no, no: we can't have that. You're our distinguished guest here tonight, Martin," smiled the chairperson, standing up and politely ushering him back to his seat. Frobisher was one of the old school and insisted on physically visiting the bar rather than tapping in his order. "Allow me. Jessica, what can I get you, my dear? Certainly. Same again, Rose? Right you are."

"I'll go with you and help," Doctor Schneider insisted.

By the time the pair returned from the bar, and the doctor had passed round the drinks, Martin was beginning to wish that he'd asked for a double. He peered down at his hands and he could see that they were trembling. Though he was tempted to down the drink in one gulp, he restrained himself and took polite sips, savouring the brandy.

"Well, time to go, old chap. You sit there and I'll go to the lectern to introduce you. The stage is all yours for forty minutes. Then there'll be a fifteen minute break for coffee followed by a round of questions and answers, which should take us up to around ten o'clock. That okay by you? Good."

Martin nodded and fumbled around in his briefcase to retrieve his notes. Rather than rely on holographs, he'd printed out a whole heap of cue cards with key points in large, bold type to jog his memory and, just in case he lost the flow and his mind should go blank, beneath these bullet points in smaller type was more detailed text. Like Frobisher he, too, was rather old-fashioned in that respect.

Martin had just risen to his feet and begun that long dreaded

walk toward the stage when his head began to swim. He reached out to steady himself but too soon his legs buckled beneath him and he fell to the floor, cracking his head on the edge of the stage on the way down.

The chairperson dashed across the stage, down the short flight of steps and bent down to feel Martin's pulse and to ensure that he was breathing freely. Fumbling in his pocket he pulled out his phone, called out a number and waited anxiously. "Hello, yes, a man has collapsed and I need an ambulance urgently. The Arbustum on Elder Street in Wigthorpe. Next door to the town library. Oh, I see, you have my location. It's on its way? Good. Yes, he's unconscious, but still breathing."

Doctor Schneider dashed across the floor. He grabbed Frobisher's phone, bent down and quickly scanned Martin's prone body. "Frobisher 10896 here. Sending you the vitals now."

3. It Rings No Bells

Duncan Xing opened his eyes and looked blearily around the room, surprised to have suddenly awoken to find himself in these strange surroundings. His head felt uncomfortable and reaching up he was shocked to find his head thickly bandaged.

A woman entered the room. She wore a nurse's uniform.

"Ah, you're awake, Mister Xing."

Xing? For the life of him, he couldn't quite work out what his name was or even who he was, though he did feel "himself", if you know what I mean, but Xing didn't ring any bells.

"And how are you feeling?" the woman smiled, reaching for his wrist and checking the digital readout.

"You're in hospital," she told him. "I'm Sister Hardy. You had a nasty fall. Nothing to fret about, though: the doctors are confident you're on the mend. So just relax. You'll soon be up and about again, and this little episode will be behind you."

"Who am I?" he asked her anxiously.

"Why, you're Duncan Xing," the woman smiled. She scrolled through the page on her tablet to double check this.

He frowned and shook his head.

"Nothing to worry about, I'm sure, Mister Xing. It's probably just temporary, to do with the bump on your head."

That was vaguely reassuring.

"Anyway, I have to go," she said, scribbling a note on the tablet. "But don't worry, I'll be back from time to time to check on your progress. And the doctors will be round to see you soon."

"Thank you, Sister."

4. Dazed and Confused

As Sister Hardy turned the corner, heading for Doctor Wellbecker's room to let him know that Mister Xing had regained consciousness, though perhaps the system had already informed him, she leapt to one side as a figure coming the other way bumped into her and almost sent her sprawling.

"Oh! Mister Young, you gave me such a fright. I nearly jumped out of my skin. Well, it's wonderful that you're already up on your feet, but let's get you back to your room and get you tucked up in bed."

"Where am I?" the man wanted to know.

"Do you remember? You were at a gathering and were about to deliver a speech when you suddenly collapsed. Nothing to worry about now, according to the scan and tests. Anyhow, I'll have the doctor come and see you in a few minutes and he'll explain what's going on. So let's get you back to bed, shall we?"

5. Not So Sure

As soon as the nurse had gone, Martin Young was out of bed again, hunting for a mirror so that he could take a look at himself. His room had an en-suite bathroom and there was a mirror above the sink. That, and an infernal bug-eyed camera hovering in mid-air, watching his every move. He had half a mind to swat the damn thing.

His head was swathed in bandages of course, and all he could see were holes where his eyes, nose and mouth went. Feeling around the sides and back of the bandage he found some adhesive tape holding the stuff in place and with a bit of an effort he managed to pull the tape free and began to unravel the mass.

What he saw took his breath away. For one thing, his head had been shaved for some reason and there was a strip of fine white, blood-stained tape circling his head at the level of his forehead. But what he found really shocking was that when he peered at himself in the mirror he saw a stranger staring back. He didn't recognize these features at all and yet at the same time, they did seem familiar. It was as if his mind was saying one thing and at the same time his heart was saying something else, which was quite bizarre.

"Oh, Mister Young! What on earth are you doing?" gasped a voice behind him. He turned to find that the nurse had returned with a doctor in a long white coat. The woman took him by the arm and guided him to the chair beside his bed.

The doctor leant forward and had a good look at his head. "Actually, Sister, it looks like we can dispense with the bandages in any case. You might get one of the nurses to cleanse the wound site and replace the tape, though."

"Yes, doctor."

The man came round to face him. "I'm Doctor Wellbecker. So, how are we feeling, Mister Young? Sister tells me you've been up and about which is an excellent sign. Naturally, you'll be feeling confused after the trauma, but is there any discomfort?"

"My head feels sore, yes. And, yes, I'm more than a little

confused, doctor.”

“I’ll have a word with one of my colleagues and you can have a nice, long chat with her about the confusion, Mister Young. Set your mind at rest. As for the soreness, that can be easily rectified.”

The doctor straightened himself up and headed toward the door. “Anyway, it’s good to meet you and see you back in the land of the living, Mister Young. We’ll keep you under close observation, and I’ll look in again on you from time to time.”

“Thank you.”

Half an hour later, one of the hospital porters came into the room with a wheelchair. “Morning, mate,” the man lilted, reaching down to consult the tablet at the end of his bed, then coming closer to check the digital monitor and plastic name tag on his wrist. “Better safe than sorry, as my old mam would say, mate. I don’t like to rely solely on these technological gizmos.

“Right Mister Young, we have you down for a post-operative scan.” He pushed the wheelchair round to the side of the bed. “Can you get in yourself, or do you need help?”

“I don’t need that, do I?” he asked the man, rising to his feet and showing that he was not an invalid.

“Sorry, mate, hospital rules and regs, and it’s more than my job’s worth to break ’em. So just sit back and enjoy the ride.”

As they passed by the next room, Martin briefly caught sight of another patient who was also being wheeled in the same direction and for a moment their eyes met and there was the dawning of recognition. Yet though the face appeared strangely familiar, he couldn’t quite place the man or put a name to the face.

6. A Jaw-Dropping Moment

It was the day of his release from hospital and Duncan Xing was putting on his clothes and sprucing himself up. He'd just pulled on his shirt and was buttoning up his trousers when, slipping his hand in his pocket to straighten himself out, he came across something that felt like nylon and he pulled out a single sheer black stocking. How such a thing had ended up in his pocket, he couldn't fathom and he stood there for a time looking at it and rubbing the nylon between his fingers.

"Yes, Mister Xing," came a voice from the doorway of his room. A heavy set man strode into the room, rummaged in his pockets, produced a clear plastic bag and held it open. "Pop it in here, there's a good chap."

"What's going on?"

"I might well ask you the same question, Mister Xing." The man produced his phone, gave it a tap, and thrust a warrant card in his face. "Sergeant Crosby, Wigthorpe police."

"Duncan Bertrand Xing, I am arresting you on suspicion of the brutal murder of Bella Harris on or about the third of May 2150 at Flat 31C, Barby Court, Havingham Street, on the Dunston Estate in Wigthorpe." The policeman went on to read him his rights and caution him, whilst a uniformed colleague pulled his hands round behind his back and restrained them with a thick electro-tie. Not wishing to be painfully shocked, he offered no resistance.

"Do you have anything to say at this stage, Mister Xing?"

He shook his head. "But this is absurd. I have no idea what you're talking about nor any recollection of such events. I'm entirely innocent."

"Suspects lie, Mister Xing. But DNA and biometrics? No, they don't lie."

7. Homecoming

Jessica clutched tight hold of Martin's hand all the way home from the hospital, she was so relieved that he'd finally emerged from the induced coma, and glad to have him back again. Even before they had reached the front door, Joseph Schneider was there to greet his return and Rose already had the kettle on the boil for a welcome pot of tea.

By now Martin's confusion had subsided somewhat, thanks largely to the efforts of the therapist at the hospital, Ms. Goodbody – or Gwen as she'd rather be called – with whom he'd spent many hour-long sessions. She helped him to recall his former life with the aid of family photo albums and videos provided by his wife and friends. It was coming back to him, bit by bit, and his former anxiety at not-quite-knowing had been replaced by the hypnotic suggestion that it was actually rather fun and exciting to find out these things anew.

Once the doctor and his wife were on their way, Jessica led him upstairs, gently tugging him along by his neck tie. He didn't take much coaxing. Allowing her long, flowing floral dress to slip down to her ankles, she stood there in her silk cami knickers, bra, black stockings and suspenders and embraced him.

They tumbled onto the bed and Jessica pulled him down on top of her and tugged at his clothes, eager to make wild, passionate love. And all went swimmingly well until she slipped off one of her sheer black stockings and playfully wafted it this way and that across his face.

Suddenly another grotesque and deeply shocking scene flashed before Martin's eyes and he froze. For an instant, he wasn't looking into his beloved wife's eyes but into the eyes of some other woman. Some altogether more slack bitch. Slack bitch? He was horrified that he could think such disgusting thoughts.

"Whatever is the matter, angel?" Jessica cooed, running her hand through his hair. She was clearly concerned, but doing her best not to show it.

Mind reeling, he pulled away.

“Good heavens, you’ve gone as white as a sheet, as if you’ve just seen a ghost, Martin.” There was a nervous quiver in Jessica’s voice now.

He pulled himself together. “Oh, I’m sorry my sweet,” he smiled at her. “Please forgive me, but I can’t do this right now, much as I would love to. Tell me you understand.”

Jessica smiled back at him and kissed him gently on the cheek. The consultant has warned them that it would take some time before he was completely rehabilitated. “Of course, angel. There’s no rush. No rush at all. And nothing to forgive, my precious man.”

He tried not to show concern, but all day long he kept having flashbacks of that nightmare scene that had stopped him in his tracks. It was the memory of having strangled a woman with one of her nylon stockings. And yet, having said that it was a memory, at the same time he couldn’t believe that it could have possibly happened, nor that he was capable of such an abominable act.

What came as more of a shock to him happened when he turned on the television to catch the latest news the next day.

Duncan Xing, 31, a reclusive unemployed single man of Hatton Street has been remanded in custody by Wigthorpe police. He was charged with the brutal murder of a local prostitute, Bella Harris, on the Dunston Estate on or about the third of May this year. It is believed that Xing strangled her with one of her stockings and was later found to be in possession of the matching stocking, though police refuse to confirm this and when asked would not elaborate further. The community is said to be deeply saddened and in a state of shock at this brutal crime on their doorstep.

When Martin saw the photo of the suspect, Xing, he could have died. For he instantly recognized him as the man in the wheelchair in the room next to his at the hospital. And something again told him that he’d known this man before.

But what really sickened him, to the pit of his stomach, was the photo of Bella Harris herself. Hers was the face he’d seen fleetingly when he peered at Jessica on the bed.

8. The Truth is in There

“No, no, no!” he screamed.

“Martin? Wake up. It’s just a bad dream.”

He felt someone shaking him and sat bolt upright in bed.

Once he’d got his bearings, he gave his wife a hug. “Oh, I’m so sorry Jessica. I was having a terrible nightmare.”

“What about? Is it something I can help with, angel?”

“No, don’t worry. I’ll sort myself out. I’d just rather not talk about it now, if that’s all right with you.”

“Of course it is, sweetie. Whenever you feel ready.”

Not a single night had gone by for over a week now without him being haunted by these nightmares. It was always the same: his murdering the prostitute ... murdering the young woman, Bella Harris.

“I’m just going downstairs for a cigarette while I calm down,” he told Jessica, giving her a peck on the cheek.

“Shall I come with you?”

“No, I need to be on my own for a few minutes, Jess. I’ll be back upstairs soon.”

When he got downstairs he made for the cocktail cabinet and poured himself a triple brandy, grabbed his cigarettes and lighter from the living room and headed into his den.

Switching on his PC, he had a gulp of brandy and lit his cigarette whilst he waited for the machine to boot up. Every year they brought out another, faster machine and every three or so years someone else brought out a new version of the operating system that was even more bloated than the last to slow things up still further. Planned obsolescence was still a bane of society. Jess had been onto him for ages to buy a Quantum Flux 3 but, computing being a pet hobby or not, he couldn’t really justify the expense.

Before the accident, his typing had been fluent, although he’d always been a two-finger typist, but since that time he’d found that he really had to concentrate because every time he thought of typing a ‘Q’, his finger – as if having a will of its own – would

find the adjacent ‘W’ key. He had a few perplexing crossed wires, in that respect. His nose would twitch every time he thought of breakfast cereal, for example. Thankfully, therapy had helped, and most of these embarrassing little glitches had begun to sort themselves out.

At length, into his second cigarette and half way through his brandy, he was booted up and on-line. First of all, he trawled through any news reports he could find relating to the murder, but they weren’t telling him much, so this called for slightly more devious methods.

Having located the local police’s system, he opened up MasterKey – a program he’d written himself in his errant teenage years as a would-be hacker – typed in the address, ticked a few check boxes and left the thing to whirr away whilst he went to pour himself another drink and make a coffee to wash it down. By the time he returned, MasterKey had gained access to the local plod’s database, via a less-secure contractor, which in turn was linked up to a whole network of other stations. He was lucky, because a lot of systems these days allowed only voice or biometric recognition, rather than old school typed passwords.

Searching for details of first Duncan Xing and then Bella Harris, he didn’t find what he was looking for, but what he did find brought a lump to his throat. The more he read about Duncan Xing, the more he realized he knew this man, though as far as he could tell they’d never actually met: well, in this life at least. And the more he read about Bella Harris and the gruesome details of her murder, the more he was told what he already somehow knew. It was uncanny and highly disturbing.

The next port of call, with the aid of his trusty old MasterKey, was the local hospital’s database. It turned out he could get into that, too, by going via the police’s system, logged in as one of their senior detectives. The police contractor had left the back door wide open.

Yes, for as yet unspecified reasons, Duncan Xing had, indeed, spent time in the hospital, so he finally had something to go on. His initial intent was to add further to the info he had on Xing, but he was in for a far greater surprise. As he was browsing

through the records, the notes mentioned an unspecified surgical procedure. OK, so that sounded fair enough. Just out of curiosity, he mined the data a little deeper and found out that there had been a transplant from a living donor. He flicked through yards of medical data and jargon that was way over his head and finally decided to abort that investigation and have a look at his own records instead.

Yet more interminable data and jargon. Wait a minute, though: what was that? A transplant? What transplant? I mean, why would a bloody bang on the head require any form of transplant? For some reason that rather important detail had been skipped over in Xing's record as well. Well, whatever it was, yet again it came from a living donor.

Time to mine a little deeper into the data again. His search yielded no further results, however, other than a reference number which was, in both cases, assigned to Doctor Wellbecker. He tried to access that record, but was met by a stony response informing him that access was denied.

Time to try MasterKey again to see if he could snaffle Wellbecker's user name and password. And time to make himself another brew: it wasn't exactly Fort Knox he was breaking into here, but the credentials were certainly well encrypted for all that.

Fifteen minutes later and he was in. He entered the legacy user name and password to login as Wellbecker and tapped in the reference number. Honestly, whichever idiots ran the hospital's IT services should be given the Order of the Boot. Sacked, that is. So much for privatisation, which was supposedly enacted to solve all woes!

So, who was this mystery living donor and just what had been donated? When he'd been told he'd had a nasty bump on the head, they hadn't said anything about a transplant. I mean, why the fuck would they?

And the donor was ... Holy shit, it was Duncan Xing.

He backtracked and had a look to see if he could find a corresponding reference number in Xing's record.

Bingo. He tapped in the reference number and up popped details of Xing's transplant. Holy Mother of God ... Living donor:

Martin Young?! But that couldn't be. It didn't make any sense. What the fuck had he got that Xing needed, well with the exception of a conscience, perhaps? And what the fuck had that Grade A asshole got that he needed?

This was more than mind boggling, it was staggering; even stupefying.

A terrifying thought suddenly gripped Martin and he dashed into the living room, turned the lights up full and stood before the mirror. He remembered asking the therapist why he had a wound across his forehead and she'd said that they'd had to carry out a simple, routine operation to relieve a build up of blood in his skull. Over and over, she'd told him that it was nothing to worry about, to simply put the worry from his mind, and in the end she had him utterly convinced. Well, more than that, really: his concerns had somehow entirely evaporated, almost as if someone had plucked the thoughts from his head.

Martin brought up another window and pulled up the police site again. He'd seen a mugshot of Xing but hadn't paid it any real attention at the time. Yes, there it was ... and, what do you know, Xing had the self-same line running across his forehead. And, looking at the poses in profile, it looked like the line went all the way round his head.

Holy Mother of God! he gasped, and he had to take several slow, deep breaths to calm himself down. His heart was thumping away in his chest by now.

He closed that window and went back to the hospital site.

Half way through Xing's record there was mention of the surgical procedure and another reference number. Already logged in as Wellbecker, he managed to gain access to it.

You have got to be kidding me? Surely, such a thing is impossible. And why? A transplant of the brain and brain stem? Was he hallucinating? Dreaming? Having a psychotic episode? Oh, my God. He felt as if he was about to throw up.

Pulling himself together at length, Martin went back through the records, made a holographic copy and printed out a hard copy for future reference. Then, without going through the shut-down procedure he got down on his hands and knees under the

computer desk and unceremoniously yanked the plug from the socket in the wall.

Then he poured himself a third brandy, lit a fourth cigarette and slumped down on the settee in the living room to mull over what he'd discovered. The thought of having the transplanted brain of a fucking weirdo inside his skull didn't bear thinking about. He felt so ... unclean. So violated.

And the question was, what on earth should he do with the evidence that he'd collected? Apart from anything else – evidence or not – who in their right mind would believe him?

Were he to mention this to Jess, even she would probably reach for the phone to get a doctor to pay a house call and discreetly evaluate the state of his mental health.

“Oh. My. God!” as his young niece Fiona would intone, though not nearly so politely.

9. *Turning in the Evidence*

There was one option open to him, Martin concluded at length. First thing in the morning he'd go down to the local police station and turn in the evidence. Whatever it was that they were up to at the hospital had to be put a stop to. It was immoral and scandalous beyond comprehension.

And on further thought, as an insurance policy, just in case both doctor and policeman rolled up their trouser legs at the same Masonic lodge, he'd mail a holographic copy of the data to a friend he knew who worked for *The New Globe*. Bollocks! He should have thought of that earlier, before he pulled the plug. Now he'd have to wait not only for the old steam engine to boot up, he'd have to wait while it checked his optical disk for errors due to an improper shut-down, too.

Martin didn't sleep at all well during the remainder of the night and as the sun came up he had to drag himself out of bed and into the shower to wake himself up.

Jessica was up and about by the time he emerged from the shower, dressed and went downstairs. "What do you fancy for breakfast, angel?" she asked, giving him a good morning hug.

He really wanted to be off as soon as he could.

"Oh, I'm sorry love, but I have to be off out. I'll grab something later. Though thanks all the same."

"None of that, Martin Young, you need to get something in your stomach, even if it's only a couple of slices of toast and marmalade."

He ummed and ached to no avail. "Okay, two slices of toast it is. And a large mug of strong coffee."

Still chewing on the last piece of toast, he kissed his wife, collected his things and headed into town.

Martin was just about to set off down an alley, en route to pick up next week's supply of cigarettes from a local black-marketeer, when who should he bump into but Joseph Schneider. He was just about to make his excuses when he had second thoughts. "Do you have a few minutes you can spare, Joseph? I

have something very important to discuss with you.”

“Is it important, or can you wait?” the man asked.

“On a scale of one to ten, this is off the Richter scale, Joseph.”

“Not about your head is it? Any dizziness or blurred vision?”

“Nothing like that,” he began. “... and everything to do with that.”

“I see. Well, I’m meeting Rose at the shopping centre at ten o’clock, but certainly I have half an hour or so to spare to talk with you, dear friend. So, what’s so important?”

“Let’s go and sit down. There’s a café just up the road – unless you fancy something a little stronger?”

“Oh, bit too early in the day for me, Martin. But a pot of Darjeeling tea and a cream bun would slip down a treat. I’ll phone in the order, so there’s no delay.”

Once they’d settled, he broached the subject with Schneider. Schneider appeared surprised by the revelation, and yet not entirely shocked. Being a doctor, perhaps he’d already switched into diagnostic mode. Well, in case the man was wondering about his sanity, he showed him the holographs from the hospital database.

“My word, what can I say? This beggars belief, Martin. Supposing this is true, you must be feeling god-awful at the thought of having the man’s brain inside you.”

“Supposing it’s true?” he queried.

The doctor apologised. “I’m sorry: it’s just that this is a lot for even me to take in, Martin, though I can indeed see that the evidence is convincing. Unless you’ve concocted the evidence and, computer whizz or not, I really can’t see how you could have.”

‘I feel violated, Joseph. Utterly violated.’

“So, tell me, what do you intend doing with this information?”

“When we met, I was heading for the police station to report the matter,” he told Schneider, though a little voice in his head told him not to mention having sent a copy to the press. “What else can I do? Top myself?”

Schneider was aghast. "Oh, for heaven's sake not that. Not ever. Cast the idea from your mind, Martin. Think of Jessica. Think of your family and friends. Let me sort you out with some medication." The doctor was already tapping away on his phone.

"Well," Schneider continued after a sober pause: "Since I've detained you, perhaps I might make amends by giving you a lift to the police station? I feel so helpless."

"If it would be no bother"

"No bother at all, my dear man. The car's just around the corner unless it's been clamped or towed away by over-zealous traffic wardens. And I still have a few minutes before I'm due to meet Rose."

They were near the car when Martin had a change of heart. "No, I don't want to detain you, Joseph. I'll take a walk, if that's all right with you. Apart from anything else, I need to clear my head."

Schneider fumbled inside his jacket pocket and prodded him in the back. "*Au contraire*, Martin: indeed, I insist."

"You have got to be joking, right?"

The man swung him round and he caught a glimpse of the gun in his jacket pocket. "Does it look like I'm joking?"

"So, you're in on this, too?"

"Walk," Schneider requested, pushing him in the back.

Martin suddenly recalled that the last thing Schneider had done before he collapsed was help Frobisher with the round of drinks. "The drink," he observed.

Schneider nodded.

"But why?"

"Why, it was all in the noble cause of science," Schneider told him. "To find out what would happen when the brain of a psychopath was transplanted into the body of someone like yourself with a healthy conscience. And vice versa. A medical first. A triumph! And at a more metaphysical level, haven't you ever wondered whether the part of you that you know as your 'I-ness' would still be there if you had a brain transplant? Whether we're more than mere flesh and mind? Whether, for example, the brain is more of an interface to something higher that is

independent of the mortal form?”

Schneider looked at him. “Tell me, Martin, even though you have the brain of a murderer do you feel like this murderer or do you still feel like the ‘I’ you were before?”

Martin was looking for a way out of this mess, and he was humouring the man and playing for time; waiting for a moment’s inattention.

“I feel like me,” he told the man. “Though I’m haunted by the memories and nightmares of another. And by the thought that in part he is inside me.”

“And do you have the physical or the emotional urge to mutilate and murder? Do you think of prostitutes as ‘slack bitches’?”

He shook his head. “No, not at all.”

“Anyhow, enough talk for now. Get in the front and drive. I’ll tell you where,” Schneider demanded, bending down for a moment to swipe his wrist implant to unlock the car door.

In that instant, when Schneider’s hand was away from his gun, Martin lashed out with his foot, sweeping the man’s legs from under him and he spun on his heel and dashed across the road, staying low in case Schneider recovered and aimed a shot at him.

Schneider just stood there and shook his head. “No matter, Martin, no matter: there’s more than one way to skin a cat.” And with that he sat down in his car and called up the list of contacts on his mobile phone. “Hello, John? We have a little problem and I’m hoping that you’ll be able to help me out ...”

10. The Cop Shop

“Yes, sir, how can I help you?” asked the young constable manning the front desk of the police station.

“I was hoping to talk to a senior detective working on the recent murder,” he replied.

“Right.” The constable tapped away at his computer keyboard. “Well, if I could just take a few details first of all, I’ll see what I can do. If you’d just swipe the chip reader on the desk, to your right.”

Martin reached his hand out and complied.

After what seemed like an age, the PC asked: “and what is the nature of your request, sir?”

Well, talk of brain transplants was not advisable. If he casually mentioned that at the front desk, he’d be shown the door or a padded cell.

“I have evidence pertaining to the murder of the local prostitute,” he said instead.

The young PC was momentarily taken back, but soon recovered his composure. “I see. And are you here to confess to that crime, sir?”

“Well, I’m sure you get your share of such sad cases, son, but no. I have information and I would like to see a senior detective about the matter.”

“Very good, sir. I’ve sent a message upstairs to CID and someone will be with you shortly. If you’d like to take a seat ...” He motioned toward a row of plastic bucket seats against the far wall of the foyer, which had been firmly bolted into the bare concrete floor, and Martin distinctly heard the metallic click as the PC discreetly locked the front door. Clearly, there was no going back now.

“Thank you.”

Ten minutes later, another young PC appeared and she let Martin in and escorted him upstairs. They stopped outside a door and she knocked politely. Well, he said “young”, but maybe it was just he who was getting old. Even politicians looked young to him

now, with the exception of elder statespersons.

“Come.”

They entered. “I have Mister Young to see you, sir.”

“Thank you constable.” The rotund man got up from his swivel chair and offered him a seat. “DCI John Clarke,” he introduced himself, crushing Martin’s hand in a vice-like grip. “How can I help? I understand you have information about the recent murder of Bella Harris?”

“Well, it’s less about her and more about me and Duncan Xing,” he replied. “It’ll all make sense it time.” He went on to describe what he’d found in the hospital database and was fully expecting the man to call the duty medical officer or to show him the door. The detective seemed to take it in his stride, though there was something amiss that made Martin wonder whether the man was considering the state of his mental health. When shown the actual data, however, the DCI read carefully through it, noting the sections that he’d highlighted.

“Well, as a policeman,” the DCI began, “I don’t think I need tell you that hacking into confidential information on the hospital database is against the law and I shall have to consider carefully whether or not to press charges against you ...

“And of course, material gathered in this way would not be admissible as evidence.”

Martin mentally rolled his eyes and nodded. “Yes, I understand that, sir, but might I say in my defence that such considerations pale into insignificance when compared with the crime committed against me and – for that matter – against Xing.”

“To put it mildly and off the record, Mister Young, if someone had taken a pair of nut crackers to Xing’s testicles on the way to the cells, I would have probably turned a blind eye and pleaded ignorance. But as for you, yes at first glance it does look like a horrific – indeed staggering – crime has been perpetrated against you.”

“You have no idea how horrific, sir. So you will investigate?”

“Yes, you have my assurance that we will look into the matter, Mister Young. And, yes, I will ensure that my officers take

the matter most seriously.”

Martin couldn't pin down the feeling, but he was not convinced. Chances were, as soon as he left the office, the detective would be on the phone calling up the hospital, though of course all the man had to do was check through his records to see that Martin had nothing to hide.

The DCI rose from his chair and shook his hand. “I'll get back to you ... including my decision about whether to charge you concerning the illegal data access.”

Martin smiled. “Thank you for your time and consideration, Detective Chief Inspector.”

“You're welcome.” The man politely gestured toward the door, with his hand already reaching for his phone. “PC Fletcher will show you out.”

11. Arrested

Nothing happened in the next few days, and not having heard from the police, Martin was beginning to think that they'd decided to bury the case.

Then all of sudden the shit hit the fan. He got up the next morning to find the front cover of *The New Globe* highlighted on his PC screen after he'd booted-up. Scrolling through the news item, he saw that his scoop had hit the headlines with a picture of a rather embattled and defensive Doctor Wellbecker splashed across the front page, with coverage extending to page three and a mention in the page two editorial.

That's when their phones started to ring ... and ring ... and ring until Jessica switched them off and dumped them in a desk drawer. Shortly after, reporters and photographers started setting up shots at the bottom of the garden and they had to disconnect the doorbell.

Well, the police wouldn't be able to bury this case, after all.

At eleven o'clock that morning, almost on the dot, DCI John Clarke turned up at the door accompanied by half a dozen officers to keep the growing crowd in order.

The DCI rapped loudly on the door and Martin went to answer it.

"Come in, Detective Chief Inspector. If you'd like to come through into the lounge, I'll get Jessica to fix you a drink."

"This is not a social call, sir. It's official business. Martin Young, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Bella Harris on or about the third of May 2150 at Flat 31C, Barby Court, Havingham Street, on the Dunston Estate in Wigthorpe.

A wave of adrenaline surged through Martin and, his head swimming, he had to steady himself against the hallway wall.

"I must caution you that you do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something that you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. You have a right to a solicitor and if ..."

“You’re joking, surely?”

The DCI shook his head as one of his officers cuffed Martin.

“... and if you cannot afford one, a solicitor will be appointed for you.”

“On what grounds?”

The DCI said nothing and headed toward a police van as the officers cleared a path through the press and onlookers.

An hour later and Martin had been processed and consigned to one of the cells to await his fate.

12. The Trial

Bail having been denied him, due to the grave nature of the crime, Martin had spent several long, terrible weeks on remand in a nearby prison. But the day of the trial finally came around. Unable to decide which of them had committed the offences, the National Prosecution Service had decided in its wisdom to try them jointly and have the courts decide.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” the defence for Duncan Xing summed up at length. “That one of the defendants before you is guilty of these wretched crimes is not in question, though each pleads his innocence.”

“What you are being asked to decide here is which one of the defendants committed these heinous crimes.

“And to do that you have to decide whether it is the mortal flesh that commits crime or the mind. As I and the many expert witnesses I have called have endeavoured to show, the evil intent resides within the mind, not in the finger or nose or even – dare I say – the male sexual organ. These have no sense of right and wrong and obey the mind, the central processing centre of the individual. It is the mind which may become depraved. It is the mind which harbours evil intent. It is the mind that commands the body to commit a crime.

“And the mind, the brain, of the murderer resides not in the body of my client Duncan Xing. No! The brain of the criminal has been transplanted into the body of the co-defendant Martin Young. So, in order to rightly punish the offender, you must convict the host of that evil mind: Martin Young! To convict Duncan Xing who bears the mind of a paragon of virtue and intellect, you would condemn an innocent man to a lifetime’s jail. And that cannot – must not – be allowed to happen.”

“Ah,” began the counsel for Martin’s defence. “If only the process were reversible, then the matter would be clear – that Duncan Xing is undoubtedly the evil perpetrator here, but alas the experts tell us, the process is not reversible.

“If you cannot decide without a shadow of a doubt who is

guilty here, then it is your God-given duty to acquit either – or indeed both – of the defendants.

“But consider the evidence presented to you by the expert witnesses whom I have called during this trial. Some of them contend that it is not simply a matter of the flesh and mind and that the one with the evil mind must be punished. No! It is a question of body, mind and soul. Body, mind and soul. Both counsels for the defence are agreed that the sin, the crime, is not the work of the body, of the flesh. But I warn you, if you convict Martin Young for being in possession of Duncan Xing’s evil mind – through no fault of his own – then you are condemning the peerless soul of an innocent man to a life in prison. Would you want that on your conscience?

“All the evidence I have presented suggests that Martin Young in his soul, in his essence, is the very same good man that he was before he had another evil man’s brain transplanted into his body. Who here believes that the man before you – Martin Young – is anything other than a good man? A pillar of the community. A man with so much love and energy to offer ... Do not condemn this wholly innocent and unfortunate young man.”

13. The Verdict

As the summing up came to an end, the jury were sent away to consider the evidence and, at length, though unable to agree unanimously, they returned to deliver their majority verdict.

The clerk of the court read out their decision: “We, the jury, find the defendant Duncan Xing not guilty of the murder of Bella Harris.”

Xing turned toward Martin in the court with a triumphal smile on his face.

And the defendant Martin Young?

“We, the jury, find the defendant Martin Young guilty of the murder of Bella Harris.”

Clearly, they had not been sold on the idea of Young’s having a soul.

There were gasps in the court and Martin had to grasp hold of the front of the dock as his legs began to buckle beneath him.

As the hubbub died down, the judge looked Martin square in the eye. “Before I pass sentence, do you have anything to say to the court?”

He shook his head, fighting back the tears.

“Very well. Martin Young, you have been found guilty of the most grave and heinous crime. I have no option, therefore, but to send you to jail for fifteen years hard labour ...

Not life, then. That was at least some small relief.

“At the end of which time, your life is to be terminated.

“And may God have mercy on your soul,” the judge concluded, bringing his wooden gavel down hard on the bench before him.

“What soul?” he wanted to know.

He called out: “What soul?”

“Take the prisoner away. Duncan Xing you are free to leave.”

He turned toward Xing to shake his head at this travesty of justice and as he did, Xing mouthed back quite clearly though inaudibly: “the slack bitch deserved it.”

God help us all.

C. One Dark and Troubled Day

“Synchronicity is an ever present reality for those who have eyes to see.”

~ Carl Jung.

Louie had been up for more than an hour now, but he had yet to take a shower or even open the thick brown curtains, as he was intent on finishing his typescript while his creative juices were still flowing. As with his attempts to quit his compensatory smoking habit, he knew that windows of opportunity opened all-too infrequently.

He was still in two minds about the title of the short story, and had discarded “The Donor”, which he felt gave too much away, in favour of “Mistaken Identity”, or perhaps “A Case of Mistaken Identity”. But, in any case, even assuming that one of the mags would take his story, no doubt they would have their own ideas about that, and about the length, the storyline, the wording, illustrations, his profile picture, potted biography, and so many other things. That was the extent of the control they had over his work and over him. Self-publishing was out of the question, though, because none of the mainstream outlets would deem his work worthy of a second look, let alone review.

Louie had hoped that finishing this piece of work would lift his spirits, but instead, after a brief spell of elation, doubt was slowly creeping in. Well, he said “doubt”. Perhaps instead it might be more rightly called realism? Maybe his idea of good really was not good enough? And maybe he should save himself the disappointment of rejection and simply consign his paper copy to the wastepaper basket?

Hell, he’d collected sufficient automated rejection memos to paper the walls of his small apartment. It was as if some dark and troubled side of his nature derived a perverse satisfaction in

seeing him fail over and over again.

It was cold in the apartment, always cold, and Louie pulled on a second thick fleece. He reached for his tobacco pouch and absentmindedly rolled a cigarette, and he was only two puffs into it before he realised he'd only just stubbed one out, so he tossed it into the ashtray on his work desk.

Almost at that very instant, Louie heard the doorbell chime, and his heart lurched. That was all he needed right now, he cursed, reaching for his extra-strong mints to sweeten his breath.

Who on earth could it be, he wondered? The landlord? A meter reader? The Jehovah's Witnesses? Hopefully not his mother, bless her. She would have a fit if she saw him like this.

"Yes? Who is it?" he called out, but since there was no reply, he crossed the room and opened the door anyway.

"Ah." It was Zee, though he wasn't at all expecting her to visit. She must have looked up his address in the phone book.

Louie stepped aside and gently ushered the old lady in.

"Hi, Zee. Good to see you. Please come in and make yourself at home."

He caught sight of the bundle of laundry on the armchair and rushed to pick it up and went through the flat to throw it in a corner in the kitchenette.

"For goodness' sake," Zee said, crossing the room and throwing the curtains open, as he re-emerged, offering her a tea or coffee and hoping that he had enough milk. "Tea would be just fine, thank you, Louie. Or whatever you're having."

"Tea it is, then." He hastily picked up his cereal bowl and mug from his work desk and Zee followed him through into the kitchenette.

"It's a lovely spring day outside, you know," Zee informed him as he clicked the kettle on. "Sunshine and bright blue skies, and a pleasant onshore breeze, just cool enough to wake you up and invigorate you."

He shrugged his hands. "I wouldn't know. "I've been beavering away at a story for over a week now." Only then did he realise just how little he'd earn based on the word count, given the long hours he'd put in, even assuming that someone would

take the story – most likely lower than the statutory minimum wage. On the other hand, he could look upon the work as a loss leader, with much more to follow should he eventually get published.

“And before that?” Zee enquired.

Again, he shrugged. “Studying, I guess.”

Zee didn’t reply until he’d got the tea brewed, had taken the tray through to the living room, cleared a space on the low coffee table, and they were settled.

“Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans,” the old lady commented, taking a tentative sip of her tea.

“John Lennon,” he nodded. Then: “And of course, you’re right. I just get engrossed in my work and shut the world and his dog out of my life.”

“Mmm,” she smiled, taking another sip. “Just what the doctor ordered. The tea, that is, not your bohemian lifestyle.”

A bohemian lifestyle? He wasn’t sure if that was meant as a compliment or a reproach, and he’d have to look it up after the old lady had left.

°Why don’t you simply ask her?° an inner voice prompted him.

Perhaps because he wasn’t prepared for the kind of answer Zee might give, that’s why.

°You’re avoidant,° he was reliably informed.

“So, what do you have planned for the rest of today?” she queried. “And I’m not talking about the slots you’ve allocated for meals. Speaking of which, when was the last time you recall eating because you felt hungry, rather than because the clock said it was ‘time to eat’?”

Louie avoided the temptation to shrug his arms for a third time. “I don’t know, really. I most likely need to visit the shops, then finish off my short story, and finally either make a start with a book on Jean Baudrillard and Postmodernism that I just bought on Amazon, or maybe find another film to watch and crack open a can of Stella Artois.”

“That’s not real life, Louie,” the lady said, shaking her head and placing her cup and saucer down on the coffee table. “And as

for Baudrillard, he's altogether too pessimistic for my taste. I rather suspect that were he to have had a genuine mystical experience, he would have arrived at an altogether different set of conclusions."

Louie walked across to his desk to retrieve his tobacco pouch and, momentarily distracted by a dozy-looking wasp crawling across the desk, his tobacco pouch went flying as he attempted to swat the insect.

He retrieved the tobacco pouch from his wastepaper basket and went back to his armchair to roll another cigarette, but when he came to light it, the paper stuck to his lip while his fingers kept moving, and he burnt the inside of his fingers on the glowing ash.

His two mishaps had not gone unnoticed by Zee, and she commented on the matter: "Bad things come in threes, or so the saying goes."

Louie took the hint and stubbed out the cigarette, but the old lady did not look convinced. "Let me do you a favour," she suggested, and she picked up the pouch of tobacco and tossed it across the room into the wastepaper basket. "And yes, I know: later on, when you've forgotten these little incidents, and discounted them as mere happenstance, you'll probably retrieve the tobacco from the basket."

She peered into his eyes. "And you're probably thinking: well, I could throw the tobacco down the drain. But then you'd only be hunting around the flat for dog-ends to roll up and smoke."

Zee clearly knew how his mind worked.

The old lady rose to her feet and began to put on her coat. "Well, you know: if you can't summon up the willpower to forcibly break the habit – and especially not start up again – or you can't tackle the root cause of your dis-ease, then we'll simply have to find some more potent means of transcending it."

Then, heading for the door: "Well, are you coming with me, or are you just going to slouch around your gloomy flat for yet another day, fruitlessly postponing the inevitable?"

He was unsure.

"Trust me," Zee added, as he stood on the threshold. "You'll

thank me for this, later, Robert Llewelyn George. I promise, the minute you walk out of that door, you'll begin to feel as right as rain. Real life is just a whisker away, as you know full well yourself, deep down inside.

"As the Sufis advised: the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," she added.

"Or as T. S. Eliot once wrote:

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.

"And again from the Sufis: 'Truth is closer than your jugular vein.' Of course, merely knowing this as a titbit of information, or even as a 'fact', or having a feeling about it, is not the same in anything but the slightest way as actually *living* it first-hand. It bears the same relationship that masturbation does to True Love, though the phenomenal – at least, human love – can be, in a way, a bridge to the Real."

"Deep in the sea are riches beyond compare. But if you seek safety, it is on the shore," he nodded, quoting Saadi, from his *Rose Garden*.

Zee took down his jacket from the stand in the hall and tossed it in his direction. "So, rather than stand here on the threshold, dithering: let's go, then," she requested, opening the door.

She added: "Being in two minds about everything is something else that may be transcended. Anyhow, don't worry: you'll soon feel as right as rain ... or, more to the point today, as bright blue skies."

Louie was used to hoofing it to and from town, as he was usually intent on getting back home as soon as he could, to get on with important work, but today he strolled at a leisurely pace, so that Zee's little old legs could easily keep up.

"Stuff the books and the Sufi circles," the old lady, laughed, casting her arms around. "Sunshine and fresh air is what we need most of all right now."

"I don't mean to sound rude, Zee, but sunshine and fresh air aren't going to put food on my table."

°Living from hand to mouth is merely subsisting, not living,°

he was prompted.

The old lady shook her head resolutely. "Maybe not, but this will give you the *means* to do so. Trust your Aunt Zee," she said, hooking her arm in his and steering him down the road. "And, heaven knows, your head could do with a good old-fashioned spring clean. Well, you could do with a ruddy chimney sweep. All those cigarettes you smoke, it's a wonder you don't have a fall of soot. But we'll get to that soon enough."

In spite of it being cold in his flat, it was quite warm out, especially in the sun, and before long, Louie was wishing that he'd taken off one of his fleeces. As they came down through the old town, though, and began to walk along the seafront, it felt a little cooler. Rather than walk past all the noisy and garish amusement arcades, Zee guided them across the road between the traffic and they walked down to where the sand was slightly more damp and manageable underfoot. The tide must be on its way out.

"Do you hear that?" the old lady asked him, holding a finger in the air.

They stopped for a few moments and listened, but he heard nothing really, not even the noise of the amusement arcades, just the gentle lapping of water on the shore, then the gentle sizzle as it receded, and the occasional sound of children playing together or a dog barking in excitement..

"That's exactly what I mean," Zee nodded, gently prodding him in the ribs.

"And do you smell that?"

He sniffed the air.

"Did you know that slightly stale sulphury aroma is dimethyl sulphide," the lady informed him. "It's made by bacteria digesting the dead phytoplankton."

"I don't find it unpleasant," he replied. "It brings back childhood memories, so it's strangely reassuring."

"And that other smell," Zee continued. "Those are dictyopterenes, which are pheromones released by the seaweed to attract sperm to the eggs."

"Gosh, you are a mine of information, Zee," he remarked, bowing his head in her direction. Being a heavy smoker, however,

his own sense of smell was somewhat lacking.

“My husband, Francis, trained as a marine biologist,” she informed him.

“Ah, I see. You must have lived a quite remarkable life.”

“We made the most of the many opportunities sent our way.

“Do you see that?” She pointed out over the waves, where several seagulls were milling round a little fishing boat.

Then: “And do you feel that?” she asked as they ambled slowly on.

He shrugged. “How do you mean?”

“Just stand here and describe how you feel. Actually allow yourself to feel, rather: you don’t have to put it into words or categorise it.”

Again they stopped for a time. “I’m sorry, my mind’s a blank,” he apologised at length.

“Take that wave there, for example,” Zee laughed, and he got the message.

“I guess I simply feel carefree.”

“Good!” Zee nodded, poking a finger in his chest. “That is a very good place to be, right now. I’m pleased.”

They walked on for a time, before heading off in search of the superloos and an ice cream or lolly to lick as they wended their way back up town. He realised he was getting ready to eat something more substantial, so though they could have eaten on the seafront, he led Zee to the fabled chip shop that he and his parents would frequent – managing to convince her that he should pay, this time – and they sat for a time on a bench outside, looking down over the bay. And every so often, amidst the smell of fried food, he’d catch the faint fragrance of roses on the gentle, shifting breeze.

“Let me show you,” Zee said out of the blue, as they finished off their meals and placed their leftovers in a nearby rubbish bin.

“Where are we going?” he enquired.

“On a magical mystery tour, Robert Llewelyn George,” was her cryptic reply.

She took Louis by the arm and guided him back down the cobbled lane a short distance, before stopping at a plain, matt

green gate that he had not given the least attention to on the way to the chippie; nor, for that matter, on any of the many occasions that he and his parents must have passed that way. There was no sign on or near the gate to show where it might lead.

Zee fished in her shoulder bag and brought out a large brass key, inserted it in the lock and turned it, then thumbed the latch, pushed the creaky old gate open, and ushered him inside. Having done that, she firmly locked the gate from inside.

“Can’t be too careful with all the lager louts about,” the old lady said, bolting the gate at the bottom and reaching up for the bolt at the top.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Zee said, casting her arms about. “Make yourself at home while I fix up a drink. Coffee or tea, or some ice-cold lemonade? I mean real, home-made lemonade, not carbonated sugar water. Or apple juice.”

He readily settled for the apple juice, and had a look around.

They were in a walled garden, to the rear of what looked like a detached, stone-built cottage, and there far more varieties of flowering plant, and colourful hues, here than Lee had names for.

Over to one side was a delightful lily pond with a statue on a small island in the centre, and he spent some time standing there and peering into the water.

“Ah, I see you’ve met Hermes or Mercurius, messenger of the gods and trickster,” the old lady smiled as she emerged from the cottage with a small wooden tray. “And those blue lotus flowers have come all the way from Egypt.”

She pointed out a group of fish in one corner. “And if you look carefully, you’ll see that we’ve had some new arrivals. The fish are omnivores, so I’m hoping that the babies won’t get eaten.”

Louis went over to sit on the wooden bench next to Zee while she poured out their drinks from a large crystal jug.

“And this is dear Henrietta,” Zee told him, as a slender, tabby cat emerged from the bushes and rubbed up against Louie’s legs.

The cat went to the old lady and meowed. “I know, I know, you’ve smelt the chicken, but that’s for later, so you’ll just have to be patient, Henrietta.”

Louis put his drink down very carefully on the tray, and Zee followed suit, and they sat back on the bench for some time drinking in the sun and the fragrant flowers. Now, more than ever, he could smell the delightful fragrance of the flowers that surrounded them. Zee's rose scent was wonderful, but it was nothing compared to this.

"The peonies," the old lady agreed, pointing to a flower bed not far from where he was sitting. "Especially those pink ones. The honey bees and other wild bees adore their nectar, too, though they make Henrietta sneeze if she gets too close." He hadn't said anything, but perhaps she'd noticed him sniffing the air.

"As for the cherry tree, that's dear to my heart. Francis planted that when we first moved here, and it's where he asked for his ashes to be sprinkled."

"That's touching," Louie nodded, gently squeezing the old lady's arm. "My father used to fish in the bay, and he wanted his ashes sprinkling over the sands, down by the low water mark."

For a time they fell silent, content to simply relax and let it all in. Louie hardly noticed at first, but a wonderful feeling was coming over him. Perhaps Zee felt it, too, because she gently patted his arm, as if to reassure him.

He had a dozen songs playing away in his head just then: Louie Armstrong's "Oh what a wonderful world"; Eric Idle on the cross singing "Always look on the bright side of life"; and the Carter family singing "Keep on the sunny side".

"Can you hear that?" he asked, but if he spoke it must only have been in a whisper. "Keep on the sunny side, I mean?"

That song had suddenly taken on a whole new meaning and significance.

"Oh, that's delightful, Louie," Zee smiled. "As for me, I used to hear songs in my head, but these days I'm blessed with orchestral arrangements. Right now I'm tuned into Beethoven's Ode to Joy, and at night, under the stars, I often hear Debussy's *Clare de Lune*."

"Is this real?" he asked her.

Zee turned toward him and pinched him.

“Ouch!” he cried out, though tongue-in-cheek.

“That real enough for you, Mister?” she laughed. Then: “What can you taste?”

Louis peered around him. It was as if he was swimming in the air; as if there was no longer any clear boundary between him and the garden; him and nature; even him and the old lady. Everything was brighter and more colourful and so much richer than he would have thought possible.

“How can I put it? That I am more present and it is more immediate? That there is no distance between ‘I’ and ‘Thou’?”

“Does this raise your hopes, Robert Llewelyn George?” Zee enquired. “I mean, not too high, but high enough for now?”

“Is this Real, I mean with a capital ‘R’, Zee?”

“It is for now, Louie, though you’ll find that the feeling passes with time. Of course you’re more than welcome to come back here any time you need to recharge your batteries. Let’s say that you’ve caught the scent of Reality – indeed, at this very moment you are in its midst.”

Louie was a little dismayed, and as this feeling emerged in him, he felt himself drifting slowly away from this Reality. Zee placed her hand on his arm and gently patted it.

“Try not to worry, Louis. You’ve caught the scent – dare I say, a taste of the ‘forbidden fruit’ – and you never will again be far from this Reality, except in appearance only. These feelings, this state of being, will return, I can assure you. Indeed, there will come a time when you wake up one day and realise that you never left Reality at all.”

Louie had an idea. “It would be good to invite Kim here.”

Zee nodded. “Yes, I had that very much in mind. And any others, too, if we can locate them.

“But anyway, first things first: let’s just sit here quietly for a time, and make the very most of the Here and Now. Aren’t the roses magnificent?”

“Now you can perhaps begin to understand how something like Truth or Reality can be closer than your jugular vein.

“And as you were rightly advised, my friend: ‘Keep on the sunny side of life.’ What was it you said? ‘Here’s to the Inklings’?”

“Well, here’s a toast for you, Louie,” Zee announced, raising her glass: “Here’s to life on the flipside.”

“To you, Zee, and to life on the flipside.”

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