

GHOSTS IN THE CLOISTERS

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GHOST WALK

Jennifer did not know who she blamed more for her present predicament – Professor Hodge for making that oblique comment about her essays on English Medieval History ‘lacking sufficient empathy’, her best friend Gillian for suggesting that she do an interview with a guide from one of the city’s infamous ghost tours to gain the said empathy, or herself for listening to either of them.

‘Hear spine-chilling stories from Oxford’s past’ proclaimed the lurid red on black letters on the sign in front of Trinity College. Jennifer saw a figure, presumably the tour guide that she was supposed to be meeting, dressed distinctively in a top hat and flowing black robes like a Victorian undertaker standing on Broad Street just outside the famous blue gates and railings of Trinity – an attempt to heighten the eerie atmosphere she guessed. Wishing that she could be just about anywhere else in the world at that moment but realising that it was probably too late to back out of this now, Jennifer approached the guide with caution.

“Hi, I’m Jennifer... from BNC?”

The guide turned and looked at her suspiciously. Close up, Jennifer saw that he was wearing a considerable quantity of make-up that had turned his face as white as that of a Parisian street mime. In an attempt to maintain an appearance of polite courtesy Jennifer tried not to look too closely to determine whether the guide was also wearing mascara and lipstick, as the unnatural colour of his eyes and lips seemed to suggest.

“BNC?” said the guide with a scowl.

“Brasenose College. You may remember that we spoke on the telephone about me doing an interview – you are Steve aren’t you?”

“Oh yes, that’s me. Steve Partridge.” he said and took her hand with a grin, moving up close to reveal his mottled yellow teeth and unwittingly giving her a taste of his halitosis. Jennifer had preferred it when he had scowled at her – it was also clear close up that beneath the clown make-up the guide was considerably older than he had first appeared.

“Well, where would you prefer to do this?”

Jennifer looked around and saw a couple of suitable meeting places – there was a cosy coffee shop just opposite and the convivial White Horse Tavern was also only a few yards away from where they were standing. For a brief hopeful moment, given their location, Jennifer wondered whether Steve was somehow connected with Trinity College. With its famous gardens, just visible through the splendid wrought-iron gates, Trinity was one of the prettiest colleges in Oxford, with lawns and trees that would do credit to the finest country house. Conducting the interview in such peaceful and secluded environs might actually make the whole experience half-bearable. Her nascent optimism was quickly dashed by Steve’s next words however.

“Oh no, we can’t go anywhere now – it’s almost six o’clock.” he said, tapping his wristwatch and pointing at the sign behind him. Following his finger Jennifer read with a sinking heart the words which were underneath the title that she had seen earlier: ‘Guided Tours Start at 6.00 pm every week day - £12 Adults, £8 Children/Concessions’.

“But, the interview...” she started, her voice forlorn.

“This is it.” Steve said, flashing her what he presumably thought was a winning smile, wider and hence even more yellow than the previous one. Jennifer mentally kicked herself for not realising as soon as she saw that he was in costume that Steve was about to start a ghost tour. Seized with a sudden panic (What if anyone she knew saw her? She would never live down the embarrassment!) Jennifer tried to make her getaway.

“I can see that you’re busy Steve – that is, Mr Partridge – perhaps another time...”

“Nonsense, I’m an expert at multi-tasking. Anyway, it’s too late to back out now – here comes the rest of the group.”

Jennifer turned to see a crowd of about a dozen people of varying ages approaching. From their cameras and belt-bags, as well as their leisurely gait and wide-eyed appreciation of their surroundings, she immediately identified them as foreign tourists. Before she even heard their accents close up she guessed that they were from the USA or Canada – it was obvious from the fact that they were wearing shorts and t-shirts in early March as well as from their red faces and bulging waistlines. There might have been healthy and toned tourists from North America, of course, but Jennifer had never come across any of them in Oxford. It was an uncharitable thought, she knew, but it reflected her mood at that moment.

As soon as they spied Steve, the tourists eagerly formed a semi-circle around him. His expression turned sombre as they did so, as if he was getting into the dour character of the undertaker that he was portraying. From the slight twitching at the corners of his mouth, however, Jennifer could tell that he was relishing every second of this.

“Welcome one and all, welcome to Oxford, home of lost causes, and forsaken beliefs, and unpopular names, and impossible loyalties!”

Jennifer saw one of the female tourists nudge the man standing next to her, who she guessed was her husband, and heard her whisper “Didn’t I tell you Chad, in Oxford everyone’s so clever that even the tour guides are poets!” Jennifer rolled her eyes and, in an even lighter whisper, said “I think that he’s got Matthew Arnold to thank for that one.”

“The ghoulish manifestations of countless ghastly acts wander the streets of Oxford and in the next hour I shall take you to the scenes of some of the darkest, bloodiest and most unspeakable events in the city’s long and gory history. But first

you must all experience what for many is the most frightening part of the tour, the moment that has even reduced many grown men to tears..."

At his words Jennifer saw a mixture of reactions on the faces in the group. A small boy who looked to be no older than seven was staring at Steve, his eyes rapt with attention, while the woman holding his hand, presumably his mother, frowned slightly, perhaps wondering suddenly whether the tour was too scary for her child. A couple of the male tourists had knowing smiles on their faces while a little girl was hiding behind another of the young women in the group, her face buried in her mother's skirt. Jennifer herself was barely moved, however, as she had a good idea what Steve was building up to next.

"... This is the moment when I must ask for your money!" he finished with a flourish.

There was laughter and even a couple of cheers from the crowd, as well as some audible sighs of relief, and then everyone was busy digging around in their pockets, wallets and purses for notes and coins to hand over to Steve. All of the money tendered went into a large black pouch which then disappeared somewhere inside the undertaker's cloak before he turned to address his audience.

"I'm Steve," he said, beaming at the group, "Just remember that name, as last week one tourist thought my name was Geede!"

Steve pointed at the 'Guide' badge on his lapel, prompting another round of laughter, and even some clapping this time. Jennifer gritted her teeth at the thought of the hour ahead – for her it appeared that the horror of the tour had only just begun.

In the event it came as a pleasant surprise to Jennifer to find that the early focus of the tour was on history rather than the paranormal. Steve told how Broad Street, where they had all stood at the start of the tour, had formerly been the Oxford city ditch and was also the exact spot where the bishop martyrs Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, Hugh Latimer, Bishop of Worcester, and Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London, were all burnt at the stake for heresy towards the Crown in the realm of Bloody Mary. Just as Jennifer was about to grudgingly give Steve credit for being better informed than she might have expected the guide of a ghost tour to be, he ruined the effect by standing on a manhole in the middle of the street and loudly proclaiming that it was the exact spot where the burnings had taken place, as was evidenced by the scorch marks that were still visible there to this day, and the screams of the unfortunate victims, which could apparently sometimes still be heard early in the morning. As a pair of passing students, overhearing this, giggled loudly and a couple of shaven-headed local teenagers loitering nearby said "Ugh, tourists" in audible whispers, Jennifer reflected that Oxford hospitality did not appear to have improved since the time of the bishop martyrs.

Steve then mercifully led Jennifer and the rest of the group away from Broad Street and into the old part of Oxford, walking past the Bodleian Library, past St Mary's Church and up to Merton College, via the Examination Schools (for Jennifer the scariest part of the tour so far). Along the way he continued to keep up a steady stream of facts and anecdotes about Oxford and its many ghosts, so many in fact that Jennifer began to wonder if she was in the minority of people who had passed through the city in all the centuries that it had stood there without actually seeing a phantom, spook or spectre. Steve seemed quite keen to draw distinctions between the various categories of ghost (Jennifer had never known that there were quite so many). For example, as they passed St John's College Steve regaled the group with the tale of the headless ghost of Archbishop Laud, who had, since going under the axe at the Tower of London in 1645 for his belief in the Church against Parliament, been known for

bowling his head towards the feet of anyone unlucky enough to meet him in the college library. Although unconventional and no doubt spectacular to those who had come across it, the ghost of Archbishop Laud was apparently, according to Steve, a quite different and far less frightening phenomenon than 'The Thing' in Trinity Chapel, which was not a mere ghost but a phantom. Steve did not elaborate further on this distinction but it appeared that a few of the other tourists appreciated this all too well from the worried looks which appeared on their faces at this news. It was not the only time during that long hour that Jennifer was to feel as if she was missing out on something.

Jennifer began to have mixed feelings about Steve and his tour as it went on. On one hand, although there were several interesting tales that the guide told about Oxford, many of which she had never heard before, they were often of dubious historical or academic value. On the other hand, however, Jennifer should perhaps have expected nothing more from a ghost tour and it was hard to deny that she was enjoying herself a little (perhaps more than a little). Steve's entertainment value was not lessened by his predictability. Whenever he was asked a question by one of the tour group that he clearly did not have an immediate and full answer to, he would hide gaps in his knowledge with vague replies and divert attention by describing wraithlike shapes and eerie sounds that seemingly could be seen and heard across Oxford virtually all the time. Jennifer found it quite disturbing that most of the spectres and screams that Steve described seemed to belong to the 'Gown' part of Oxford (i.e. students and dons) rather than the locals which constituted the 'Town' element. This might simply have been to cater to the tastes of the tourists, who were after all there to see and hear more about the city's ancient university, but Jennifer could not help wondering if there was more to it than that. Being obviously intelligent and well-spoken, Steve presented the image of being an academic who was down on his luck rather than a career tourist guide and for this reason Jennifer speculated that he had somehow fallen out with the university, now taking relish in describing the various ways in which its members had met sticky ends over the centuries, leading to afterlives of torment haunting the same city in which he too was somehow trapped.

Her mind having taken this somewhat poetic turn, it was with some surprise that Jennifer noticed that the tour had come to a halt around her. They were standing at the crossroads immediately before the Westgate Shopping Centre, where Pembroke Street met St Ebbe's Street. Nearby, the gothic church which was the latter street's namesake presented a neat contrast to the more modern buildings surrounding it, which included a large Marks & Spencer as well as a couple of rather rough-looking townie pubs on either side of the road.

Jennifer overheard one of the tourists whispering to another "Why have we stopped here? I don't see any colleges nearby and it's not exactly the prettiest location in Oxford." She shared their confusion, for she was not aware of anything more historic than the opening of a department store having taken place in this spot, although she did not voice the query aloud.

It was not clear whether Steve had overheard but it did not take long for him to answer both of their questions, the spoken as well as the unspoken one.

"This is regarded as one of the unluckiest sites in Oxford," he said, waving his arms expansively to seemingly take in everything around them, "There have been a number of businesses here over the last few decades, none of which have succeeded. A few years ago a Harry Ramsden's fish and chip restaurant achieved the unique accolade of closing within eighteen months of opening here, an unusual event indeed

for such a popular restaurant brand. Two pub chains have also leased the same buildings since then – both have failed.”

“Was it a ghost?” one of the children squeaked, before being cuffed by his mother for speaking out of turn.

Clearly not happy at having been interrupted while he was trying to build up the atmosphere, Steve continued in a slightly louder voice.

“There are no written records of the tale that you are about to hear, which comes to me entirely by word of mouth. The origins of the tale are misty, its protagonists unnamed and its exact location uncertain. Yet of all of the tales that I have heard in my time cataloguing the multitude of supernatural events that have taken place in this city, this is undoubtedly the most gruesome and chilling.”

Scary stuff, thought Jennifer, although having stumbled around in roughly this area on a number of occasions herself after dark, she had heard nothing more frightening than the frying of the nearby kebab van and then people vomiting it all up. Although in all likelihood that would probably scare the tourists about as much.

“The events I am about to describe are more recent than the source of most of the hauntings which have taken place in Oxford. It all started less than a century ago when complaints at the pub next door to St Ebbe’s – now this is the Royal Blenheim Hotel but at the time it was called the Horse and Chair – were made concerning a decaying stench which apparently emanated from the Church. Despite the protests of the vicar at the time, for no dead bodies had been interred there for several years, a search was made of the crypt of St Ebbe’s for signs that it was the source of the unpleasant smell.”

At these words Jennifer could not help flicking her eyes over to look at the Church. She was sure that it was her imagination, stoked by Steve’s stream of supernatural anecdotes, that lent an ominous cast to the steep spire of St Ebbe’s as it rose darkly before her in the rapidly deepening evening gloom. There were no signs of life or activity within the Church, no light or sounds, yet it still seemed to be somehow awake, almost expectant, as if it was as eager as the little tour group for Steve to finish his tale.

“The vicar led a group of local men, including the landlord of the pub, into the crypt. It was pretty dusty, full of cobwebs and the like as if nobody had been there for years. They had to get candles because it was as dark as night down there. The landlord wanted in particular to investigate the older part of the Church, which stretched towards his pub, so they made their way over there and found a door which was hanging half open. The funny thing was that this door was not covered in dust and stuff like the rest of the crypt, but instead it looked like it was in regular use.”

Steve took a deep breath before carrying on. Here comes the punch line, thought Jennifer.

“When they pushed open the door they found another bit of the crypt on the other side and, despite the vicar’s statement that no dead bodies had been interred in the Church for many years, there were two coffins within, one of them with its lid off. None of the men, not even the vicar, wanted to approach any further but eventually it was the landlord, at whose instigation they had gone down there in the first place, who took his candle over and had a look inside the coffin. Although its lid was off the coffin was not empty – there was a dead man inside it and he looked as fresh as the day he died. No rot, no smell, skin as good as a living man’s and hair and clothes neat and tidy as could be. It wasn’t natural of course and at first light the very next day all of the men came back, got the coffin out of the crypt and threw it, corpse and all, onto a great fire in the middle of the street. Although that was the end of the affair as far as

they were concerned, the entire area has borne the taint of what took place here ever since then and in my mind there is no doubt – this is the most haunted spot in Oxford.”

Jennifer and the rest of the group had not more than a moment to digest the conclusion of this macabre tale before there was a sudden bloodcurdling scream. Afterwards Jennifer was ashamed to admit that she almost screamed herself and several other members of the group jumped half a foot in the air at the disturbing noise, which did not even sound human. It did not take long to determine the source, however, when Steve with a sheepish look pulled out of his cape a small audio device.

“Pre-recorded.” He said.

Jennifer sighed with relief, mainly because she was sure that the tour was now over. Gillian, she felt, owed her a pint down in the college bar for this one. Just as she was about to turn around and head back to Brasenose, however, she felt a hand on her arm. It belonged to the mother of the seven year old boy, whose discomfort Jennifer had noticed earlier on, although her son was no longer with her.

“Please Miss,” she said, and Jennifer noticed from her northern accent that unlike the other tourists she was English, “It’s my son Jamie, I let go of his hand for a just a second and when I turned around he had gone. You haven’t seen him have you?”

Jennifer nodded, no. The anxious mother moved off and asked the other members of the group, as well as their guide, the same question. None of them, she noticed, appeared to have seen Jamie either.

Steve raised his voice again and summoned the rest of the group around him.

“Ladies and gentleman, your attention please,” he said, almost sounding as if this was another part of the tour, “I’m sure that he hasn’t gone far but it appears that this lady’s young son has wandered off. Could I ask all of you to have a quick look around to see if you can find him?”

Jamie’s mother, who introduced herself to the group as Carol, mumbled her apologies and thanks to everyone, saying again and again that normally he was a good boy and that this was nothing like him.

“He knows not to go off on his own. I don’t know what he was thinking or where he can have got to.”

Jennifer gave Carol’s shoulder a squeeze in encouragement and then joined the search. They spread out in all four directions from the crossroads, some of them going down St Ebbe’s Street, others down Pembroke Street all the way to St Aldate’s, while she and a couple of the Americans covered the Westgate Shopping Centre. Steve stayed with Carol at the crossroads in case the boy returned. After fifteen minutes of searching they all came back, none of them having had any luck at all. At this Carol’s brave face finally cracked and she started to cry, for it was now getting late and dark.

“How about checking the Church?” said one of the Canadians.

Several members of the group nodded approvingly at this idea but Steve, Jennifer noted with interest, looked none too enthusiastic at the suggestion. In fact, Jennifer realised, ever since the boy had gone missing their tour guide had looked increasingly uncomfortable. Partly this was explained by what had happened, but there seemed to be a deeper fear emanating from Steve – especially at the mention of the Church – that suggested to Jennifer that he was party to some knowledge of which the rest of them were unaware.

“That sounds like a good idea,” said one of the other tourists and then another added, “But how do we get in?”

The group turned to look at Steve but he simply shook his head wordlessly. Jennifer was unsure what the guide was struggling with but she could help with this much at least.

“The vicar leaves the doors open until about eight o’clock in the evening for late worship so we should have a few minutes more.”

“How did you know that?” someone asked.

“I came here for the advent service last term,” Jennifer said. There was probably no need for further explanation but she felt the need to add, “I’m a student,” as if that ensured her veracity.

The group entered the Church as one. Although most of them seemed genuinely concerned to assist Carol, Jennifer was disappointed to note that a couple of the younger men had their cameras out. If they were after any impressive holiday snaps, however, then they were out of luck, for the interior of the Church did not match its striking gothic exterior. As she remembered from the advent service, St Ebbe’s was plain and unadorned within, like many of the later Anglican churches, with columns evenly spaced along its length leading up to a simple altar. Before the altar a small shape crouched as if in prayer.

Carol gave a great yell at the sight of Jamie and had run down the aisle to take him in her arms even before many members of the group had set eyes upon him. The boy appeared well, blissfully unaware of the fuss he had caused and puzzled by his mother’s tears and concern. At that point, the tour group might have broken up and gone in their separate directions had it not been for Jamie’s next words.

“But mummy, you were the one who left me here.”

“What do you mean boy?” said Steve, who had crept into the Church with the rest of them, unnoticed.

Jamie’s story came out slowly, punctuated by hugs and sobs from his mother and more questions from Steve. At the start of the guide’s story about St Ebbe’s, Carol had offered to take her son into the Church itself. Jamie had leaped at the chance and together they had entered St Ebbe’s, at which point Carol had left Jamie, promising to come back shortly. Jamie’s mother had asked him not to make any noise or call out for her, no matter how long it took her to come back. But as time had passed and there had been no sign of Carol, Jamie had become scared, all alone in the dark Church as he was, and had gone to the altar, where the only light emanated softly from a candelabrum. There he had waited until the rest of the group had turned up.

All the blood drained out of Carol’s face at this story.

“But... it wasn’t me,” she stammered, “It couldn’t have been.”

Jennifer, who had been standing next to Carol the whole time while Steve had told his story, concurred that she had gone nowhere.

“But mummy, you were holding my hand the whole time.” Jamie said.

“I know darling,” said Carol, “You were holding my hand as well until right at the end when I let go for an instant. That’s when I noticed you were gone.”

“But that couldn’t have been me mummy, I never heard the end of the man’s story.”

The tour ended not long after that as everyone who had been on it departed with what seemed like unseemly haste. Steve received no tips, even from the normally generous Americans, and cut a forlorn figure on his own outside the door of St Ebbe’s. His dejected demeanour cheered up only slightly when Jennifer approached him, all sorts of questions on her lips. Unfortunately, however, he had few answers for her.

“This tour has been cursed almost from the moment I started doing it. Children – and adults – have gone missing before, and although they always turn up eventually I feel like I’m being warned. You know – keep doing this and one day we’ll take them for good.”

“Who do you think is responsible?” said Jennifer, “Pranksters?”

Steve shrugged, “They’re bloody good at it if it’s pranks. And organised – I’ve started varying where the tour starts to avoid being followed.”

Jennifer very carefully did not ask Steve to elaborate on who he thought was responsible if it was not a practical joker.

“Why do you think they’re doing it?”

“I don’t know, perhaps it’s because of the hammy way I do the tour – you know, I like to keep things slightly tongue-in-cheek to avoid scaring the kiddies too much and alienating the parents. There are some,” he stopped, perhaps catching himself about to say something he might regret, before continuing, “who might perhaps want me to be more serious about the hauntings in Oxford. To get people to take the ghosts more seriously, treat them with the respect they deserve perhaps. But that’s just not me, I don’t want to turn this into a dry history tour – that’s why I left academia in the first place.”

Jennifer winced, remembering her first reaction to the ghost tour.

“If this carries on though,” said Steve, “I might just have to pack it all in.”

Jennifer thought back to the events of the past day, by turns comic, scary and informative and decided that for all that had happened she was glad that she had taken Gillian’s advice after all.

She put a comforting hand on Steve’s shoulder as she led him to the nearby pub.

“We should talk,” she said, and when the guide turned to look at her in puzzlement she added, “Have you ever thought of taking on an assistant?”

THE VISITOR

Afterwards, Sarah and I would argue extensively over whose fault it was that we got involved in the whole nasty business involving The Visitor. She said it was my fault for always going on about the fact that I needed a killer story to kick start my journalistic career. In turn I argued that she was the one that told me about The Visitor in the first place. Of course, as you might expect, her response was that she was simply being a good girlfriend by telling me the story.

Perhaps I should just explain what happened.

At the time we were both students at the same college in Oxford, Wadham. Wadham isn’t a college that you hear much about – it’s not as famous as places like Christ Church or Magdalen, with their wealth and architectural grandeur, or as academically intimidating as the likes of Merton or Balliol. Us Wadhamites, perhaps not surprisingly, thought the world of our little college though. We called it the ‘People’s Republic of Wadham’ because of its reputation for left-wing politics – arts critic Melvyn Bragg and former Labour Party leader Michael Foot had both studied here and the college’s liberal credentials were further strengthened by the fact that one of its other most famous alumni was the licentious libertine John Wilmot, better known as the seventeenth century Earl of Rochester, he of the infamous pornographic verses. I suppose, with my budding interest in journalism, it was the college’s liberal reputation which had mainly influenced my choice of applying there, although its

location on the corner of Holywell Street, right next door to the most popular student pub in Oxford (the King's Arms, which it also owned) probably influenced me slightly too.

It may sound like I had a clear career plan mapped out when I went up to Oxford, if my choice of college was anything to go by, but really nothing could have been further from the truth. I had no contacts in the publishing or newspaper industry and no real clue how to get started as a journalist. I had a vague idea that I needed to improve the way I expressed myself and hence I had chosen to study English Literature at university. That took care of the technical part but I knew that I would need something more substantial to put on my CV when it came to securing a lucrative internship in Fleet Street. It never even occurred to me at the time that I may have to aim my sights lower and perhaps work on a local or regional paper, at least to begin with (Oh, to be young and at Oxford). That's what led to me joining the staff of the Oxford Student.

Oxford has two student newspapers – the Cherwell and the Oxford Student. The Cherwell is without doubt the 'broadsheet' of the pair, largely well-respected, it had in the past boasted editors that had gone on to become bestselling novelists, publishing magnates and even Prime Ministers. I made up my mind that becoming a feature writer for the Cherwell was the essential first step on the road to my becoming a world famous ace reporter. Unfortunately, things didn't go quite to plan.

My first mistake was turning up to the Cherwell's offices in Wellington Square without an appointment. Being a student newspaper I had come to the quite natural conclusion that I would not need one – I was wrong. My second mistake was turning up unprepared, but as you may have gathered by now, planning was never one of my strong points. Unfortunately for me, the editor of the Cherwell at the time was a girl called Penelope Smith who took her role very seriously. She was one of those over-achieving types that Oxford seems to be annoyingly full of and everything that she said and did seemed aimed at securing for herself a top job in the City. She proceeded to give me my first job interview, asking for references, past experience in what she called the 'newspaper journalism sector' and even asking for a sample of my work. Of course I had none of these things and she politely but firmly showed me the door, pointlessly saying that she would be in touch if something came up. She didn't even bother to take my contact details.

Sarah found me looking depressed and dejected in my room later that day. We had only just started going out, having got together at a college bop earlier that term. Bops (an embarrassing term that conjures up day-glow make-up and eighties big hair) are pretty ghastly affairs, being discos held in the college bar with cheesy music belting out at high volume while everyone you know is making fools of themselves on the dance floor with 'moves' that should probably never have seen the light of day. I had fancied Sarah for some time without ever having the courage to ask her out but there's something about a bop that makes people shed their inhibitions. A combination of alcohol and fancy dress (it was a nuns and vicars theme that night and Sarah was looking rather foxy in a wimple) gave me the courage to have a proper conversation with her for the first time and we found that we got on famously. I think the key to our relationship after that was that we complemented each other quite well – she was a Law student with what seemed to me to be phenomenal amounts of work to do (don't forget, I was reading English Literature, which was a somewhat less labour intensive subject) and was a very organised person. It was Sarah that had encouraged me to go along to the Cherwell and when she heard the cause of my

depression I think she felt a bit guilty. Perhaps that's why she suggested that I go to the Oxford Student.

Now if the Cherwell was the broadsheet of student newspapers, the Oxford Student was undoubtedly the tabloid. The Cherwell prided itself on the neutrality of its reporting and the steady language that it employed in its articles. The Oxford Student, meanwhile had no such qualms. It was famous for its lurid headlines and the rabble-rousing nature of its contents – more than one student march or riot had been started by the Oxford Student, something that the paper seemed to be almost gratuitously proud of. Also, articles that would never have got into the Cherwell regularly got into the Oxford Student – stories about college hauntings, aliens in the countryside and conspiracy theories involving the higher echelons of the university authorities. Once, the Vice Chancellor had actually closed down the paper because of a damaging story about one of his staff allegedly defrauding the university benevolent fund. Popular backing had restored the Oxford Student, however, and it had continued ever since, as loud and careless of whom it offended as ever. I was horrified by the suggestion that I try to enrol with the newspaper.

Sarah and I argued about the idea all night. Eventually she asked me whether or not I was serious about becoming a journalist, because if I was, this was my only chance. Put as baldly as that I couldn't argue with her anymore (I was worn out by that point anyway – I've often found that girls win arguments that way). One thing that I was sure about though, was that this time I had to be prepared before I approached another paper. I told Sarah that I needed a story and that's when she told me about the Visitor.

She first found out about it in a conversation with one of the college porters. Porters at Oxford have a privileged sort of status in that most of them seem to have been around for longer than even the oldest and crustiest dons and generally know more about the city and the university than virtually anyone. At Wadham it's their job to make sure that no strangers go wandering around the college outside official visiting times and as such they are supposedly looking out for students like me. Porters have always made me a bit nervous though, because one of their other duties is to keep an eye on the students – in particular it's their job to shut down illegal room parties. Under college rules a party is considered to be taking place whenever there are eight or more people in a room at one time and the occupant of the room has to get permission from the Junior Dean or face a fifty pound fine. I'd always considered this to be a somewhat draconian rule, especially as, for students with no money, anything over ten pounds constituted a fairly hefty financial penalty. Quite apart from anything else, the fact that we had to get permission for having a party made me feel like we were all children at an Edwardian boarding school rather than adults attending a university. The Porters were always heedless of protests, however, and often seemed to take a certain amount of pleasure in fulfilling their duties whenever they shut down student parties.

Of course some students, like Sarah, got on with the Porters rather better than others. I had made a couple of attempts in my first term at Wadham to befriend the college custodians but they had never seemed to recognise me, instead ending up mistaking me for a tourist more often than not and asking that I produce my university card to prove that I was a student. Unsurprisingly, experiences like this rather soured my attitude towards their ilk. Sarah, however, never had this problem and would often have long chats with them about all sorts of things. It was a gift she had in that she tended to get on with just about everyone – she was a good listener and usually gave sensible advice or at least heart-felt sympathy. This was how she had found out about

the Visitor. She told me that she had spotted one of the Porters, Bernard, looking rather the worse for wear when she was on her way to the Bodleian Law Library early one morning. None of the Porters was particularly young – most of them only came to the role after retirement from some other job – but Bernard was one of the oldest, a grandfatherly-looking man with white hair and large round spectacles that he was virtually blind without. That morning his hair was wild, his eyes bleary and his appearance generally unkempt as if through lack of sleep. Sarah had been in a rush to get to the library to finish off an essay that was dangerously close to being overdue but she had taken one look at Bernard and stopped. When she had asked him what was wrong he had related the bizarre story of the Visitor to her.

Every now and again, apparently, the Porters of Wadham College found themselves disturbed by all kinds of mystifying phenomena, which appeared to be ghostly in origin. Late at night sometimes they would hear some kicking and banging on the thick wooden gates of the college right next to the porter's lodge. Whenever someone got up and opened the door, however, they would find no one there. At around the same time that this would happen, the lights illuminating Front Quad, the large central courtyard of the college, often flickered inexplicably and mysterious disembodied shapes appeared to flit across the shadowed quadrangle. The Porters involved all swore that the shapes looked like the cassocks of monks. Most troubling of all, however, was the sensation that lone Porters got when they sat in the lodge in the early hours. They would feel like a great weight was pressing down on them from above and that they could not get up, try as they might. The name that that porters of Wadham had given to the entity which haunted them was simply The Visitor.

Recently the Visitor had been getting particularly active and aggressive during the night shift and poor old Bernard appeared to have suffered the worst of it. On his most recent shift the Visitor had manifested suddenly – weighing him down so heavily that he could hardly breathe. The pressure on him had got greater and greater, on his shoulders, head, feet and chest and then, just as suddenly as it had come, it went and he could breathe again. Just then, however, the banging on the gates had started up again. Bernard had run (or at least walked briskly, a run being beyond him at his age) to investigate and once again found no one there. After his experience with the Visitor he had not wanted to head back to the lodge and had instead spent the rest of the night searching up and down Parks Road, just outside the college, for signs of pranksters with no luck.

I didn't know what to think once Sarah had told me this story. I had my own theory, which I had no hesitation sharing with her.

“Had Bernard been drinking?” I said.

Sarah glared at me crossly.

“Of course not – he's a teetotaller!”

“Well you don't believe any of that nonsense do you?”

Sarah paused, then shook her head sadly.

“No, of course I don't, it's probably some sort of practical joke in very poor taste. But...” she began.

“But what?” I said.

“If it is a joke then they are pretty clever at getting away and they seem very persistent. Also, how could a student prankster be responsible for the Visitor?”

Another possibility that I had thought about but that I didn't share with Sarah in order to avoid hurting her feelings was that Bernard had made the whole thing up in an effort to seek attention. After all, being a Porter seemed to be a fairly mind-numbing job and he probably appreciated the focus of a pretty young student like

Sarah – it wouldn't surprise me if the Visitor and the other alleged goings-on during the night shift were the product of Bernard's overactive imagination.

But still... what if he were telling the truth? Not about the ghosts of course – I was far too much of a cynic and a sceptic to believe that there was anything supernatural going on. However, there was every possibility that the Porters were the subject of some vengeful student prank that had gone too far. Suddenly I became excited at the prospect of exposing the perpetrators by writing a story about them that would appear in the Oxford Student. This could be my big break! Perhaps I could even persuade the Cherwell to print up my story if it was good enough.

I began to get excited by the tantalising prospect of an exposé but I purposefully hid my growing excitement from Sarah. I loved my girlfriend but she had a tendency to become annoyingly smug when she came up with a good idea, which was admittedly quite often, and it would be for the best not to let on too early that she had done it again.

“Well, I suppose that there's no harm in at least seeing him...” I began.

“Are you sure?” said Sarah and for a moment I became worried that my attempt to feign disinterest had worked too well, so uncertain was her tone of voice and posture.

“Yes, I am, what's wrong?”

“It's just that poor old Bernard has already been through the wringer with this one and I'm concerned that further excitement would not be good for him.”

“Hey,” I said, and this time it was me that sounded hurt, “I can be sensitive – I'm a budding journalist remember?”

Sarah's only response was to give me an arch look which said, as clearly as if it had been put in words, “Don't screw this up!” and together we headed over to the Porter's Lodge.

We saw few other students as we walked through the college grounds, which was unsurprising as it was '0th week' and the term hadn't really started. Most of the undergraduates that had arrived were Freshers or Finalists with important exams to sit at the end of that term and as such they were mostly squirreled away in their rooms revising hard for the trials ahead. Sarah and I, both second years with nothing but a summer term of Pimms and punting to look forward to, were mercifully free of such stresses but it had become a tradition for both of us to arrive in pre-term. For Sarah it was because she liked Oxford the more deserted it was, when many of its cobbled streets and college halls, customarily so full of rambunctious students, were eerily empty yet peaceful. I had more pragmatic reasons for coming up early – it was usually just about the only time I got any work done before the term got into full swing and there were many more diverting things to do.

As was usual during the college vacation period the lodge was staffed by just one porter, an elderly West Indian gentleman called Levi, although everyone said that was not his real name. Relentlessly cheerful, Levi was one of the few porters that even I got on with, and he seemed to always have a comment or view to share, no matter what day of the week it was or who he was talking to.

“Hello, isn't it a lovely evening for a pair of young lovers to be out?”

Sarah blushed but I smiled back at Levi because he was right. Everyone says that Oxford looks its best in the summer and, even after just a couple of years here, I have to agree. It was that time of day when the sun was lowering in the sky and its light was slanting across the quadrangle, highlighting the pitted stone walls and worn slate roof, hundreds of years old, of the college which would outlive all of us. For a moment I let the romance of the moment carry me away and I thought to myself that

if any place in Britain had ghosts then it would be somewhere like Oxford, where there was more history per square foot than anywhere else in the country outside the centre of London and the spirits of hundreds of men and women surely still haunted its many ancient passages and alleyways.

Sarah was all business however.

“We were looking for Bernard.”

Levi smiled a wide smile, showing off his almost dazzlingly white teeth, and said, “You’re in luck, I’m just about to knock off and Bernard is taking over the night shift... in fact there he is now!”

We turned to look as Levi pointed and saw Bernard approaching from the far passageway that joined Back Quad and Front Quad. Sarah stopped Levi just as he was about to take his leave.

“By the way, have you ever come across the Visitor yourself?”

An oddly guarded look came over Levi’s normally jovial face then.

“I don’t know nothing about that Miss, you’ll have to ask Bernard about that – him and his buddy Sam.”

Before either of us could ask him any further questions Levi took off with almost unseemly haste.

I looked at Sarah quizzically.

“Sam joined Wadham at about the same time as Bernard and people say that they knew each other beforehand – served in the same regiment in the army or something,” she explained, “They’ve certainly seemed almost inseparable ever since – on or off duty.”

When he saw us Bernard greeted me with what seemed like rather an unenthusiastic nod but he positively beamed at Sarah.

“How are you love?” he said with what I thought was a bit of a leer, “Come to offer me a shot of whisky before I start the late shift have you now?”

I was aghast at the suggestion that a student would be smuggling him alcohol but Sarah simply flashed a dimply smile at Bernard. At that point, even though I knew that Sarah was only putting on an act to get something out of the porter, I started to feel a bit queasy about the whole thing.

“You know my boyfriend Kevin,” Sarah said, gesturing at me, “Well, he was the one who really wanted to see you.”

At that Bernard’s cheerful expression faltered for a moment before he recovered himself.

“Oh yes, it’s Gannet isn’t it?”

“Gardner.” I corrected him, trying my best to keep the chill out of my voice.

Bernard shrugged.

“What can I do for you?”

Sarah stepped in before I could reply, probably in an effort to restore some sort of diplomacy.

“We wanted to talk to you about The Visitor,” she said, emphasising the capitals in the name of Wadham’s supernatural guest, “Kevin’s a journalist you see and he just needed to interview you for his... article in the Cherwell.”

Even if it was not strictly true (I was not after all working for the Cherwell or any other paper for that matter), I was glad that Sarah had added in the last bit as an afterthought. Bernard had looked none too pleased at the mention of an interview but had at least appeared slightly less nonplussed when the respected student newspaper had also been referred to.

“I don’t know about any of that...” Bernard said.

“You’d be kick-starting his career – it would be Kevin’s big break.” Sarah said, injecting as much enthusiasm as she could into her voice.

While Bernard was mulling this over I had a sudden idea and, before I could really think it through, I blurted it out.

“It would be really great if I could stay in the lodge with you tonight as well, perhaps get a first hand sighting of the Visitor!”

Sarah gave me a shocked look which said quite clearly, “What are you doing you idiot? We didn’t discuss this!” but all I could do was look back at her with a not quite guilty expression. I thought it was a good idea though, after all, the public would surely prefer a story backed up by some evidence rather than simply the say-so of a porter who was probably over fond of his whisky.

“No, not a chance,” said Bernard in a sudden huff, “It’s against college regulations. I’m on duty now so you’ll have to come back in the morning for your interview.”

With that the old porter ambled off, leaving me alone with a rather put out girlfriend.

“Oh Kevin, why couldn’t you just have left the talking to me?” said Sarah.

I shrugged and apologised to her, making out that it was not a big deal and that I would find another story to write about. Dissembling with Sarah was easy because in the back of my mind another idea was taking shape. Perhaps it was not such a bad thing that Bernard had rejected my request, after all, if he knew I was there then that might make it harder to get at the truth. But what was to prevent me spending the night in the lodge without the porters knowing about it?

I waited until a quarter to midnight that night to make my move. As I crept through the silent college grounds I felt a thrill of excitement touched with pride course through me. I was finally thinking and acting like a journalist, going the extra mile to get at the truth (lying and dissembling along the way but I suppose that was part of the job description for a journalist as well) and it felt exhilarating. Wandering through Wadham at this late hour only added to the drama of the occasion – colleges in Oxford tended to regain an element of their monastic austerity at night, acquiring an almost tomblike atmosphere of silence and foreboding when the sun went down.

I knew that the porters manned the lodge in pairs, working in ten hour shifts and being relieved with a new partner every five hours, so that there was always one of the pair who was relatively fresh. Since Bernard had come on shift at seven o’ clock that evening I had therefore worked out that he was due to be relieved with a fresh partner in a few minutes’ time. That was the best time for me to put my plan into action.

I hid myself in a shadowed corner of Front Quad adjacent to the lodge and waited. Presently two figures came out of the lodge, one of whom I recognised as Bernard. I did not know the name of the other porter but he seemed relatively young for the post, appearing to be in his fifties rather than in his sixties or seventies like most of them. It was him that was talking as they strode into view.

“...I’ll tell you Bernard, they’ll have to get some air conditioning for the lodge one of these days. Summer’s not yet in full swing and already I’m sweltering in there. It’s not like the old days when we were on the frigate together – all you had to do then was go up on deck to get a bit of fresh sea air to clear your head.”

“That’s right Sam,” said Bernard to his now-identified friend, “although in a way this reminds me of being back on board a ship. It sometimes feels like we’re afloat on the sea still, all isolated and protected like we are.”

So it appeared that the stories about the pair knowing each other prior to coming to Wadham were right, except for the part about them having been in the army together anyway. It seemed that Bernard and Sam had actually been sailors and I wondered with a sinking heart whether the two old salty dogs were about to launch into a reminiscence about their naval exploits. I suddenly foresaw a long night ahead of me and wondered if I would be able to stay awake long enough to see this through. Then Sam said something that caught my interest and sleep instantly became the furthest thing from my mind.

“Protected from everything except the Visitor that is,” said Sam with a snigger, giving his colleague a sly dig in the ribs.

Bernard seemed none too amused though.

“Not here.”

“Why not?” said the other, “No one’s listening. Are you afraid that the Warden will find out that you made the whole thing up so you wouldn’t have to do anymore night shifts and get more time to spend at home with the grandkids?”

“Keep it down you idiot!”

I watched dumbstruck as the pair walked off into the night, still arguing. I stayed there, enfolded in the darkness and alone with my thoughts, for several long moments after they had gone. Although it was past midnight there was no chill in the summer air but, even had there been a bitter wind blasting my face and body, I still could not have moved. My appetite for a story had died the moment that I had heard the truth.

Eventually I gathered myself and made my slow way back through the college, stumbling and unsure along ways that I had grown to know so well over the past two years in which I had spent most of my life within Wadham’s walls. My mind was somewhere else entirely, wondering what to do with the new information that I had involuntarily come upon, a conundrum that I still had not solved by the time that I got back to my rooms in Back Quad.

The whole thing – the ghostly shapes in the Quad, the banging on the front gates, the Visitor itself – had all been a pack of lies. The fact that Bernard had not concocted the story simply to get attention for himself, but rather out of a more understandable need to spend time with his family and avoid the awkward night shift, made things no better. The fact remained that he had lied to everyone, not just Sarah and I as well as all the other students but also, apparently, to the Warden – the head of the college – himself.

I did not sleep at all that night while I tried to figure out what to do. Part of me wanted to expose Bernard for the fake he was – surely it was my duty to the college and to everyone that he had tried to hoodwink? But then I thought of the consequences of my actions – where would Bernard go and what would he do if he was sacked? I wondered then whether sacking was the worst thing that would happen to the old porter if I exposed him. Would he be charged with fraud, perhaps even sent to prison? My imagination ran wild as I thought of Bernard’s fate, imagining his wife left alone, his children and grandchildren bereft. The worst thing was that every time I closed my eyes I saw Sarah, an accusing expression on her face as she mouthed a single word: ‘Why?’

The next morning was one of the few times that I went to breakfast. This was always served early in the main hall of the college and, as I rarely tended to be up before midday even during the week, it was something that I was not overly familiar with. The only reason I went was because sleep had eluded me all night – a night after which I was no closer to resolving what to do about my dilemma over Bernard. A sea

of unfamiliar faces greeted me as I entered the dining hall – mostly rowers and scientists, who were used to keeping ungodly hours – and I searched among them for Sarah’s blond bob. I eventually located her in the midst of a gaggle of other second years in a corner and moved to join them, the stress of the previous night causing my hands to tremble as they held a tray piled high with sausages, eggs and toast with great care.

When I sat down next to her Sarah turned to look at me and I was shocked to see that her eyes were rimmed red as if from recent tears.

“What’s wrong?” I said. As I spoke I wondered for some strange reason whether her obvious distress was connected with what I had learned last night, although there was no logical reason why that should be the case.

“It’s Bernard,” she said, causing my spine to tingle, “he’s in hospital.”

The story came out slowly, with Sarah relating most of it and, where she was unsure of the facts, one of the other second years filling in the gaps. It seemed that some time during the night, not long after I had last seen him in fact, Bernard had had a cardiac arrest and been taken away to the John Radcliffe Hospital. His condition had been critical for a while – serious enough that not only his wife but also his married son, who lived miles away in Banbury, had come to his bedside. Whilst he appeared to be stable and over the worst of it, his career as a porter at Wadham was definitely over and he had been persuaded by his family to take early retirement.

Although I said the right things as the story unfolded I did so dumbly and my thoughts were in turmoil. What had happened? Nothing made any sense here – Bernard was old but, as a former naval man who had continued to stay fit and eat well he was in extremely good shape for his age. He did not smoke and, although he liked the occasional drink, surely that was not enough to account for the sudden heart attack. What troubled me even more was the timing of Bernard’s illness. The way that the heart attack had taken the dilemma over what to do about my sudden discovery out of my hands was all just a bit too convenient. After all, it went without saying that I could not and would not now tell anyone about the conversation that I had overheard between Sam and Bernard.

I put my journalistic career on hold for the rest of that term. Sarah did not give me a hard time over this because for a long time afterwards she felt guilty that she had in some way contributed to Bernard’s condition. I reassured her with the usual boyfriendly words but could not tell her what I really wanted to – in fact I never told another person that Bernard had made up the Visitor. This was partly due to my own guilt over what had happened to Bernard but it was also because afterwards I was never fully convinced that the Visitor had been entirely a hoax. I always had a nagging feeling that perhaps there had been some other agency behind Bernard’s sudden heart attack – an agency that did not want the existence or otherwise of the Visitor to be confirmed either way.

When I did finally get my first story published – in the Cherwell no less and not the Oxford Student after all – it was a rather bland piece about a student pirate radio station that was run out of a room in Back Quad. Although Sarah was proud of me, I always regretted never being able to publish the story that had affected me so deeply that term. Even so, I never let my regret move me to do anything foolish. There was no mention about the Visitor in that story or in anything else that I ever wrote. I had a feeling that the Visitor – if it existed – preferred things that way.

BONE GIRL

“So we’re cousins?” said Elizabeth, trying to keep the scepticism out of her voice.

“Yes,” said Zara, her blue eyes guileless, “That is, our mothers were cousins, which I suppose makes us second cousins.”

Elizabeth’s eyes were also blue, and she had to admit that Zara’s dark hair was a similar shade to her own chestnut locks. But as far as she was concerned there the physical similarity ended. Elizabeth had a slight figure but Zara’s form was even more delicate, her features pixie-sharp and her skin fair as fine china. She’s like a porcelain doll, thought Elizabeth uncharitably, likely to shatter at a single touch. And it was becoming clear to her that their personalities were nothing like each other either.

Elizabeth had agreed to meet Zara at her father’s request. She was in her second year at university in Oxford and Zara was a fresher starting at Oriel College. Her father had thought that it was a good idea that the two of them meet so that Elizabeth could take the younger girl under her wing, or ‘show her the ropes’ as he had put it. Elizabeth had agreed reluctantly – meeting new people because she had to was never something that she enjoyed, especially when they were long-lost family members that she had never heard of before. She preferred to get to know people in a more organic way, preferably in familiar surroundings, which was why she had suggested that Zara come round for tea in her rooms in Exeter College. It was Zara who had chosen the Queen’s Coffee Shop on the High for their first meeting – because she preferred to meet on neutral ground apparently. Elizabeth was mystified as to why this should be necessary and it had ensured a prickly atmosphere between them from the outset.

“But how come we’ve never met before?” said Elizabeth.

“Your mother never mentioned me?” said Zara.

“My mother died when I was very young so there were many things that she never really got a chance to mention to me.”

Elizabeth was not sure whether her answer sounded short but in any event Zara seemed unfazed, cordially murmuring her apologies and regrets before moving on to the next topic of conversation.

“So what are you reading?”

Elizabeth relaxed slightly as they moved onto a somewhat safer subject.

“Archaeology and Anthropology.”

“Really?” said Zara brightly, “Like Indiana Jones?”

Not for the first time since she had met her Elizabeth wondered whether her cousin was patronizing her. It felt odd given that Zara was younger and smaller than her but Elizabeth got the sense somehow that the other girl was looking down on her. Deciding that she was imagining it, Elizabeth opted to give Zara the benefit of the doubt. I’m doing this for Daddy, she told herself.

“Not really, I mean I’m concentrating more on the Anthropological side of things now that I’m in my second year. It involves studying humans and their interactions with the environment and each other since the dawn of recorded history. It’s really interesting as a subject -”

“I’m reading PPP.” Zara said, interrupting Elizabeth airily.

Elizabeth winced in irritation, both because her cousin had interrupted her just as she was warming to her subject and because PPP (or Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology, to give it its full title) was the one course at Oxford which she could neither comprehend nor begin to have a conversation about. With its emphasis on

airy-fairy theories without the comfort of hard evidence that a science like Anthropology was founded upon, the subject left Elizabeth mystified.

“Oh really,” she managed after a moment, “that’s interesting. What drew you to that?”

“The life which is unexamined is not worth living.” At Elizabeth’s presumably blank expression Zara added. “Plato. I find that there are few questions which the great philosophers do not have the answers to.”

“So finding quotes comforting is what led you to read PPP at Oxford?” said Elizabeth, not sure if she understood what she was hearing. Even having been at the University of Oxford for the past year, it had been a long time since a conversation had left her this perplexed.

“Analogies, it is true, decide nothing, but they can make one feel more at home.” Zara said, a slight smile quirking her lips. “Sigmund Freud. Psychologists are sometimes just as useful a font of wisdom.”

Elizabeth decided that she had had enough for one day and, offering the excuse of an essay crisis she made her apologies and departed hastily. Zara seemed to take no offence and, indeed, when she looked back Elizabeth saw her cousin still seated quite happily at the table that she had recently vacated, her expression dreamy and the ghost of a smile still lingering on her face.

The essay crisis that Elizabeth had mentioned to Zara had not been entirely a fabrication. She had a paper to hand in a couple of days’ later which she had done little preparation for and after leaving the coffee shop she headed straight for the School of Archaeology and Anthropology in Beaumont Street, at the other end of Oxford. Given the city’s size, however, this was a short journey, especially by bike and scarcely a quarter of an hour later Elizabeth was seated at the desk that she had appropriated on one of the upper floors.

On the inside the Anthropology department resembled a museum, with glass cases filled with assorted oddities on every side and the occasional skeleton on display stands dotted here and there. There was the musty smell inevitable in a place that was rarely aired for fear of damaging its contents and it was neither light nor spacious within. Despite this, as she entered Elizabeth immediately felt the usual sense of calm come over her. Bones were so much easier to deal with than people – most of the time at least.

The subject that she was studying at the moment was already set out on her desk when Elizabeth arrived. It was a skull from the collection housed in the building’s underground storeroom, carefully concealed under a cloth with books on either side to hide its shape. Leaving it out in this way was of course entirely against university regulations and was something that Elizabeth might never have done were she a first year. However, entering her second year had given Elizabeth the confidence to do many things that she would not have dared a year earlier. Besides, the location of her desk, which was in a secluded alcove on the rarely-visited second floor, meant that her infraction was unlikely to be discovered.

When she removed the cloth covering the skull regarded her with much the same expression that it had on the last few occasions on which she had been alone with it. There was an indefinable sadness to the object – perhaps because of its size (it was that of an adolescent girl) or its battered state (it was hundreds of years old, perhaps dating from the Civil War). That was part of what intrigued Elizabeth and why she had chosen it for study, but partly it was because of the mystery that was attached to it.

The Bone Girl, as the skull was known colloquially, had been discovered in the Oxford city ditch in the nineteen sixties by a local academic on a dig in Shotover woods. It had been a surprise to everyone, as the individual concerned had simply been demonstrating archaeological techniques to his students at the time rather than digging in the hope of actually discovering anything, especially in such a mundane spot. At first the more dramatically inclined of the city's newspapers had speculated that the find was the grisly remains of a murder victim but it soon became clear on further study that it was in fact of much older origin. But, other than its age, very little information could be gleaned from the skull because of its decayed state and its lack of a body to go with it. Who it belonged to and why it had been buried by itself out in Shotover so many years ago had remained a mystery ever since.

Unfortunately, despite her best efforts, it was a mystery that Elizabeth was no nearer to solving. Also, discovering the secret of the Bone Girl was somewhat beyond the scope of her paper, which was meant to simply focus on bone markers using the skull as a subject. In spite of herself, however, Elizabeth had felt a strange sense of connection to the skull from the moment that it had come into her possession – perhaps because it had belonged to a girl near her own age or perhaps for some other more intangible reason connected to the mystery surrounding it. She had originally intended that the solution to the Bone Girl mystery would be the subject of her paper but, acutely aware of the impending deadline for it to be handed in, Elizabeth knew that might have to change her focus soon to dealing with the original, more mundane scope of the paper.

An hour later, and having gotten no further in her musings, Elizabeth's contemplation of the skull was interrupted by the arrival of Dylan, her tutorial partner. Tall and rangy with an athletic frame honed by many hours of rowing on the Cherwell river, there always seemed to be something out of place about Dylan whenever Elizabeth saw him in an academic environment. Not that there was anything in the least bit lacking about Dylan when it came to scholarly matters – he was one of the few students on the course that Elizabeth grudgingly admitted was at or near her own level, and her tutors had predicted a First Class degree for her from day one.

“Are you still bugging around with that bloody skull?” said Dylan, a smile on his face to lessen the coarseness of his vocabulary.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. Dylan was an alumnus of Sherborne, one of England's finest public schools, yet persisted in using language more suited to a football hooligan most of the time. As a concession to the fairer sex, he avoided using the more lurid swear words when he was around Elizabeth, but she would have preferred it if he acted his age. For the past week he had been teasing her about the skull and, as Elizabeth had no wish to be ribbed at that moment on a topic which was growing increasingly frustrating for her, she tried to change the subject.

“How are you getting on with your project?”

“The origin of the ruby of Raman-Ka?” said Dylan, his eyes lighting up suddenly, “I handed in my paper yesterday. I worked like a dog on that so with any luck, if I get an Alpha plus on it, I can finally convince the Bursar to give me that travel grant for a trip to Egypt this summer on the back of it.”

Like Elizabeth, Dylan went to Exeter College and students there were given generous grants from the governing body's own funds for travelling, as long as some sort of academic benefit could be shown from the trip. Of course, funds were limited and competition was fierce for this (as it was for most things in Oxford) and Elizabeth had secretly been harbouring hopes that her Bone Girl project would secure her funds for a trip to the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, Canada, which was perhaps

the finest of its kind in the world. She felt sure that this was a far more worthy cause, academically speaking, than Dylan's Egyptian odyssey, which was to her mind nothing more than a blatant attempt to live out a boy's own fantasy. She smiled suddenly as a phrase she had heard earlier that day was recalled to her mind.

"Like Indiana Jones you mean?"

Dylan nodded, then gave her a suspicious sidelong look.

"What's so funny?"

Elizabeth had mentioned her meeting with her estranged cousin to no one else and to her own surprise found herself unburdening herself to Dylan with little further encouragement.

"We have absolutely nothing in common you know, despite the fact that we're family." Elizabeth said when she had finished relating the events preceding her arrival at the School of Archaeology and Anthropology. "And we don't really get along either – I mean she was just so dogmatic and self-centred with all that philosophical psychobabble."

"Well it's hardly surprising that you don't get on, is it?" said Dylan.

"Why?"

"She's family, isn't she? Most of the time we never get on with our relatives – just think of Christmas and birthdays. I think there's a famous quote about it..."

"Please, don't you start quoting as well."

"... You can pick your friends and you can pick your nose but you can't pick your family. At least that's how I think it goes, but I can't for the life of me remember who said it."

Dylan furrowed his brow with exaggerated concentration and Elizabeth could not help it when a rebellious chuckle escaped her lips.

"Some learned sage no doubt. So are you suggesting that I should give it another chance with Zara?"

"That's the spirit Burns."

Dylan almost never referred to people by their first names, which was probably one of the few boys' public school habits that he had been unable to shake. Having been to a girls' boarding school herself Elizabeth usually hated such affectations but for some reason did not seem to mind when Dylan did this. It was probably because he always flashed her one of his toothy grins whenever he said her surname and she found it impossible to stay mad at him on such occasions.

"But what about..." said Elizabeth, trailing off and indicating the skull in front of her.

"I have an idea about that too." Dylan said, grinning at her again.

"I have to admit, I was surprised when you called." Zara said.

"Oh?" said Elizabeth as she leaned over to re-fill her cousin's coffee mug.

They were in her room in Exeter College, Zara finally having accepted the invitation to visit Elizabeth there. Although the room, which was generous by student standards, boasted a comfy settee and armchair, both were now empty since Elizabeth had been sitting on the swivel chair by her writing desk while Zara had chosen to perch on the window sill. There seemed something oddly formal about the arrangement but Elizabeth told herself that she was just imagining things.

"I just didn't think we hit it off that well earlier and you don't seem the type to change your mind very easily."

Deep breaths, thought Elizabeth, remember that she's family.

“So how are you finding Oxford?” she said, hoping that a change of subject would help.

“I find the political climate quite disappointing,” Zara said, sipping her tea before adding, as if by way of explanation “Too many careerists.”

The conversation petered out after that and Elizabeth was grateful for a knock at the door. It was Dylan.

“Good news Burns,” he said excitedly, barely pausing for breath as Elizabeth let him in, “I made a breakthrough in the college library – it’s all in here.”

In Dylan’s hands was a battered book entitled *Nameless Ghosts of the Colleges of Oxford*. At her puzzled look Dylan thrust the tome into Elizabeth’s hands.

“What do ghosts have to do with this?” said Elizabeth, “This is for an Anthropology essay.”

“Look, it’s like this...” Dylan said, then paused mid-sentence, staring behind her.

Elizabeth followed his gaze and remembered with a start that Zara was still there. Her cousin had barely stirred at Dylan’s entrance and was still sipping her tea slowly. She gave Dylan a slight wave to show that she acknowledged his presence.

“Is this your cousin?”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, then introduced them with an air of resignation.

“I can certainly see the resemblance,” Dylan said, flashing Elizabeth a grin as he added, “You’re both very pretty.”

To her own surprise Elizabeth felt herself blush. Zara, however, seemed unmoved.

“Beauty is a short-lived tyranny.” she said, with an added “Socrates.”

This time it was Dylan’s turn to look puzzled.

“Zara is reading PPP at Oriel.” Elizabeth explained.

“I see.” Dylan said.

An awkward moment followed with none of them sure how to steer the conversation from that point, before Dylan turned his attention back to the book in Elizabeth’s hands.

“Look, the easiest thing would probably be for you to join me back at the library where I can explain once you’ve... er... finished up here.”

With that Dylan left, taking the odd book with him.

“Dylan’s my partner,” said Elizabeth. Zara raised her perfectly manicured eyebrows and she hastily added, “My tutorial partner, that is, we work together. Nothing more.”

Zara took another sip of what seemed suddenly to be a bottomless cup of tea.

“Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, something is out of tune.”

Elizabeth waited patiently and, sure enough, a moment later the attribution came.

“Carl Jung.”

Family, Elizabeth thought, breathing deeply again, *Remember that she’s family.*

“So your cousin seems... nice.” Dylan said

Elizabeth gave him a withering look.

“Can we get to the point – my essay’s due in just over 24 hours.”

Dylan grinned and pointed.

They were in the front quadrangle of Exeter College and Dylan had gestured towards the imposing Victorian Gothic Chapel, whose spire dominated the skyline both within the college and from the outside when viewed from Turl Street. It had been designed by George Gilbert Scott as a scaled-down version of the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, and was every bit as grand and elegant, if much smaller in scale. Behind the chapel was perhaps one of the loveliest gardens in Oxford, with a secret view over the heart of the city. In summer, it was one of the nicest places imaginable to sit with a book, or just sit, or play croquet. At any other time of year it was just a wonderfully peaceful spot to escape from the pace and worries of the outside world.

Elizabeth turned to give Dylan a puzzled look but he was already moving off towards the chapel. The light from the quadrangle disappeared as they entered the ante-chapel and Elizabeth shivered as she imagined the famous candle-lit concerts that were held here sometimes late at night. A more atmospheric setting could scarcely be imagined than these intimate but august surroundings. On this occasion, however, the only spectators here other than Elizabeth and Dylan were the statues which lurked in the shadows of the ante-chapel, including the bust of J.R.R. Tolkien, one of the college's most famous sons.

It was towards one of these statues that Elizabeth was led by Dylan. There seemed nothing particularly remarkable about the statue, which was neither grand nor, in her humble opinion, that well-carved. It depicted a small figure garbed in silks and brocades, probably female although that was difficult to tell since the statue had no head.

“What is this?” said Elizabeth, letting her impatience show on her face.

Dylan did not answer her straight away, walking around the statue slowly as if inspecting it. Just as Elizabeth felt like she was about to scream in frustration, Dylan spoke.

“People assume from its appearance of antiquity that the chapel is a very old building. However, while it was constructed in the nineteenth century, it actually replaces a much older building dating from the time that the college was founded in 1314. Some of the stonework of the original chapel is retained within the new one – as are some of the statues.”

At his words Elizabeth looked at the headless statue with new eyes, intrigued.

“This particular piece was once the crowning glory of the old collection, as it was said to depict the daughter of the first Rector of the college, who died young but was forever immortalised in stone by a local sculptor. Unfortunately the names of both the girl and the sculptor have been lost to history. Attempts to identify the girl have been frustrated further by a development in the nineteen sixties.”

Something about the story struck Elizabeth as being very familiar but it stayed just out of reach when she tried to discern it.

“What happened?”

“The head went missing,” said Dylan, a surprisingly serious expression on his face, “No one has ever been able to find it but I have a theory concerning where it ended up.”

Elizabeth had an idea where this was heading and stopped him.

“The Bone Girl – are you serious? It's a real skull, not a sculptor's rendering in stone! And surely it wasn't a skull when it was attached to the rest of the statue. What you're saying makes no sense!”

Dylan remained calm in the face of Elizabeth's exhortations.

“I know it sounds far-fetched but I've been giving this a lot of thought. Think about it – the head disappeared at exactly the same time that the skull was discovered.

No one since then has been able to link the skull with any living person and yesterday I took the measurements of both. Guess what? They matched perfectly!”

Dylan went on, talking about similar instances of such phenomena happening in places of worship all over the world, from Buddhist temples to Roman Catholic shrines in Latin America. The idea might have been crazy but Elizabeth had to admit that Dylan had done his homework.

“You’re not seriously suggesting that I put all this in my paper? Our tutor will laugh at this – if he doesn’t fail me.”

“I hate to say this Burns, but I don’t think you’ve got much of a choice” said Dylan with a smile, “Didn’t you say that you have only 24 hours to hand in your paper?”

Elizabeth poked him with her elbow, producing a satisfying groan. Damn him for his cockiness but he was right!

“Can I borrow your notes?” she said, a sigh of resignation escaping her lips.

As they headed back to Dylan’s room a sudden thought struck Elizabeth.

“There’s just one thing I don’t understand. Why did the first Rector erect the statue in the first place? My knowledge of history isn’t up to much but I don’t think that it was normal for statues of family members to be put up in churches at that time.”

Dylan nodded thoughtfully.

“It wasn’t. You see, the Rector didn’t even know that he had a daughter until after she died of a fever. The girl was conceived before he took the cloth and her mother never revealed her existence for fear of shaming her father. The Church was all-powerful back then and even nobles took care not to offend it so a peasant woman, like the girl’s mother, had to take special care. She needn’t have worried though – the Rector was heartbroken when he heard about it and erected the statue in her memory.”

“So she was a relative that he never knew about.” Elizabeth said in a whisper.

“She was family.” Dylan acknowledged.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes more before Dylan spoke again.

“So do you think you’ll see Zara again?”

“I don’t know. We just don’t seem to get along. And she drives me crazy with all those quotes!”

“You could try telling her that you want to hear what she has to say rather than the musings of a bunch of dead philosophers and psychologists.”

Elizabeth thought about it and nodded.

“I just might.”

COLLEGE SPIRITS

Alan felt a familiar mixture of apprehension and anticipation as he approached Staircase H on Peckwater Quadrangle, where his friend Casper lived. For students at Christ Church, Oxford’s largest and most prestigious college, rooms in Peckwater (usually referred to with affection as plain ‘Peck’) were the most sought after, the crème de la crème of student accommodation. Each staircase block was four storeys high and on the first three floors were double rooms with oak-panelled walls, which looked out on to the well-manicured lawn of the quadrangle beneath and the grand neo-classical façade of the college library opposite. Regrettably, however, Casper’s room was one of the much-maligned singles on the top floor that looked out not on pleasant Peck Quad but instead onto the street that ran alongside the outer walls of the

college, where drunkards could usually be heard being manhandled out of the Bear public house late on a Friday or Saturday night. Such rooms were considered the consolation prize for those students who came near the bottom of the room ballot at the end of their first year. It therefore never ceased to surprise Alan that Casper, who, as a scholar, was entitled to any room of his choice within Christ Church, had actually chosen to live there.

A grimy keypad was the obstacle that prevented outsiders from entering the staircase and Alan keyed in the code automatically (it was the same as the code for Canterbury Quad, where he lived amid somewhat less salubrious surroundings). The door clicked open and he was hit by a musty smell of wood and age – an odour familiar in many of the older parts of the college. As Alan climbed the creaking wooden stairs he wondered, not for the first time, whether they had ever been replaced, or even repaired, since they had been built originally, midway through the seventeenth century. The loud squeak that his trainers elicited from each loose plank made Alan wince with almost every step that he took. It was the very start of ‘noughth’ week in Michaelmas term, the first week of the first term after the long summer vacation, and some students at the college would be revising for their Collections, examinations in which they would be tested on all that they had learnt the previous term. These were the least welcome Collections of the year, since the break of almost four months between the end of the previous academic year and the start of the next one lent itself greatly to relaxation and forgetfulness. As a result those studying for their Collections at this time tended to be extremely irritable and Alan had no desire to fall foul of their frustrations.

It was therefore extremely softly that he knocked on Casper’s door, so softly in fact that the door was not opened until he had knocked a second and then a third time, rather more loudly than he would have wished in the end. When the door swung open Casper was standing there, looking more like a scarecrow than ever – bespectacled and pointy-nosed with a shock of yellow hair that looked more like straw. Alan’s heart sunk when he noticed that his friend had the familiar ‘mad professor’ gleam in his eye – a sign that Casper had had another one of his eccentric ideas and that he, Alan, was inevitably going to be dragged into it. He was only slightly relieved when, over Casper’s shoulder, he saw that they were not alone. There was a slim, pretty Indian girl standing by the window that looked out onto Blue Boar Street who Alan immediately recognised, with some surprise, as Lakshmi Devi. Although she was in the same year as both Casper and Alan, he had only ever spoken to Lakshmi a handful of times and, whilst she had been friendly enough on those occasions, they moved in entirely different circles the rest of the time. She was therefore almost the last person that Alan would have expected to see in Casper’s room and she did not look as if she particularly wanted to be there just then. Lakshmi wore an expression of some discomfort on her face as she stood by the window, looking for all the world like she would have preferred to jump out of it rather than continue to stand there. However, when she saw him she nodded slightly and Alan returned the gesture, glad that at least he would not be the only sane person present for Casper’s latest scheme.

He had been summoned there in the usual way when he had found a rolled up bit of paper in his pigeonhole in the Porter’s Lodge. ‘The Plodge’, a small area beneath Tom Tower, location of both the porters’ offices and the staff and students’ pigeonholes, was the nerve centre of the community that lived within the college. Even in these days of e-mail and mobile phones, the favoured method for tutors and students to stay in touch with each other was still a hastily scribbled note shoved into

the tiny slot that each student had in the Plodge. Casper's note had been typically brief: 'Urgent – someone needs our help. Come to my room no later than 9.00 pm tonight'. It had been Alan's first day back and it was not the way he would have wanted to end it – a night out in the college bar would have been considerably more welcome. Looking at Lakshmi, the meaning of Casper's message suddenly became clear to Alan and he realised that her obvious discomfort was probably not entirely due to being in their company.

Casper and Alan had been brought together in a professional capacity for the first time the previous summer term – called Trinity term in the Oxonian lexicon – although they had met each other before that, having both been freshers commencing their first year at Christ Church at the same time, albeit in very different subjects. Alan tried not to think too much about the circumstances in which they had been brought together – doing so inevitably made him shudder and tended to spoil the memories of what had otherwise been a happy start to student life for him. Their experiences together had been memorable for all the wrong reasons and even now Alan wondered whether anything good had come out of their mutual association – he was not even really sure that he could call Casper his friend. They got on well enough when they were in each other's company but Alan seemed to have subconsciously made the decision to steer clear of Casper since the events of last summer – until now that was. Hence the feelings of mounting dread that had afflicted Alan ever since he had read Casper's note.

Casper seemed oblivious of this however. He took Alan's hand, shaking it enthusiastically, and half-dragged him into his room, so reluctant was he to set foot inside it. At first sight there was nothing remarkable about Casper's room – it was as standard for the top floor of Peck Quad, cosy rather than comfortable with its low ceiling, cramped living area and narrow adjoining bedroom. It was only when one looked closer that certain details stood out as somewhat out of the ordinary. Casper's bookshelf, filled to bursting, was lined with books that had obscure and rather disturbing titles, like *The Enigma of the Poltergeist*, *Is there an Afterlife?*, *Parapsychology: the science of the unusual experience* and, most bizarrely of all, the Society for Psychical Research's *Guide to the Investigation of Apparitions*. Further books lay open on the large desk beside the window, on which there also sat a Geiger counter. In another corner of the room stood a tripod with a video camcorder sitting on top of it. There were no clocks in the room, digital or otherwise, but on the wall there hung a barometer set on a wooden platform that looked to be of great age and value.

Alan knew from past experience that these items were what Casper called the tools of his trade. They had nothing to do with the course that he was studying at Oxford, Experimental Psychology, which itself required textbooks more obscure than could be found in most bookstores. What impressed Alan was the fact that Casper's odd collection seemed to have grown since he was last in his room – there were several new books lining his shelves, and both the Geiger counter and camcorder were recent additions as well. From the looks of things, it seemed that Casper was taking his hobby more seriously this year.

"How are you old chap?" Casper said.

"I'm fine," Alan said noncommittally. When Casper said nothing and just continued to grin at him he felt the need to add something more. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm just capital. It's so delightful to be back isn't it?"

Alan nodded, mentally sighing. Casper always talked like that, as if he were a character out of one of the detective novels of his favourite author Dorothy L. Sayers

(a fellow Oxonian), which were set in the 1920s and 30s. With the waistcoat, scarf and tie that he invariably wore whatever the weather, Casper often seemed to dress like Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers' most famous character, as well. He had often suspected that this was due to Casper's parents, who had not sent their son to school, instead educating him by way of a private tutor. When Alan had actually met the Grimstons at the end of the previous year his suspicions had been confirmed – Casper's father had resembled his son in every way, from glasses to straw-like hair, and his mother had been dressed from head to toe in black like an Edwardian schoolmarm. They had been stiffly formal with him, almost to the extent that Alan had worried that he had in some way offended them. Later, Casper had reassured him that his parents reacted to most young people in that way – fear of their potential bad influence was what had led them to school their son at home. They had even apparently had second thoughts about allowing Casper to go to Oxford for the same reason, although they had relented once they visited Christ Church with him for the first time. The college, in all its Tudor grandeur, was a place that tended to impress even the most cynical of visitors.

Small talk, never one of Casper's strong points, tailed off fairly quickly after the first opening exchange and for a few moments the pair of them just stood there uncomfortably, saying nothing and looking anywhere but at each other. Alan was the first to break the tense silence, looking pointedly at his watch as he spoke.

“Look Grim, I've got Collections on Friday so if there was anything you wanted to talk to me about could we get on with it?”

Grim was his nickname for Casper and it was an epithet which in truth Alan knew that his friend did not particularly like. Despite himself, however, he took a petty sort of satisfaction in rubbing Casper the wrong way whenever he used the moniker, a sort of small revenge for the numerous irritations that he had suffered over the time that they had known each other.

“Ghosts old chap, that's what I wanted to talk to you about!” said Casper with a flourish, as if he had been looking forward to sharing the news with him for some time.

Inwardly Alan groaned. Ghosts were what seemed to drive Casper and give him purpose, far more so than his degree or any subsequent career. Whilst Casper could not speak about normal things – current affairs, sport, the weather, small talk – with any great fluency or confidence, whenever talk turned to the supernatural he came alive. He was a believer to the extent that it sometimes seemed to Alan that Casper saw paranormal explanations in the most mundane of matters. Casper always saw it as his duty to investigate and what made things worse was that Alan was almost always there as well, dragged into Casper's latest escapade against his better judgment and therefore left with equal egg on his face when it all turned out to be a misunderstanding, a prank or something else entirely.

“I'm sorry Grim but I really don't have time for another hoax right now.”

“It's not a hoax.”

It was Lakshmi that spoke on this occasion, for the first time since Alan had arrived. Alan looked across at her and was concerned by the solemn expression that she wore, which was so unlike her normally cheerful appearance. Lakshmi had Indian parents but she spoke with a cut-glass English accent (having been born and brought up in nearby Banbury) and this contrasted attractively with her dusky skin and delicate features. She was level headed and hard-working – she had to be given that her subject was medicine, without doubt the most gruelling course at any university –

and was therefore less inclined to waste time than either Casper or Alan. That she was still standing here, taking this seriously, therefore spoke volumes.

“Okay, tell me about it,” said Alan, trying to put as much weary resignation as possible into his voice. Just as Casper was about to leap up and animatedly shake his hand again Alan added, to make it clear that he retained a healthy dose of scepticism “Her, not you.”

Lakshmi hesitated for several long moments before she started, clearly uncomfortable with what she was about to say.

“Well, it all started the first night I came back to college. I was up late, revising for Collections. They’re quite important this term because we have Moderations in a few weeks and I suppose I was quite stressed about them.”

“Where’s your room?” said Casper, smiling to show that he was sorry about the interruption.

“Over in Canterbury Quad. I’m in one of the rooms right at the top, in the roof almost. It’s one of the oldest parts of the college and I often have trouble sleeping there as the floorboards are always creaking and the windows rattle when the breeze gets up. That’s why, even when I don’t have exams, I tend to only get to sleep quite late.”

“What exactly happened?” This time it was Alan’s turn to interrupt. The fact that Lakshmi’s experience, whatever it was, had taken place in the same quadrangle that he lived in made the whole thing seem more immediate.

“I was feeling a bit drowsy and must have dozed off. I was woken up at about two in the morning when I heard the sound of singing. At first I wondered whether I was still asleep and having a very vivid dream. There was no doubt about it though, there was the faint sound of singing coming clearly through my window as if borne on the wind from the cathedral.”

Christ Church was unique among Oxford colleges in being the cathedral church of the diocese of Oxford as well as a college of the university. It was however the tiniest cathedral in England and fit snugly within the walls of Tom Quad, the impressive main quadrangle which welcomed visitors to the college through the gate under Tom Tower. Like most cathedrals Christ Church had its very own choir, although Alan had never heard of practices or performances taking place so late at night.

“At first, although I listened carefully, I could make nothing of the singing – no words or familiar melodies. I’m not sure but eventually I must have blanked it out, as I started to drowse again, but then the singing returned. This time it was louder, so loud that I was sure that the singers had entered my staircase and were coming up the stairs.”

“Were you scared?” said Casper, trying (and failing) to keep a hint of relish out of his voice.

Lakshmi thought for a moment before answering.

“Not really, no, not at first. In fact, I thought that some of my friends were playing a joke, you know, that it was just a college prank or something.”

“But it wasn’t a joke?” Casper again.

“No,” said Lakshmi, barely hiding a shudder this time, “it wasn’t my friends. Even when the singers came up the staircase, even when they were outside my door, I still thought it was a prank. But then I heard the handle of the door turning.”

When Lakshmi paused again neither Casper nor Alan thought to interrupt. It had suddenly become very quiet in the little room.

“I’d been lying on my side, books spread out all over the bed, but I turned to lie on my back so that I could see the door. It opened and there was a figure standing in the doorway. I couldn’t tell who it was because he was obscured by the shadows but I assumed that it had to be my scout. You see, by this time I’d pinched myself so many times that I knew I was awake, and I thought it couldn’t be anyone else. After all, I was sure that I’d locked my door and no one else had the key.”

At Oxford the college servants were called scouts, although Alan was fairly sure that they did not habitually turn up to clean out student rooms at that time of night.

“But when the figure came into my room and was illuminated by the moonlight I saw that it wasn’t my scout. It was a man dressed in a black cowl and cassock, like a monk and he was swinging one of those vessels that they use for burning incense in churches.”

“A Censer you mean?” said Casper.

Lakshmi nodded.

Alan was not sure what to believe – was Lakshmi having them on or had she indeed been the victim of an ill-judged student prank? Her story sounded barely credible. It was as if the college’s amateur dramatic society had got together, found some black robes and dared one of their number to stage an elaborate charade. It sounded more like an initiation ceremony than a supernatural experience.

“I know what you’re thinking but it felt so real. When the door opened a current of air carried a nasty stench into my room. I can still smell it whenever I think about it, it was so awful. And the figure – the monk or whatever it was, it just stood there, swinging its censer and chanting.”

“What was it chanting?” said Casper, as if that was important in some way.

“I didn’t understand everything, but I recognised some bits and pieces, enough to know that it was in Latin.” Lakshmi said. “You see in medicine we use a lot of Latin words and, although I couldn’t really make out what he was saying, it sounded familiar from my textbooks. It was horrible though, him just standing there. I kept hoping that he would throw back his cowl, reveal that he was a student and then we would both have a good laugh at the joke.”

Lakshmi stopped then, as if too embarrassed to go on. Even with Casper’s gentle coaxing it seemed to take a visible effort for her to continue.

“Then the monk entered my room and I screamed. I threw back the covers and ran for the door. I was dreading touching him but it seemed like I passed straight through him, as if he wasn’t really there.”

The girl looked so shaken up that Alan decided that she was either the world’s best actress or she was certainly not having them both on. Genuinely concerned, he asked where she had spent the rest of the night.

“I slept over with my friend Melanie in the next staircase. She didn’t ask any questions until I woke up the next morning and when she heard about my intruder she wanted to go to the Junior Censor.”

The Junior Censor administered disciplinary matters within Christ Church and it seemed to Alan to be the most sensible thing to do to report the matter to him.

“I begged her not to though, partly because by the next morning I wasn’t sure whether the whole thing had been my imagination.”

“But you don’t think it was your imagination now?” said Casper.

“No, it was that business with the Latin you see. Melanie and I looked up some of the words that I could remember the monk chanting and from what we could

make out it seemed to be some sort of medieval burial service. The monk had been giving me the last rites or something!”

It was Casper’s turn to take over at that point as he had overheard Lakshmi and Melanie talking about the matter at lunch in Hall earlier that day and offered to help out. Lakshmi, dubious about the whole thing and still in two minds about whether or not to involve the Junior Censor, had agreed reluctantly.

“So what do you think?” said Lakshmi.

Casper smiled, put an arm around her and led Lakshmi firmly but politely to the door.

“I have to discuss the matter with my colleague here,” he said, gesturing at Alan, “but as soon as I’ve done that I’ll be sure to get back to you.”

Closing the door on a clearly nonplussed Lakshmi, Casper turned to face Alan, fairly beaming with delight. Alan was none too sure what the other had to be so pleased about.

“The poor girl’s obviously being victimised in some way. I vote that we report the amateur dramatic club to the Junior Censor.”

Casper waved away Alan’s recommendation.

“I think there’s more to it, old chap, too many details that point to it not being a hoax: there’s the timing, the incense, the odd stench and most of all the Latin. You’ve seen the drama society’s performances – do you really think that they could have pulled off all of that?”

Alan was forced to agree that the Christ Church drama club was a pretty shambolic outfit, full of hammy actors and overblown scripts. But the alternative seemed even more far-fetched.

“But surely you’re not suggesting...?”

Alan left the question hanging without finishing it. Instead of answering, Casper steepled his fingers, a sure sign that he was deep in thought.

“All I’m suggesting at this stage is that the matter requires some more looking into,” he said, then rose to grab his coat and scarf.

“Where are you off to?” said Alan.

“The source of all knowledge,” was Casper’s mysterious reply. (“The library,” he added in a stage whisper, seeing Alan’s uncomprehending expression.)

“And what am I supposed to do?” Alan said, annoyed that he had been summoned only to be discarded just as things got interesting.

“Look after our damsel in distress,” Casper said, disappearing through the doorway, “that’s the part you’re good at.”

“So how did you two first meet?”

It was later the same night and Alan and Lakshmi were sitting in her bedroom drinking warm cocoa. Although he was technically ‘on a job’ as Casper liked to put it, Alan could not help enjoying himself slightly. After all, both the hot chocolate and the company were undeniably pleasant. An hour spent in each other’s company with nothing better to do had revealed that Alan and Lakshmi had a great deal in common, in terms of views, likes and dislikes and their sense of humour. Her question took him by surprise though.

“Casper and I?” said Alan.

“Yes, I mean, he’s so... and you’re so...” said Lakshmi.

“Are the words you’re looking for ‘odd’ and ‘charming’?”

Lakshmi giggled and then did her best to look serious again.

“Actually I was going to say ‘eccentric’ and ‘normal’. No offence, it’s just that you two don’t look like the sort of guys that would normally hang around together.”

Alan nodded.

“Actually, I agree. We became acquainted in circumstances that were somewhat... strange.”

Lakshmi waited for several moments until, when it became clear that Alan was not going to be more forthcoming without further encouragement, she poked his shoulder playfully.

“Well go on, the suspense is killing me.”

We’re definitely flirting now, thought Alan, but what he said was:

“Okay, okay! It’s a long story but I suppose we have a bit of time to kill,” then, growing more serious, “It was the very first week that I started at Oxford. I was a fresher, awkward and uncertain like we all were in the beginning and nothing seemed to be going right. It didn’t help that, unlike most of the First Years who had rooms in either Blue Boar Quad or the Meadow Buildings I was stuck in an out of the way staircase in Tom Quad with only postgraduates and dons as neighbours. It meant that I didn’t really have anyone to talk to about how lost and alone I was feeling.”

Alan paused, worried that he was starting to come across as a bit of a loser.

“Hey, it’s alright,” said Lakshmi, putting her hand gently over his, “We’ve all been through the same thing at some stage at Oxford.”

A pleasurable tingle ran up Alan’s arm at her touch. He tried to remind himself that they were not on a date, even if this was starting to feel like one – not that he minded.

“It was more than that. No matter how much sleep I got I always felt tired, drained of life almost. I wasn’t eating, I couldn’t concentrate, and I’m sure that people must have noticed that something was seriously wrong with me. When I saw my reflection I could barely recognise myself but try as I might there seemed to be nothing that I could do to get myself out of the rut that I was in. Night was the worst, though. I was having these awful nightmares where I was suffocating in bed because something was pressing down on top of me, choking the life out of me. Except it wasn’t a nightmare – it turned out to be real.”

“What do you mean?” said Lakshmi, wide-eyed, her cocoa cold and forgotten in her hand.

“It was Casper that told me about it. He came across me outside the library one day, snoring on the steps like some sort of tramp. Most people were giving me a wide birth, probably because I looked and smelt like I hadn’t washed in a week, but he came over and asked me what was wrong. I decided that I had nothing to lose and told him everything. Instead of calling me crazy – which is what I would probably have done had the situations been reversed – he came up with an even more insane explanation.”

“Which was?”

“That I was being haunted. You know, by a ghost.”

Lakshmi shook her head, although it was not clear whether this meant that she was having trouble believing Alan or that she was simply trying to digest what she was hearing.

“So, what then?” she said when Alan did not carry on.

“Then? To cut a long story short he dealt with it, I got better and we’ve been, well, friends ever since.”

Lakshmi did not probe further and Alan did not volunteer any more details. He kicked himself for telling the story in the first place as it was clear that it had shaken

Lakshmi badly, perhaps making her own experiences harder to dismiss as a result. Whatever the case, it killed the mood completely and shortly afterwards Lakshmi announced that she was retiring to bed.

Wanting to appear a true gentleman, Alan offered to take his bedroll and sleep outside her door. Lakshmi appeared to hesitate at this announcement but Alan never found out what she was going to say because at that point she froze. Fear flickered across her face.

“What’s wrong?” Alan said.

“Don’t you hear it – the singing?”

Alan strained his ears, although in truth he was not keen to verify whether what Lakshmi was hearing was actually real singing. It opened the door to all sorts of possibilities that he was not particularly keen to embrace, even given the evidence of his own eyes in his past escapades with Casper.

Then it came, impossible to deny or ignore: the sound of singing. It was not a lone voice but a chorus of singers. Alan, not the religious type, had rarely been to a service and had never heard a church choir in full voice so he was unable to liken the sound to anything that he had ever heard before. The closest comparison that he could make was to the carol singers that gathered in the street outside his house every Christmas back home in Exeter. Except that this choir was singing in Latin and whatever they were chanting sounded far more ominous than carols.

Like Lakshmi, Alan froze as the singing got closer. It was definitely in the building and from its increasing volume it was coming nearer to Lakshmi’s room. When the sound reached them the singing stopped, just outside her door. Just as Alan was about to breathe a sigh of relief he saw to his horror that the door’s handle was turning and that it was beginning to creak open. Absurdly, Alan looked around for some sort of weapon and, finding nothing to hand, stepped in front of Lakshmi, bravely he hoped.

The door opened and standing there was the figure that Lakshmi had spoken of earlier – a man in the dark robes of a monk, the cowl pulled up to conceal the face and a censer swirling slowly from side to side in his hands. For a long moment the figure just stood there regarding them both in silence until a voice issued forth from the empty visage within the hood. Alan had never heard a sound that was as awful as the monk’s voice in his life – it was a slow, agonising groan, like rocks being crushed or dry leaves scraping across gravel. He could not understand the words that the monk intoned and assumed that they were, as Lakshmi had indicated, in Latin. At that point he was thankful for his lack of comprehension but he had a feeling that nothing good could come of it if the apparition reached the end of his incantation. Unfortunately Alan, transfixed by paralyzing fear, was powerless to do anything about it.

Luckily for him he did not need to.

Casper burst in through the door at that moment and stepped in between Alan and Lakshmi and the phantom monk. Bizarrely, Alan noticed that he was holding what looked like a salt cellar in his hand. Pausing only to smile reassuringly at the pair of them, Casper shouted something at the spectre (it sounded like Latin again), and flung the salt cellar full in its face. For a moment nothing happened, the monk regarded Casper almost quizzically and he in turn began to look pale and rather uncomfortable. Just when Alan was beginning to think that getting involved in this business in the first place had been a very big mistake, however, the apparition gave a terrible wail and disappeared, winking out of existence like the image on a television screen when it was switched off.

Several cups of cocoa later the three of them sat in Lakshmi's room settling shattered nerves and scared wits.

"From what I can make out after a night spent going through the college archives, it seems that the recent redevelopment of the Picture Gallery next to Canterbury Quad disturbed buried remains from the building's past as part of St. Frideswide's Priory." Casper said. "I surmised that the monk was the spectral personification of the outrage of the Priory's deceased and resorted to the standard repellent for a spirit – sodium chloride."

"So what you're basically saying" said Alan, "is that the Dean's refurbishment plans may have released a ghost that began to haunt the college and you stopped it with a spice?"

"Well yes, I suppose that's one way of putting it. It's certainly a rare form of paranormal phenomena, but there was a case a few years ago at an excavation at Durham cathedral..."

"Whatever," said Lakshmi, with uncharacteristic sharpness, "Can I actually get some sleep in here now?"

Casper looked slightly uncomfortable for a moment or two before he answered.

"Not quite. There's still just one more, small thing that we have to do."

"What's that?" said Alan, not liking the 'we' that Casper had put in his last sentence.

"We have to salt the bodies and burn the bones." Casper said, an expression of great solemnity on his face.

Lakshmi looked at Alan as if hoping that he at least would crack a smile to show that they were joking. When he remained solemn too Lakshmi sighed and pointed both of them in the direction of the door.

"I'll leave you to it."

LIDDELL'S GHOST

Sometimes when I wake up in the morning to find myself in a bedroom with oak panelling on the walls, then walk down four flights of stairs which creak and groan like something out of a Hammer horror film, and finally step out into a college quadrangle built by Sir Christopher Wren in which not a stone has been changed for five hundred years, I feel like I must be in a dream. I say only 'sometimes' because for most of the day, when everywhere you look there are other students, Faculty and all the other multitudes of people that are necessary to keep a college the size of Christ Church running smoothly, it is easy to forget the surroundings that we're all a part of. But, at certain times, like first thing in the morning when the dawn sun is reflected like a wraith through the low-lying mist over Christ Church Meadow, or at dusk when the shadows give Tom Tower a Gothic cast as it spears the Oxford skyline, there's no one around and it feels like you've just stepped into the past or even into a world that never was.

In many ways Oxford as a whole is like that, full of ghosts of the past and elements of the fantastical that cannot be found anywhere else. They say that this city has more history per square mile than anywhere else in Britain, with the sole exception of the centre of London. King Charles fled here during The Civil War and, for a couple of years at least, it was the country's capital. Half of the country's Prime Ministers were educated here, as well as a number of Nobel prize-winners and even

one American President (although whether what Bill Clinton did here in his days as a Rhodes Scholar can strictly be described as ‘education’ in the traditional sense is open to debate). But this is also the city where *the Hobbit* and *the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* were written, not to mention the place where Inspector Morse solved most of his cases and Dame Iris Murdoch went slowly mad. In the suburb of Headington, not far north of central Oxford, for no particular reason, a twenty-five foot tall sculpture of a shark pokes, tail first, out of the roof of a terraced house. Matthew Arnold once said that “*the Oxford of the past is the Oxford that will always be*” and in this city where fantasy and history, ghosts and fevered imaginings mingle seamlessly in the streets, I find it impossible not to agree with him.

I find myself thinking of the past when I’m in Oxford more than I do when I’m anywhere else. I don’t mean my own past – I’ve never been a nostalgic person and there’s too much going on in my life right now, here at Christ Church, for me to have the luxury to cast my mind back to my childhood growing up in Liverpool. I can’t remember whether I did this when I first came up to Oxford as an undergraduate, itself almost a decade ago now, but the longer that I’ve been here the harder it is to recall what kind of life I led or what kind of a person I was before then. I certainly don’t look the same or dress in the same manner and I have a strong suspicion that not only my voice but even my mode of speech is almost entirely different. I rarely see school friends anymore, other than on the rare occasions when I visit my parents or attend a reunion, but they’re quick to pick me up on my odd turns of phrase and words that they’ve never used or even heard of before – ‘bumps’, ‘scouts’, ‘spods’, ‘tutes’, ‘sconcing’ and other elements of the Oxonian lexicon which I find myself using without a thought that there might be any chance that they could mean nothing to anyone outside of the ancient university.

No, the past that I think of is the one that belongs to everyone – the past of history but also the past of the imagination. I’ve always had a fascination for ghosts, a product perhaps of a somewhat lonely childhood and a love for Victorian novels. My father was a Professor of English Literature and kept a veritable library of the classics in his study. Although there were battered copies of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and the ghost stories of E. F. Benson amongst this selection, these were not the writings that truly nurtured my interest in the supernatural. I found them unsubtle and uncouth in comparison with works that had no overt paranormal trappings, such as *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations*, which nevertheless fired my imagination with Dickens and Bronte’s unforgettable depictions of Magwitch, terrifying young Pip with his ghastly appearance in a moonlit graveyard, and Mrs Rochester, locked away in an attic yet casting an ominous shadow over the lives of all who were aware of her existence. It was love of literature that led me eventually to Oxford, where I read English as an undergraduate. I’m not ashamed to admit that almost the only reason that I applied there was the knowledge that, if successful, I would find myself walking the same streets and taking in the same sights that had inspired Shelley, Wilde, Eliot, Yeats, Auden and countless others. Shakespeare himself, I learned, knew the city well though he never attended the university, for he used to stop over with his friend John Davenant at the Crown Tavern in Cornmarket as he passed back and forth between the theatres in London and his family in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Oxford is full of trivia like that and I sometimes wonder whether I could spend my entire life here without uncovering even the barest fraction of the history that has accumulated in this place over the centuries. Each college that makes up the university (there were thirty nine at last count but considering that the last was founded in 1996 there may be more by the time you read this) has its own body of

history and mythology. In Christ Church there is a door opposite the foot of the stairs leading up to the dining hall on which the words 'NO PEEL' are burned – it wasn't until my final year as an undergraduate that I was told by a college porter that this was an election slogan of 1829, referring to Sir Robert Peel, an old member of the college who went on to become Prime Minister. I mentioned earlier that half of England's Prime Ministers were educated at Oxford but neglected to confirm that half of them were Christ Church men – thirteen in all – including Gladstone and Eden as well as Peel. The college was founded by Henry VIII, Edward VII studied here while he was the Prince of Wales, and to this day the head of the college is elected by Royal appointment. This distinguished Royal and Parliamentary legacy is in large part why Christ Church is often regarded as the cradle of the British upper crust and has something of a superiority complex over the other colleges – according to Oxford style it is always called simply Christ Church, without the need for the suffix 'college'. It is also known as the House after its Latin name *Aedes Christi*, the House of Christ, but of course etiquette dictates that it is so called only by members of Christ Church. Yet for all that this has been the abode of Kings and politicians, the House's most famous alumnus remains a solitary and sickly mathematics don called Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, creator of Alice's Wonderland. It is in a tale concerning Dodgson, indirectly at least, where all of my consuming interests - literature, Oxford and the paranormal - merge.

I must go back over ten years to my very first autumn term – or Michaelmas as we in Oxford call it – as an undergraduate at Christ Church. It was a difficult time for me. Even though Oxford, with the seemingly endless joys of its dreaming spires and towers eternally whispering the last enchantments of the middle ages (and here I again borrow shamelessly the words of Matthew Arnold, for never was an admirer of this city more eloquent than he in its description), lived up to and indeed surpassed most of my expectations the same could not be said for life as a student. Gone was the routine of my schooldays to be replaced by a working week which was unstructured and to me bewildering. Academic life for an undergraduate was focused around the tutorial system, a weekly meeting with one of the college dons which I had initially looked forward to with anticipation but which, as the weeks went by, I began increasingly to dread. It was not my tutor that was the cause of my dismay, for Professor Hodgkin was a patient and kindly old soul whose greatest fault was a somewhat detached air which made it seem like he was in constant contemplation of the works of Chaucer even when one was in conversation with him. I shared my tutorials that first term with two other students, the exotically named Francesca-Louisa Cortez, who had seemingly grown up everywhere in Europe but spoke with a cut-glass English accent that was better than my own, and Iain Duncan, an old Etonian whose family supposedly owned most of the Highlands of Scotland. Both Francesca and Iain were nice enough to me outside tutorials but it became clear very quickly that I was not in their class when we were brought together. Their schooling, general knowledge and essay-writing technique were on a level that I had never encountered before and suddenly I, who had never been anything but first in my class in English at school, found myself lagging behind them. I did everything I could to catch them up, spending night after night in the library after days spent attending every lecture that I could at the English Faculty Building. But it all seemed in vain - by the middle of that Michaelmas term I wondered whether a mistake had been made in the admissions process and began to question whether my motives for wanting to come to Oxford had been the right ones. As I said, it was a difficult time for me.

My greatest comfort during this period was the cathedral. I mentioned earlier that Christ Church regarded itself as something apart from the other colleges of the university. This was in part due to its architectural magnificence and illustrious history but, more tangibly, it was also because alone among Oxford colleges it was indeed more than just an academic institution, for its chapel served as the cathedral church for the diocese of not only Oxfordshire, but Berkshire and Buckinghamshire as well. For all that the chapel was part of the largest and grandest college in Oxford, it was an unassuming building in itself, and in fact it was the smallest cathedral in the country. Despite this it was magnificently located – to the east the wheel window of the cathedral looked across the well-manicured Fellow’s garden, over the playing field to the University Botanic Garden with lovely views of the imposing tower of Magdalen College beyond. Other than at dusk, when the daily evensong service was performed, the cathedral, unlike the rest of the college, was generally closed to the public. It was therefore a haven of tranquillity for those seeking to escape from the twin stresses of essays and social obligations that afflicted many students in the college, me in particular. I never had to worry about my peace being disrupted while I was in the cathedral, for there seemed to be an unwritten rule, almost universally heeded, that anyone seeking comfort in the solitude of the place was not to be disturbed.

I was therefore surprised when one evening in early November I was approached by one of the vergers whose job it was to look after the cathedral. I was in a particularly bad mood just then – that morning I had endured an especially trying Victorian literature tutorial in which both Francesca and Iain had been in rare form while I had felt myself stumbling through in a manner which seemed clumsy in contrast. I was so depressed that I had passed up on the weekly ritual of post-tutorial lunch with the others and come straight to the cathedral, where I had hoped to find some sort of perspective without any intrusion. In my depressed state of mind the last thing that I wanted or felt I needed was the company of others, yet when the verger spoke it was unmistakably me whom he addressed.

“Hello there, are you alright?”

I looked up reluctantly at Desmond Flynn, one of the vergers of Christ Church cathedral, as he approached. Desmond was a familiar figure around the college – he was not much older than many of the students, since he had only just finished a postgraduate degree in philosophy and theology and was in only his first year of exclusive service to the cathedral. I had never really spoken to him before, other than to nod or briefly pass the time of day with, but he had seemed a pleasant enough chap – his company just then still remained unwelcome however.

“Beautiful isn’t it?”

Assuming he was referring to the cathedral I nodded and murmured my agreement noncommittally.

“Although, considering its size, you wouldn’t have thought that this place was haunted, would you?”

“Haunted?” I said, my interest mildly piqued for the first time.

Desmond raised his eyebrows as if in surprise but he couldn’t quite conceal the slightly smug and self-satisfied smile that flitted quickly across his face and then disappeared.

“Oh, so you were unaware of the cathedral ghost?”

I nodded, unable to resist a ghost story even back then, although I was loath to give Desmond any encouragement. It struck me that I was probably just the latest in a long line of students that he had tried to impress with his knowledge of college

folklore. Being a verger, even one in a cathedral as famous as this one, did not strike me as being the most exciting of jobs for someone like Desmond, who was, as I was aware, extremely bright as well as still relatively young. He had to find ways to amuse himself from time to time and on that particular occasion I was prepared to indulge him.

I had been sitting in the Nave, the part of the cathedral nearest to the front entrance leading from the main college quadrangle, but Desmond led me towards the Choir. On the way we passed the Latin Chapel off to the left, which contained the shrine of St Frideswide, the patron saint of Oxford and first head of the original Saxon church upon whose foundations Christ Church had later been built. Not for the first time I felt the immense age of the surroundings pressing down upon me almost like a physical weight. I spared a glance for the ceiling as I walked, rising high above, the splendour of the vaulting and the gracefulness of the pendants almost intimidating in the intricacy of their craftsmanship.

“It puts one in mind of the heavens doesn’t it?” Desmond said, noting the admiration in my gaze and then shrugging his shoulders “But of course that’s the point I suppose.”

We went right to the end of the South Choir aisle, which was overlooked by one of the five stained glass windows at this end of the cathedral. The windows alone were one of the reasons why visitors came to Christ Church, for they had been designed by Edward Burne-Jones and executed by William Morris, both of them Pre-Raphaelite artists who had been undergraduates together at nearby Exeter College. The window in front of us depicted three seemingly angelic figures – two men with wings in white robes on either side of a woman, without wings but also in white, a halo about her head and a kindly expression on her face. Although even I, with no artistic training or particular interest, could appreciate the beauty of the scene I felt only puzzlement and the beginnings of mild impatience as to why Desmond had brought me here and asked him pointedly to explain himself.

“All in good time – one can’t rush these things you know.” Desmond said, almost prompting a rude response from me to the effect that I had other places to be just then and far better things to do with my time. Before I could open my mouth, however, the verger pointed at the central figure in the stained glass.

“You know who she is of course.”

Distracted by his words I looked at the female, saint or angel that she was, and tried to work out her identity. I did not admit that I did not know who she was offhand – that was not something one did at Oxford. More than once before I had pretended more knowledge than I had, both during tutorials and in conversations at formal hall, when students gathered to take dinner together in the imposing surroundings of the college’s Tudor Great Hall, and I had so far got away with it. I was not sure why I attempted at all times to maintain such a façade, but Christ Church was not a place where I could voluntarily confess my own ignorance to anything without feeling lessened for doing so.

So I stood there concentrating on the image in the window while beside me I could feel, but not quite see, the smug smile returning to Desmond’s face. I racked my brains trying to find something familiar, some identifying mark that would reveal who the mysterious figure was. I thought of all the saints that I knew that had links to Oxford or colleges here named after them – Saint Anne, Saint Mary Magdalene and Saint Hilda as well as Saint Frideswide – but from my dim memories of religious studies classes taken in school long ago none of them seemed to match. It was only when I noticed the yellow eight-spoke wheel on a red background to the left of the

saint in the picture that I realised who she was – Saint Catharine of course. The story came to my mind unbidden of how Catharine, on the day of her execution, touched and miraculously broke the wheel on which she had been condemned to be crucified for her beliefs, earning herself the dubious honour of having the Catharine wheel firework named after her. Little comfort, I had remembered thinking when I first heard the story, in light of the fact that Catharine herself had not escaped death that day in the end, losing her head instead of being crucified.

When I turned to Desmond it was I who had the smile on my face, although it did not stay there for very long.

“It’s Saint Catharine.” I said.

Desmond shook his head. “Good but, alas, not quite right,” he said.

I bristled at that, pointing at the stained glass.

“But the wheel – who else could it be?”

“Of course, it is meant to be Saint Catharine, but the likeness was of a living woman or at least a woman who was alive when the window was put up – Edith Liddell. You know who she was of course.”

The fact was that I did not and this time I was not minded even to pretend that I did. Desmond’s tone and attitude were really beginning to grate on me at this point. I had joined him in the hope of hearing the esoteric details of a haunting but all that I seemed to be getting was a rather boring lesson in theology, never one of my favourite topics at the best of times. The surname Liddell was one that was familiar to most students at Christ Church – it belonged to our most famous Dean, Henry Liddell. He became Dean of the college in the middle of the nineteenth century and, despite the fact that he was a great scholar and educational reformer, he was to be entirely overshadowed by one of his ten children – his daughter Alice Liddell, the muse of Lewis Carroll and inspiration for one of the classics of children’s literature, *Alice in Wonderland*. Edith Liddell I knew not, however.

“Is she any relation to Dean Liddell and Alice?” I said.

“She was Henry’s daughter and Alice’s younger sister, who died while in her early twenties,” said Desmond, “she was a beautiful young girl, which is partly the reason why she was chosen to be the model for Saint Catharine. For many years afterwards the Dean could not bear to have her name mentioned.”

“How did she die?” I said, now forced to look at the stained glass in a very different light. It seemed to make all the difference that I now knew that I was looking at a real woman.

“Now there’s a sad tale – she contracted measles at her engagement party by all accounts,” Desmond said then gestured vaguely behind him, “she’s buried just behind the wall there.”

“What, actually in the wall?” I said, shocked that the cathedral might have, unbeknownst to me, housed the mortal remains of a long dead woman all this time.

Desmond laughed out loud.

“No, I mean in the Deanery Garden just beyond it. Dean Liddell is also buried there.”

I nodded, mightily relieved to hear this. The Deanery was the residence of the head of the college, a grand old Victorian era residence built into Tom Quad right next door to the cathedral. For all its grandeur, however, the Deanery itself was not as impressive as the gardens which it overlooked, rarely seen by students except in the height of summer, when they were the setting for outdoor performances of Shakespeare by the college amateur dramatic society. The gardens were a golden delight on those very rare Oxford summer days which were not afflicted by either

cloud or rain but I was aware that even at these times access to them was not unrestricted. If there was a small cemetery reserved for former Deans and their families then it was probably in one of the areas that was usually closed off to all but the denizens of the Deanery.

“I didn’t know that,” I admitted, “It’s odd that there isn’t something to commemorate them.”

“Oh there was,” said Desmond, “Just below the window there was a brass plaque to Edith’s memory. It was moved to the wall just to your left when this part of the cathedral was converted into the Military Chapel.”

Desmond seemed to have all the answers, which was all very well but I had not asked for a history lesson. Where was the ghost that I had been promised?

Desmond spoke then as if I had asked my question aloud.

“It was just next to the original position of that plaque that the ghost first appeared.”

I’m ashamed to say that I almost jumped when he said this. I quickly turned around, my eyes darting from side to side as if in the expectation that I would suddenly see a phantom, spectral and grey, emerging from one of the stone walls all around me. There was nothing there of course.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Just there,” said Desmond, pointing, “Years ago, long before I came up as a student here, a stain formed in the plaster – a stain that looked remarkably like the head of our former Dean.”

I stared at the spot that Desmond was pointing at, seeing nothing, and then glanced back at him.

“But there’s nothing there now.” I said pointedly.

“Oh, the wall was re-plastered before my time. But I’ve seen photographs of the stain. In them, the Dean appears to be looking at the plaque dedicated to his daughter. As I said, the image looked remarkably like him – his hairline was receding severely and low down on the back of his neck his hair was curling forwards. The stain even had Henry Liddell’s protruding nose and his famously austere expression.” He paused, then said “But that’s only half the story.”

I waited, determined not to be drawn into Desmond’s rather crude attempt to build the suspense. However, several moments passed in which he said nothing, simply staring at me with an air of expectation. Beginning to feel slightly uncomfortable, I was forced to break the silence.

“And what’s the other half of the story?”

“They say that the stain reappears every so often, when someone in the college is about to die.” Desmond said, not without a certain amount of relish.

I shivered involuntarily. Desmond seemed to see or sense my discomfiture and was encouraged by this enough to continue.

“You know, I sometimes think that I can still make something out,” he said, motioning with his hand, “Look there, in the corner, to the right of the military altar where the wall darkens and you can just about make out a shape. Do you see?”

I leaned closer and my eyes scanned the area which Desmond pointed at. My first instinct was to dismiss what he was saying out of hand for I saw nothing that resembled a head there. There was little light in the cathedral at any time, although there were always plenty of shadows. It was entirely possible that someone could interpret the interplay of the shadows as a face (or indeed just about anything else) but I remained unconvinced. I grew frustrated as my searching eyes looked in vain for some trace of the former Dean’s visage. Part of my annoyance stemmed from the fact

that, even had I found what I was looking for, I would still have felt somewhat short-changed – after all an image in the wall was hardly what I would have called a true haunting, which was what a cathedral as great and old as this one truly deserved.

After some time I eventually gave up, convinced that there was nothing there and that Desmond had purposely played me for a fool. I turned around, some choice words on my lips intended for the verger but saw to my exasperation that he was no longer there. I looked everywhere in the cathedral for him, convinced that he could not have gotten far, but found no trace of him. I even called Desmond's name a couple of times (albeit quietly – I did not think it appropriate to raise my voice in what was after all a place of worship) but he did not answer. At last I gave up and took my leave of the place, feeling disappointed and rather angry that for once the peace that I had sought there had eluded me.

I did not see Desmond again, although his name did come up on one further occasion that term.

A couple of weeks later I was invited by the Dean to take lunch with him in the Deanery. This was a ritual that every fresher in the college went through – usually in groups of a dozen or so. Most of us looked forward to it with mixed feelings, for while the food served was by common consent always delicious, the company was not always quite as inviting. The Dean himself was a pleasant enough chap, if somewhat difficult to engage in conversation due to his great intelligence, which rarely found its equal among mere students. It was the Dean's wife that was viewed with rather more apprehension, for she was every bit his intellectual equal (having been a Barrister in London before retiring here with her husband) and had a habit of almost interrogating freshers at every opportunity. That day she had, before our soup was even served, started one of her famous cross-examinations with the girl sitting next to me. Fearing that I would be next in line I excused myself from the table, coward that I was, and pretended to make my way to the cloak room.

I couldn't help but admire my surroundings as soon as I left the dining room. The interior of the Deanery was like that of a country mansion out of a Jane Austen novel, vast and open with corridors stretching in both directions as far as the eye could see. The ornate chandeliers that hung from the ceiling high overhead were all lit up, for although it was still early afternoon it was December and little light was admitted by the windows that overlooked the Deanery Garden. I stopped at one of these windows, reluctant to return to the lunch too quickly, and as I dawdled a sudden idea came to my mind.

I pressed my face against the glass and peered out, hardly knowing what I was searching for. Desmond's story had come back into my mind and I wondered whether I would be able to see the graves of the Liddells to which he had referred. Would they, I wondered, be marked by simple tombstones or perhaps by something more elaborate – a stone angel for Edith maybe, carved into the likeness of Saint Catharine like the stained glass had been painted?

“Bloody awful day isn't it?”

I was distracted from my search by the voice at my shoulder, which was that of none other than the Dean himself. He was standing behind me but, although he seemed to have addressed me, he was looking out of the window as well, through which we could both see that it had now started to rain. Close up I saw that he was extremely old, wrinkled all over and what little hair he had was white rather than grey. He wore a rather glum expression and did not seem inclined to speak further. I wondered whether he had excused himself from the dining table for the same reason as I had, to avoid his wife's questioning. Lawyers were probably very difficult people

to be married to, I thought, being argumentative by nature. I did not of course say this aloud but instead, for I saw no harm, I asked him about the graveyard.

“Graveyard? Oh yes, where the former Deans of the college and their families are buried. You can’t see it from here though, it’s just behind the walls of the cathedral at the end of the garden. How did you know about it?”

He seemed impressed by my knowledge and I was almost inclined to let him believe that it was just something I knew. Something discouraged me, however, although I was not sure whether this was a hangover from my recent experience with Desmond or the fact that the Dean did not seem the type to dissemble with.

“The verger told me.”

The Dean frowned when he heard this. “The verger? You don’t mean Desmond do you?”

I nodded.

“But when?”

“Just a couple of weeks ago.”

“That’s not possible,” he said, shaking his head heavily, “Desmond died a month ago.”

The story, delivered in the Dean’s sombre, authoritative tones, was sad but somehow inevitable. It had been no surprise to anyone that had known him that Desmond, so bright and able an academic, had grown increasingly frustrated with his job as verger. As his underused intellectual muscles had atrophied he had taken to drink, habitually disappearing for long periods without explanation and eventually turning up later on the cathedral’s doorstep reeking of ale. It was on one such occasion that the canon had finally lost patience with him and sacked him on the spot. No one at Christ Church saw or heard from Desmond again until a report appeared in the local newspaper, the Oxford Times, a few days later. It told of a body found in the woods at Shotover some miles north of the city – Desmond Flynn, dead of exposure.

I said nothing more of my experience in the cathedral to the Dean or to anyone else. I told the Dean that I must have been mistaken and that it was surely one of the other vergers that I had spoken to and not Desmond Flynn. He excused me from returning to the lunch when I said that I had a severe headache that had come over me suddenly. It was just as well, for had I returned to the dining table any food would have tasted like ashes in my mouth. All the way back to my rooms in college Desmond’s words kept going through my head, over and over again.

They say that the stain reappears every so often, when someone in the college is about to die.

DEAD MAN’S WALK

Meadow Keepers and Constables are instructed to prevent the entrance into the Meadow of all beggars, persons in ragged or very dirty clothes, persons of improper character or who are not decent in appearance and behaviour and to prevent indecent, rude or disorderly conduct of every description.

Reading the sign near the entrance to Christ Church Meadow, Aaron reflected that he and Ryan probably matched the description of at least a few of the persons for whom entrance was forbidden expressly. As students with no income of their own they could probably be classed as beggars (although in Aaron’s case it was only his own parents that he had ever sought favours or money from; the same could not

necessarily be said of Ryan). Aaron wondered whether the sweatshirt, tracksuit bottoms and trainers that he was wearing could be termed 'ragged' or 'very dirty' and decided that they just about passed muster, at least compared with Ryan's clothes – a combination of ripped jeans, threadbare shirt and a pair of sandals that had seen better days. At least they could not be accused of 'indecent, rude or disorderly conduct' – not yet anyway.

Ryan laughed when he looked across at Aaron and saw that he was reading the sign.

"You're not seriously worried about that are you?" he said, waving at the sign, "No one takes any notice of it. You're also not meant to be allowed in if you're carrying a package, flying a kite, throwing a ball, firing a gun, fishing, catching birds or cycling – all of which I've done in here!"

Aaron stared at him in amazement. Even after being friends for almost a year Ryan never ceased to surprise him.

"You've fired a gun in here?"

"Yes," said Ryan with an innocent grin, "although I admit that it was only an air gun."

"But what about the Meadow Keepers and Constables? Weren't you worried that they'd arrest you or something if they caught you?"

"They'd have to catch me first," said Ryan as he entered the Meadow through the gate on Merton Street, Aaron a step behind him, "and the Meadow's easy to get lost in."

That part, at least, was true. Christ Church Meadow was one of the last pastoral paradises of The Middle Ages remaining in England today, and, what was more, it was planted right in the middle of one of its busiest and most crowded cities: Oxford. The fields here had not been ploughed since medieval times and had never been sprayed with pesticide. As a result buttercups, moneywort, columbine, lady's mantle and straggly yellow rattle all grew here. It was a dream for insects, botanists and entomologists as well as a popular place for students needing to gather their thoughts and for anyone else who wanted simply to clear their head. The land between the college and the River Thames had been guarded jealously by Christ Church against all plans for its redevelopment and it was no wonder. After all, where else in the world could you find a herd of cows grazing on undeveloped grassland within two hundred yards of the bustle, noise and activity of the high street of a major city?

For Aaron and Ryan, the Meadow always offered a quick and easy escape from the trials of Oxford life. It was Ryan who had 'discovered' the Meadow first and it was unsurprising that he had been drawn here since, in a way, there was something of the same wildness in him. Aaron, a city boy raised in the grimy urban sprawl of Manchester, had been slower to succumb to the Meadow's lure. In the end he had done so because, as in so many other ways since he had come up to Oxford, he was merely following Ryan's lead.

Aaron sometimes resented Ryan for the influence that he had on him. Starting at university for him had not been easy, not least at a place like Oxford which, with its cloistered world of double-barrelled surnames, southern affluences and centuries-old academic tradition, could not have been more different from where he had grown up. While he found that, even at the end of his first year there, he was still adjusting to the place, Ryan had in contrast seemed at home almost from the day he had arrived. In this way Ryan had a quality that Aaron envied, which was his ability to fit in almost anywhere and talk naturally with just about anyone. Without Ryan around, Aaron

tended to stand at the edge of the crowd being ignored and making no effort to get himself noticed. With Ryan there, however, he inevitably found that they both quickly became the centre of attention. His friend was like a flame in that way, he lit up any room in which he was in and drew people to him as if they were moths, helpless before his charm.

Aaron particularly envied Ryan's luck with the fairer sex. While he, Aaron, was still waiting for his first college romance after two terms there, Ryan had already had a string of girlfriends, and that was in addition to the one that he had had back home in Surrey when he first came up. At least Ryan's attractiveness to girls (and to women too, as his shameless flirting with their young tutor Jacqueline during tutorials attested) was no mystery. While Aaron was awkward and unsure whenever he had a conversation with a girl in whom he had the slightest interest, Ryan could be natural and charming with any number of pretty girls at once. It was like a gift that he had, and its effectiveness was not limited to girls alone. Popularity, the most important currency at any university when it came to fitting in, was something that came to Ryan without trying.

One of the many ways in which Oxford had disappointed Aaron had been his discovery that being there often felt like being at a private boarding school. The collegiate system was partly to blame for this. Unlike most institutions of higher learning, at Oxford there was no single campus or building that constituted 'the university'. Instead, these functions were undertaken by the numerous colleges of Oxford, inward-looking places centred around enclosed quadrangles, which were often entered through gate towers and narrow doorways which seemed intended to put off all but the most determined visitor. Within the college walls was an enclosed world where meals were eaten in medieval dining halls and croquet was often played in hidden gardens. It was a goldfish bowl-like existence – even Christ Church, one of the largest colleges, housed less than five hundred undergraduates and the lack of anonymity was shocking. Everyone knew everyone else's business and nothing that happened – whether it involved a student, a Fellow or even a porter – remained secret for very long.

The lack of diversity in the student body was particularly disappointing. Aaron had not put much thought at all into his choice of college and he had written Christ Church down on his application form as much because he had thought the buildings looked quite nice when he walked its extensive grounds briefly on an open day as for any other reason. In truth, Aaron had not really entertained much hope of getting into Oxford at the time anyway. It was only afterwards that he had found out from other people that Christ Church was not only the largest and most prestigious college in Oxford but also the most public-school dominated – thirteen former British Prime Ministers had gone here, including William Gladstone, and the place had for centuries been regarded as the academic cradle of the British aristocracy.

That had not put Aaron off initially and indeed, when he came up to Christ Church for his interview, everyone he had met, existing students and his fellow interviewees alike, had seemed fairly normal. They had actually seemed like quite a nice bunch and he had enjoyed the nights he had spent with them in the college bar following stressful days being grilled by tutors and sitting complicated written tests. Unfortunately for him, somehow all of these nice, normal people seemed to have disappeared by the time his first year started, to be replaced by large numbers of people with ridiculously posh accents who seemed to have no time for a Northern lad from Manchester. Before coming up to Oxford he had, for a dare, rented a DVD called *Brideshead Revisited*. It was a plodding, outdated serial from the eighties

adapted from a novel set partly in an Oxford college with an unfathomable plot that seemed to revolve around a bizarre homosexual love triangle. One of the aspects that he had found amusing at the time he had watched it was a character who carried a teddy bear and spouted odd bits of verse while quaffing champagne. What had seemed like a hilarious exaggeration on screen, however, had acquired a sobering reality when, in his first term at Christ Church, he had met a student exactly like this fictional character (with the exception of the teddy bear).

The rest of the students that he had encountered in his year at Christ Church had fallen into a number of types. There were The Sloaneys, people who only seemed to want to hang around with those who had as much money as them and could prove it – usually by wearing designer labels and carrying the latest mobile telephones. Then there were The Spods, students who avoided all human contact and spent most of their time in the library, whether they had an essay to hand in or not. There were also people who belonged to neither group, lacking the academic ambition of the Spods and the snobbishness of the Sloaneys, they had no specific name but tended to spend most of their time in the Junior Common Room drinking coffee and watching satellite TV. Aaron thought of them as The Dropouts because he regarded himself as one of them and, at this rate, he would be dropping out of Oxford soon enough.

Aaron had been fighting an increasing state of depression since he had returned to Oxford for the start of the summer term – called Trinity term in the Oxonian lexicon. He could not have put his finger on precisely why he felt as he did – perhaps it was the fact that Trinity term brought with it the prospect of Prelims, the dreaded university examinations which cast a long shadow for most first years over an otherwise idyllic summer of punting, Pimms and lazy afternoons in Oxford's many parks and gardens. Or perhaps Aaron's feelings of apprehension stemmed from what would come after Prelims – the long summer vacation when he would have to return to the grimy streets of Manchester for four months, four months which his more fortunate friends would be spending in locations as diverse and engaging as the French Riviera, the island of Manhattan and the Amazon basin. His sombre mood at the thought of leaving Oxford was unreasonable in view of his difficulties in adjusting to the city and its eccentricities but that seemed to be the way with Oxford – however hard you found it to live there, the thought of living without it was for most people equally unbearable.

When Ryan had knocked on his door that morning Aaron had therefore been only too glad of an interruption both from his studies and his dismal musings and had taken his friend up on the suggestion of a walk in the Meadow almost instantly. It was by no means the first time that Ryan had asked him along on one of his little excursions, although it was considerably rarer for Aaron to take him up on the offer. One of Ryan's many natural affinities seemed to be for the outdoors – he seemed to constantly be going on trips to places like the Botanic Gardens, Port Meadow, the University Parks or the Deer Park in the grounds of Magdalen College – in short, just about any available green space in or around the city of Oxford. He always went at odd times too – sometimes at the crack of dawn before even the rowers had woken for their morning practice, sometimes at dusk when the University warned its students to avoid places like Port Meadow – a favourite haunt of vagrants and junkies – and sometimes in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday, when most other students were at lectures, tutorials or squirreled away in one of the city's numerous libraries. On the rare occasions when Aaron accompanied Ryan he never felt himself able to relax completely since he was always conscious of the passage of time, time he guiltily felt should be spent at his books rather than perambulating pointlessly with his

friend, no matter how picturesque were the surroundings in which they found themselves. Despite the fact that Ryan, like Aaron, was also reading Law, one of the most gruelling disciplines in the Oxford syllabus, and should in theory have felt just as much academic pressure as him, somehow he never seemed to show it on these occasions, appearing lost in the moment and totally at one with the landscape.

Thinking of time made Aaron glance at his watch just then and, as he saw that it was rapidly approaching the middle of the morning, he once again began to feel the pressure to return to his books that he invariably started to feel on one of Ryan's trips. It was a pressure that, unsurprisingly, Ryan seemed not to feel, if his easy gait and total obliviousness to any anxiety that Aaron might have been feeling was anything to go by.

"Look," Aaron said, "I'm sorry but I really must be heading back."

"Just a minute," said Ryan, "we're almost there."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

They were now walking along the path that bisected Christ Church's well-manicured Master's Garden on one side, its many delights hidden behind an ancient stone wall, and Merton Fields, the sports ground belonging to the college of the same name, on the other. It was still and peaceful, and although Aaron was in no mood just then to appreciate the tranquillity of their surroundings, it appeared to him from Ryan's general air of nonchalance that his friend was. Aaron grew increasingly annoyed by the fact that Ryan still appeared to be in no hurry despite the urgency he had tried to express earlier.

Ryan eventually stopped when they reached the end of the path, beyond which lay Merton Grove, yet another of Oxford's exquisitely trimmed gardens, which formed a green corridor between the chapel of Merton College on the right and the wall of Corpus Christi College on the left. Blocking their way was a complicated iron gate made up of several railings that doubled back on themselves, a contrivance which seemed designed to keep cyclists out. Aaron had heard that this gate was called the kissing gate, although whether that was a general name that was given to gates of this type or a more specific name that had been given to this particular gate, perhaps because it had connotations for courting couples in Oxford, he was not sure. He gave Ryan a suspicious sidelong look then – if his friend had bought him here solely to boast about one of his recent conquests then he had no intention of hanging around for a moment longer.

"Why have we stopped here?" Aaron said.

"This is Dead Man's Walk." Ryan said, pointing at the path that led away from the kissing gate, which was at a right angle to the one which they had just walked up.

Aaron shivered as Ryan said these words, and not only because the term 'Dead Man's Walk' conjured up in his head images that he would rather not have thought about. There had been an un-seasonal mist earlier that morning, which had appeared to clear somewhat for a time, but which now seemed to have returned inexplicably with the approach of midday. Dead Man's Walk was a long pathway and as it stretched away into the distance Ryan was troubled that he could not seem to discern the end of it, shrouded as it was by the mist.

"I've never heard that name used for the path before," said Aaron, "is it called that because something horrible happened here?"

Aaron knew that Oxford was a place that was full of history. The university had stood here for eight hundred years but there had been a town here for many

centuries before that and there was much that had been forgotten in that time. He had heard once that the surface of Carfax square in the heart of the city centre had been built upon eighteen times and, whether this story was true or merely apocryphal, it seemed to be an appropriate analogy for Oxford itself – a place where layers of history had built upon each other until the earliest remained hidden to all but the most determined investigator. For some reason Ryan seemed to be full of unusual little tidbits like this about Oxford's secret history, although how or why he came across his knowledge was a mystery to Aaron – he himself found it difficult enough to keep up with all of the reading that he had to do for his course without spending what little free time he had swotting up on general esoterica like this.

“Not really, it was simply the route of the funeral cortege from Saint Aldate's Street to the Jewish cemetery outside the city,” said Ryan, sounding like a guidebook, “The Jewish quarter was near the current location of the city museum but their cemetery was in the grounds of what is now the university's botanic garden. Hence they carried their coffins laden with the dead along the pathway – it actually follows the city wall you know.”

Aaron was not sure what to make of this information, other than being impressed that Ryan appeared to know so much about the rather obscure subject of the history of Oxford's Jews. While he had always been aware that his friend was Jewish it had never seemed to be a particularly prominent aspect of Ryan's personality – it was not as if he wore a skullcap or refused to touch machines on the Sabbath. But that was hardly a surprise – Christ Church was full of students of all races, colours and creeds, all mixing as if their differences, which were rarely even remarked upon let alone made an issue of, did not exist.

“Oh right,” Aaron said, searching for something to say. Eventually all he could think of was: “I didn't realise that Oxford had a large Jewish population.”

“Oh yes,” said Ryan, his voice now somewhat rueful, “In the early twelfth century, around two hundred Jewish families lived between Carfax square and Folly Bridge – their synagogue was more or less on the spot where Tom Tower now stands in fact. The university was never very inclusive towards them though – they weren't allowed to become students at Oxford, from 1218 onwards they were forced to wear yellow badges and then in 1290 they were driven out altogether by Edward I's troops.”

This time Aaron could think of nothing to say that would not cheapen or lessen what Ryan had told him. Silence stretched between the two friends for a time while Ryan stared along Dead Man's Walk, as if trying to see through the concealing haze to the end of it. All Aaron's attention was focused on the mist itself, which seemed to be getting ever thicker, making the very air grow chillier as it did so. Eventually both the path which they had come up to get to the kissing gate and Dead Man's Walk itself were partially obscured.

It was at that point that Aaron first saw the shape.

There seemed to be a person standing just beyond the gate, in the odd shaped little cutting beside the old city wall. Aaron thought that it was a man, standing there with his back to the wall, but he could not be quite sure. It was dark there in that corner and, even without the enshrouding mist, he would have had difficulty telling whether the shape was in fact a person or just a tree or large bush. It seemed unusual for anyone to be just standing there at any rate, in an awkward little spot that led nowhere. Aaron had just decided to move closer when he was distracted by Ryan's voice.

“What is it, what are you looking at?” he said.

“Nothing – well actually I just thought I saw someone over there.” Aaron said.
“Where?” said Ryan, his voice suddenly tight.

Aaron was about to point but just then he noticed that the mist had lifted somewhat and that, in fact, there seemed to be no one standing beside the wall after all. He turned around to tell Ryan that he had been mistaken but was surprised by the look on his friend’s face. He had gone pale and the tension that had been in his voice was now reflected by the taut set of his features. Inexplicably, Ryan looked scared.

“What’s wrong?” Aaron said.

Ryan ignored the question, instead asking one of his own.

“The man, what did he look like?”

Aaron was puzzled – how had Ryan known that it was a man that he had thought he had seen? He had not said as much.

“There was no man,” he said, trying to inject as much calm as possible into his voice, “It was just my imagination. Probably just a trick of the light – this wretched mist must have confused my senses or something.”

“You know, if you had seen something, you wouldn’t be the only one,” said Ryan, his voice adopting a low and trancelike quality, “There have been reports of people seeing things in this part of the city for years.”

“Things,” Aaron repeated dumbly, “What sorts of things?”

“Well, this place has seen a lot of history. During the Civil War, when Oxford became the Royalist capital of Charles I, the city walls and castle were reinforced and the colleges were transformed into armouries and lodgings for his cavaliers. They say that during this time the punishment for thieves, traitors and deserters from the Royalist army was to be shot dead against the walls of Merton College.”

Ryan paused, pointing dramatically at the walls in question to emphasise his point, before he continued.

“Between the firing squads and the Jewish funeral processions, this is an area that’s seen more than its fair share of dead bodies. If anywhere in Oxford were to be haunted it would be here – the restless spirits of literally hundreds of dead men and women probably still feel drawn to this place.”

Aaron gave Ryan a long hard look, trying to work out whether or not his friend was just having him on. He waited for the familiar cheeky grin to break out on Ryan’s face together with a swift admission that this was all a big joke, but it did not come. For once Ryan seemed serious. All sorts of questions went through Aaron’s mind at that point: Why had Ryan brought him here? Was it because he had seen something on Dead Man’s Walk himself? Was he somehow testing Aaron by bringing him here or was this all some sort of elaborate hoax?

Not for the first time Aaron wondered how well he really knew Ryan. He would have said that Ryan was a good friend – perhaps his best friend at Oxford – and they had spent a lot of time together in the past year, in tutorials, in the library, at the college bar and on these small trips that they took from time to time. Aaron thought about all of the conversations that they had had during this time and realised that his friend had never really spoken about his family or his life before university. This had never before struck him as particularly unusual – after all, there was so much going on in their lives at the moment, with their studies and everything else that being at Oxford entailed, that there was little time for navel-gazing. He would therefore have no idea whether Ryan had had a difficult or troubled childhood that was now leading him to lie or – worse – to him seeing things that were not there.

The second theory was one that Aaron felt that he could simply discount out of hand. Ryan had never before exhibited any symptoms of madness and, after all, he

himself had seen something, or at least imagined it. That left the hoax theory but Aaron found it impossible to give this any credit either. Quite apart from the fact that it was surely beyond the abilities of any student, even Ryan, to come up with this mist and seemingly create a shadow, Aaron could not believe that his friend would go to all of this trouble just to play a practical joke on him. Ryan never did anything without a good reason, and he seemed, from his in-depth knowledge on the subject, to be taking Dead Man's Walk and its many secrets extremely seriously. Aaron decided that he had to know why.

"What is it about this place that you're so interested in?" he said, "Have you seen something too?"

Ryan did not answer, seeming almost disappointed in Aaron for the questions that he was asking. Instead, he turned away from the path and looked back towards Christ Church. The mist was now clearing and the distant dome of Tom Tower was briefly illuminated by the sun.

"We'd better get back – our next lecture is about to start." Ryan said, and began to walk back the way they had come.

Unable to think of anything further to say, Aaron followed him.

The term ended a couple of weeks later in a flurry of examinations and summer balls. As they parted at the gates of Tom Tower Ryan promised to arrange to visit Aaron at some point over the long vacation but in the end he never got in touch. Aaron was disappointed by this, but reassured himself with the fact that he would no doubt see his friend again at the start of their second year at the beginning of October. But Ryan did not come back that October; in fact Aaron was never to see him again.

During the week leading up to their first tutorial of the term, which was the first time when all of the Law students in Aaron's year at Christ Church would be gathered together again, Aaron looked for Ryan in vain. It was only at the tutorial that the Senior Law Tutor, Doctor Arkwright, revealed that Ryan had been seriously ill over the summer and his parents had left the country with him to secure the best possible medical care for their son. There were no plans for Ryan to return to the college for the foreseeable future. Aaron, struck dumb by this information, had been unable to say anything but one of the other students had asked what had happened to Ryan. Doctor Arkwright had simply replied that he knew nothing more and then got on with the tutorial. At formal hall that evening someone mentioned that there was a rumour that Ryan's illness was in fact mental and that he had been sectioned in a psychiatric ward because 'he was seeing things'. When he heard this Aaron remembered that day on Dead Man's Walk and froze, once again unable to say anything.

With his best friend gone, Aaron feared that he would be miserable and alone for the duration of his time at Christ Church. However, if anything the opposite happened, and Aaron soon made other friends, eventually even finding himself a girlfriend, a red-headed Historian called Samantha. Aaron often wondered whether, in that sense at least, Ryan's absence had proven to be a boon, forcing him to step out of his friend's long shadow and establish his own niche in the college at last. He never thought of Ryan's departure as a good thing, however, and still found at certain times that he missed his old friend desperately. Mingled with this sense of loss was a feeling of guilt when Aaron wondered what would have happened if he had admitted to Ryan that he had also seen something in the shadows of Merton Grove that day.

When the guilt threatened to overcome him he would wander around the city, following the old routes that he and Ryan had once taken through Oxford's green spaces. Sometimes Samantha or one of his other friends would join him. They would

wander through all of Ryan's old haunts, including the University Parks, the Botanic Gardens and Magdalen Deer Park but they never went near Dead Man's Walk, which was a place that Aaron now avoided. He was afraid of what he might see if he went there again and he never spoke of what he had seen that day with Ryan to anyone, even Samantha. It was better to convince himself that it could not have been real than to consider the alternative – hallucination, hysteria or madness – and to be branded as such by the outside world. Aaron would not make the same mistake as the young man who had once been his friend.

NIGHT LINE

It all started on a wet Tuesday night in Oxford.

We were all students back then, scruffy, angst-ridden and very occasionally suicidal when it came to dealing with the twists and turns of university and of life. Of course, even now I couldn't tell you exactly what it was that I was meant to be learning at Oxford Brookes (or just plain Brookes as we at the city of dreaming spires' less-well-known educational institution liked to call it). I think I started out on a Philosophy degree, but when that got boring I extended it to include Politics, and later on incorporated a language (Italian I think, although it could have been Spanish - I forget now). I suppose it kept me busy but ultimately I wasn't really into what I was doing, and neither were Stefano, Saul or Forest. I suppose those three were what you would call my inner circle. We had all fallen in with each other more or less from the start, as much because no-one else wanted us to be part of their clique as because of any attraction we had for each other.

Stefano was the one I got to know first. I couldn't really help that, seeing as we shared rooms in our first year. It's difficult to see how we could ever have become friends otherwise, even though we're practically blood now.

You see, Stefano was *cool*.

He was half Italian, which showed through in his tanned good looks, but he spoke with one of those broad Geordie accents that made it almost impossible to understand him when he was either drunk or stoned, which to be honest were two of the three states in which he was most likely to be found (the other one being sound asleep). I suppose that's where I came in, at least initially. Like me, Stefano was reading Philosophy, and my notes came in handy whenever he had to miss a lecture - which was basically any time before midday. He wasn't really a morning person and I think that must have rubbed off because, by the end of that first year, I wasn't either.

It was because of Stefano that I got to know Forest, which was odd because, as far as I was concerned, she had a lot more in common with me than with him almost from the start. I first bumped into her when I got back to our room in the early hours following a long night at the library (I didn't have much of a social life in my first year). She was in her underwear at the time, and of course, when I saw her in that state I made the mistake of assuming that she was just another notch on Stefano's bedpost. There turned out to be a lot more than that to Forest McGinty of course. For a start, not only did she introduce herself to me then and there, but also, when we bumped into each other a couple of days later, she didn't blank me. That was a surprise because usually Stefano's conquests ignored me as a matter of principle after the event. I tended to be a reminder of a lapse in judgement that they'd rather have put behind them.

Forest was different, and I could tell that from the start. She was one of those New Agey types, and by that I don't mean that she danced around a bonfire naked on Midsummer Night, or that she was a witch or wicca or whatever those weirdoes call themselves nowadays. She just had some strongly held beliefs that involved respecting the earth and everyone that we shared it with, including the animals, the rocks and the trees. She explained it better than I ever could, but what I understood was that, to Forest, there was a power in everything, an energy that ran right through the earth to encapsulate and invigorate all living things. It wasn't like she went around telling everyone about her beliefs though. What I found out was learned on those occasions when she came round and sat with me waiting for Stefano to keep a date that he had arranged with her and more often than not had forgotten all about. I felt like a heel and hated Stefano for it. I knew there was no real malice in it - it was just the way he related to girls. Being committed to anyone scared the life out of him. It was a sign of just how special Forest was that they lasted a whole two months, which was two months longer than any other relationship that he had in all the time I knew him.

When they broke up, inevitably, it was fairly amicable and I was glad. It meant that we could go on being friends without her feeling awkward by being reminded of a painful break up. Being honest, I was probably inwardly cheering when they did split up. You see by that time, I was completely in love with Forest. Any man of my age, of any age, would have been, if they'd met her back then. She was certainly everything that I could ever have wanted in a girl: blonde, petite, caring, sensitive, and warm but *attainable* despite all those things. At least that's what I thought until she made it clear, in the nicest way possible, that nothing was never going to happen between us. She said she was interested in staying friends though, and when Forest said that, unlike ninety-nine percent of girls, I knew she meant it. So we stayed friends, all three of us, Forest, Stefano and I. Right up until that wet Tuesday night in Oxford when everything started to change.

It was through Forest that we first got involved with Saul and Night Line. That night, it must have been around ten o'clock; Stefano and I were lounging about in our shared bedroom. It was rare for both of us to be around at the same time. I had decided to cut short my third consecutive late-night stint at the library that week when Stefano had dropped by to plead for my services as a drinking companion. As usual my protests were ignored and eventually the librarian, who found Stefano's presence unhelpful to the atmosphere of quiet study that she was trying to cultivate, evicted us both. (*Bitch* Stefano had said, and for once I was inclined to agree with him.)

It was only when we were actually outside the library that I found out that Stefano had already been out drinking for most of the afternoon and early evening. That wasn't hard to figure out. The trail of vomit that he left on the street leading back to our halls of residence was something of a give-away. Half an hour later we ended up back in our bedroom. By that stage I was considering returning to the library while Stefano was doing his best to let his body recover from the abuse that he had put it through earlier that day. It was lucky for both of us that Forest chose that moment to drop by.

She was looking great because she had just come back from a yoga session, which had left her looking flushed and feeling relaxed. She took one look at the pair of us, lying around like a pair of drowned rats, and suggested that we go with her to meet a friend of hers. It took about five seconds for Stefano and I to decide to follow her out of the door. Hanging out with an attractive young woman, even if she was just

a strictly platonic friend, certainly sounded like a better idea than keeping each other's company right then.

It was only after we left the main university campus and the halls of residence well behind us that I started to have misgivings about the whole thing. I wasn't being a wimp (not too much of one anyway) but, contrary to the public perception of the city as a place where the peaceful pursuit of knowledge was all that went on, parts of Oxford could be really rough, especially if you were a student. And we were moving into townie territory. That was what really worried me. The locals were fine as long as we had nothing to do with them; once you crossed over the invisible line that separated 'the gown' from 'the town' things tended to turn nasty quickly. My mood of apprehension wasn't helped by the fact that it was such a miserable night. The skies, which had been clear for most of the day, had, typically, chosen right then to open up. Not that Forest cared. She said that she loved the rain for what she called its purifying qualities - another New Agey thing I guessed. Stefano didn't particularly seem to mind either, but that may just have been down to him being Stefano, always along for the ride.

We were halfway up the Woodstock Road before either of us thought of asking Forest where we were going. She was in front, I was a few paces behind, wondering why I couldn't seem to catch up with her despite the fact that I was taking longer strides since I was taller, and Stefano was several yards back, trying to get something off the back of his trainer. I looked back at him, shook my head and realised that if anyone was going to be doing the asking it would have to be me. So I picked up the pace, caught up to Forest and asked her where on earth we were going.

I was sorry for asking the question almost as soon as I opened my mouth. Forest looked irritated, although I couldn't tell whether that was because I had woken her out of her quiet communication with the raindrops or because I had asked her to explain something that was supposed to be her little surprise for Stefano and I. Anyway, all she said was that she was taking us to see Saul and that was really all the explanation that I needed. You see, at that time Saul was the one who ran Night Line.

Most universities have some sort of student-run welfare system. I think the idea behind it is that young people prefer to go to their peers to talk about their problems, rather than, you know, the professionals. Now I can't say for certain, as these things tended to be vague by their very nature (anonymity and all that), but it seemed to me that most of the problems that students at Brookes had were pretty insignificant. What I mean is that financial worries or exam stress usually beset them rather than serious life or death issues. Of course, every now and then you hear about the really heavy stuff like suicides, muggings and even rape, but I think that kind of thing is well beyond the scope of a university welfare group. That's when you needed the professionals and what distinguished Night Line from other organisations of its kind was the fact that it was semi-professional. It existed to serve the university's welfare needs and most of the volunteers were students, much like anywhere else. The difference was that fully trained, qualified counsellors ran it - like Saul.

Saul wasn't like the rest of us. He was several years older for a start because he had left the university partway through his degree, worked in social services for a few years, and then returned to finish his course. There were all sorts of stories about why he had left - apparently he had some kind of traumatic experience but the gossips tended to disagree over what exactly that was - but it was never really clear why he returned. Even Forest, who had been a Night Line volunteer from the start and probably knew Saul as well as anyone on campus, didn't know for sure. She always told me that he said it was because he wanted to set up a proper system of welfare for

Brookes, in place of the ad-hoc arrangements that had been in place previously, so that he could feel that he was really giving something back to society. I gave him credit because a lot of things did improve once he appeared on the scene, but I couldn't help thinking that, if he really did want to 'give something back', he could have done more by remaining a social worker and helping the truly needy rather than a bunch of over-privileged co-eds. Unsurprisingly, this opinion didn't go over too well with Forest.

There were many reasons why I had ambivalent feelings towards Saul Chapman, and Night Line in general. I was sure that groups like that had their uses but I'd never completely trusted the motives of people who said that they wanted to hear about my problems. No doubt there were some genuine philanthropists in Night Line, but I took the view that the busybodies, nosey parkers and people who simply couldn't mind their own business outnumbered them. Was I too cynical? Perhaps, but as proof I would have to cite the number of supposedly anonymous conversations that ended up being the subject of general gossip on campus within a week of the original phone call. I rest my case.

As we arrived at the door of 16 Wellington Square (a.k.a. Night Line Headquarters) I could tell by the look on Stefano's face that he was having the same misgivings as I was. The difference was that he was not quite as subtle in expressing them.

"No way; no bloody way! I thought we were going to an all-night bar not the bloody Samaritans' Club. And if you think I'm hanging around with that poof Saul all night you can forget it. I'm out of here!"

As I said, subtlety was never his strong point, although I would have recommended it when trying to say no to Forest. She was a difficult girl to turn down when she had her mind set on something. This was a perfect example of why. Instead of replying straight away, Forest turned around and fixed Stefano and I with a baleful stare, which she maintained just long enough for both of us to start feeling very uncomfortable. Then:

"Well, why am I not surprised? Disappointed, of course, saddened, most definitely, but never surprised. The pair of you were quite happy to sit around all night getting progressively plastered but the moment that somebody suggests that for once you actually do something worthwhile with your time, why, you run a mile! And as for you..."

At this point she turned her attention fully upon Stefano. I was too glad at the respite to bother complaining that I hadn't actually been the one who had spoken in the first place so why her previous comments had been aimed at me as well was beyond me.

"...If I *ever* hear you use that word in such a disparaging tone again I will personally make sure that the whole university knows that you keep Ricky Martin magazines in your underwear drawer."

I looked across at Stefano, who was spluttering in indignation something about "It was just that one time" and "When I was having my hair done". I was starting to see him in a very different light.

Needless to say there were no more protests from either of us and that's how we came to be at Night Line's offices sometime between one and two o'clock in the morning on a wet Tuesday night in Oxford.

It was the graveyard shift even for a night helpline so it was no surprise to find that the only person on duty was Saul himself. That was one of the things that disturbed me about the man - you never saw him on campus because he just never

seemed to be awake during daylight hours. Not that he ever looked like he wasn't getting enough sleep. The one thing that you had to give Saul Chapman, like him or not, was that he was always immaculately groomed. He was a serious looking sort of person and this was reflected in the clothes he typically wore - big horn-rimmed spectacles, a v-neck jumper and dark corduroy trousers. I know a description like that makes him sound like a complete nerd, but believe it or not he had more than his fair share of admirers from the opposite sex. Don't ask me why - maybe girls went for the quiet, intense type in those days (although that never worked for me). The funny thing is that he was almost always single. Forest said that was because he just had different priorities from the rest of us. Of course, Stefano drew a rather different conclusion, and I had to admit that I had my suspicions about Saul's sexuality as well, although I'd never be foolish enough to be quite so open about expressing them around Forest.

Saul was on the phone when we came into the room and barely acknowledged our presence except for a faint nod to Forest. I had no idea what the conversation was all about - it sounded like the person on the other end was whining about how much coursework they were getting at the moment - but it seemed pretty dull. Stefano announced that he was 'going for a slash' and I pulled up a seat across from Saul, running through all of the other things I could have been doing just then in my head. Like sleeping, which suddenly seemed like a very good idea.

When Saul eventually got off the phone he didn't look too pleased.

"What are they doing here Forest? You know that it's volunteers only in here during working hours. I don't think the people we help would particularly appreciate their business being spread all over town."

I looked indignantly back at him - just what the hell was he implying? Like that wasn't happening anyway!

Forest managed to calm him down a bit by saying that we were simply there as observers because - and I hope she was joking when she said this - we were thinking of joining Night Line. I don't think Saul really believed her anyway because I could see further protests forming on his lips when, luckily for all of us, the phone rang. Saul motioned for silence before going to answer it, a gesture directed at me which, annoyingly, Forest repeated.

"Hello you've come through to Night Line. This is Matthew speaking. How can I help?"

I looked at Forest with eyebrows raised - Matthew? She shook her head but that was okay because I could sort of understand. It stood to reason that the volunteers used aliases since the last thing you wanted if you called up with a problem was to find yourself sitting beside the person you had just bared your soul to the previous night in the next morning's lecture. Besides, I got the feeling that it might be a measure to protect the volunteers as well - if you were giving up your spare time you definitely did not need some weirdo who knew your name calling up, getting obsessed with you and then stalking you. I think 'Matthew' sounded rather less intimidating than Saul anyway.

"Uh... hi Matthew. I'm Bruce. I think I have a problem."

Saul had turned the phone onto speaker mode for our benefit. For some reason the voice on the other end struck me as sounding a little odd. It might have been because it was muffled but there was something else too, something that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Saul, to his credit, took it in his stride.

"Go on Bruce, I'm listening."

“I feel all confused. It started ever since I came to university. I’ve never had a girlfriend you see and I thought it would be easy now that I’m away from home, but I’m still on my own.”

“What you’re describing is very common Bruce,” Saul’s voice was soothing and a bit drippy to be honest, “You’ll find someone, it’s just a matter of time before the right person for you comes along. These things shouldn’t be forced. Take your time and...”

Bruce cut in before he could finish.

“It’s not that. I mean I’ve had plenty of offers - I could have hooked up with any number of girls by now.”

For the first time Saul looked confused.

“Then what’s the problem Bruce?”

There was a long pause on the other end before he continued.

“I’m not interested in girls. I think I prefer men.”

I looked at Forest incredulously: was this ‘Bruce’ for real? She shrugged her shoulders as if this kind of thing were commonplace on a Night Line shift. Saul certainly appeared unfazed and carried on as if he were back on more solid ground.

“Bruce, the important thing to understand is that you’re perfectly normal. There’s nothing wrong with what you’re feeling. In fact I think it would be a good idea for you to explore it. Have you talked to anyone else about any of this?”

“No, but it’s not really like I’m homosexual or anything. You see, I’m just into this one bloke who I know.”

“Oh really? Have you tried approaching him?”

“No way, I barely know him. He’s older than me for a start and, like, really sophisticated. I’m definitely sure he’s gay though.”

At that point I finally worked out what it was about the voice that was bugging me - it sounded familiar. I suddenly realised what was going on and rolled my eyes. This couldn’t be happening.

“Well that’s good, what else do you know about him?”

Poor Saul. He was still taking this seriously.

“Well he’s definitely the intellectual type, but he’s got a really cute body. And his voice, oh god, it’s so husky and sexy - sort of like yours is in fact.”

At this point the penny must have dropped because Saul slammed down the phone and went over to the door. When he opened it, to nobody’s great surprise, Stefano was standing there with his mobile clasped guiltily in one hand. I swear that Saul would have gone for him right then and there if Forest and I hadn’t been there to separate them. We might still have struggled to restrain him if it hadn’t been for the fact that fortunately, once again, the phone rang.

This time Forest answered it.

“Hello you’ve come through to Night Line. This is Fo...uh, I mean Fiona speaking. How can I help?”

Forest recovered quickly and it was just as well. The voice on the other end of the line this time sounded like it was deadly serious. I came to realise afterwards that this term was particularly appropriate.

“Hello Fiona.”

That was it. We all waited several moments for more, by which time even Saul and Stefano had their full attention on the telephone conversation that was now taking place, but an expectant silence remained. It was as if the caller was waiting for Forest to break it.

“Who am I speaking to?”

“You can call me Malcolm. To whom am I speaking?”

“What?” said Forest, and I wasn’t surprised - it seemed like an odd question.

“I can tell that you’ve put me on speaker, so tell me - who else am I speaking to Fiona?”

We all looked at each other. I could tell that I wasn’t the only one who was starting to feel uncomfortable. The person on the other end did not sound like a student. He also did not sound particularly like he was in trouble, although he did seem like the kind of person who might cause trouble for us if we did anything but tell him the truth. Which was why I winced when Forest replied.

“There’s just me and my supervisor here. He’s called Matthew and he’s just listening in to make sure that I’m doing this right.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

He said it in such a quiet, conversational voice, but his words were filled with an unspoken menace.

“There are two other people there with you. Tell me who they are.”

On the previous occasions on which Malcolm had addressed her, his words to Forest had been compelling but this time there was a snap in his voice that made his question seem more like a barely concealed command. That’s why I answered for her.

“Hi Malcolm, my name’s Tim - Tim Morton.”

I have no idea why I gave him my real name, but Stefano followed suit. Malcolm seemed to appreciate it though because the snap left his voice and he went back to his earlier, more conversational style.

“Good, so now that we have all been introduced I feel much better about sharing my problems with you.”

“What are your problems Malcolm? What’s bothering you?”

I admired Forest’s attempt to regain some form of control over the conversation. It was somewhat spoiled by the fact that Malcolm’s reply was laughter, cruel, ugly laughter, which chilled us all to the bone.

“My problem? Oh Fiona, my problem is that I’m dead.”

He said it as if it were a joke but none of us even thought about smiling. I couldn’t believe that I had been complaining about that night being boring. Give me boring over creepy any day of the week. Not that I thought that Malcolm really was dead of course - give me some credit. I was far more concerned by the likelihood that we had a crazy on the line: a crazy who knew my real name. I would have put down the phone right then, but Forest at least tried to make a go of it.

“I can see how that, um, might present a problem Malcolm. Do you want to talk about it?”

“You don’t believe me of course. Why should you? I can see that I will have to make believers out of you.”

Then the lights went out. Not just the light in the office - all the lights everywhere. Out in the street, where a few seconds earlier lamplight had been clearly visible, suddenly there was total darkness. I honestly couldn’t have seen my hand in front of my face right then, much less the faces of the people in the room with me. I didn’t need to see them to know what the expressions on their faces would be though - shock, fear, and the beginnings of desperation - because I knew that the same feelings were reflected on my face. It didn’t just go dark either. It also went cold: a deep, numbing chill that reached deep down inside me, right to the bone. It shouldn’t have been that cold. Yes, it was winter but we were indoors with the central heating on for Christ’s sake, and even if the heating had failed on us it shouldn’t have been possible for the cold to descend so quickly, so completely.

“Jesus Christ, Stefano, if this is another one of your pranks...” said Saul, his voice quavering.

Stefano didn't need to reply to convince Saul that this situation was for real. Just then the lights came back on, including the streetlights outside. We all looked around, as much to make sure that everybody was still there and we weren't going through this nightmare alone as for anything else. Poor Forest still had the phone to her ear.

“Very well, now that I have your full attention I'll tell you what's on my mind, Forest.”

Forest flinched at the use of her real name. From the look on her face I could tell that she was wondering the same thing as me - how the hell did Malcolm know that Fiona had been an alias? Malcolm continued as if he had read our minds (by that stage I wouldn't have been surprised to find out that he could do that too).

“Oh, I hope that you and your friend Saul don't mind my using your real names? I really do feel as if we are past that.”

“How...?” said Forest in a weak voice.

“Don't concern yourself with that,” said Malcolm, his voice acquiring a businesslike tone, “Now, as I said before, I am dead. That isn't really the problem that you might think it is, in fact it's been quite useful for a while, but I'm afraid that in the circumstances it just won't do to remain disembodied anymore. That is why I need one of you.”

I really didn't like where all of this was going. Look, I know that it all sounds completely off the wall, us being contacted by a spirit called Malcolm and everything. Yes, it could have been a prankster - the thing with the lights, the heating going off suddenly, him knowing our identities - everything could have had a rational explanation. But at half past two in the morning, tired and cold and more or less cut off from the rest of the world as we were, it was hard for any of us to convince ourselves that Malcolm's was anything other than a voice from beyond the grave.

It wasn't like I had ever been in a situation even remotely like this before in my life. This Malcolm guy, dead or not, was clearly disturbed. He believed what he was saying and fully expected our co-operation. In what though? I really didn't want to think that far ahead because I just didn't see how we could refuse without him taking it very badly indeed. I wondered whether Forest, or Saul especially, with all his experience of Night Line and social services, might have a better idea of how to deal with our midnight caller. The scared looks on both their faces didn't inspire a huge amount of confidence.

“First though, there are a few things that I would like you to get for me.”

Malcolm instructed Forest to get a pen and paper and then proceeded to list a bizarre set of items ranging from a pig's liver to an athame (whatever the hell one of those was). It sounded like the Addams Family's weekly grocery list. I wondered whether he needed to carry out some sort of ritual and that's why he needed us - to get him the raw materials. But a ritual to do what?

Forest saved me from having to ask.

“Malcolm, this is quite a list. What do you need all of this for?”

The question was greeted by an unnerving peal of laughter.

“Why to help me to cross over of course. I've just described all that you will need to perform an advanced Re-corporealisation rite. My goodness, what do they teach you young people at university these days?”

Forest took it surprisingly well, considering. Of course, if you assumed that we were in fact communicating with a dead guy then it stood to reason he might want to 'cross over' as he put it.

"Can you give us a moment, Malcolm, I just need to talk to the others about getting hold of this stuff."

"Take all the time in the world, my dear, you know where I am."

Forest put the receiver down gingerly, as if she were handling a live snake. Then she motioned to the rest of us to huddle close and when she spoke it was in a low voice. I could sort of understand what she was doing but I didn't think that there was any point in huddling and whispering at that stage. I was beginning to realise that Malcolm didn't have to be at the end of a telephone to hear what we were saying.

"So," she began, "anyone have any ideas?"

"To do what?" I replied, "exorcise Malcolm?"

Forest gave me a withering look.

"Look if you don't have anything useful to say..."

"Does anyone know what he means by 'cross over'?" Stefano broke in. He was never the sharpest pencil in the box.

"I think we all know what he means. The real question is whether we think he's for real," said Saul, before adding, "and if he is for real should we even think about helping him?"

We all looked at each other. I didn't know what the rest of them were thinking but just then I was wondering how the hell we had ended up in this mess. More importantly, I was trying to think of a way out of this situation and, worryingly, no bright ideas were coming to mind. What was really bothering me was the question of whether this was for real or not. I mean, okay, so Malcolm had pulled some pretty neat tricks so far - knowing our real names, the thing with the lights and the heating - but that didn't mean we had to buy into his whole dead man routine. It could all just be smoke and mirrors - even if it did seem like a long way to go just for the sake of a practical joke. The only problem was that I couldn't think of a way of proving he was a fake without getting us all killed.

Unfortunately Stefano beat me to the punch.

"I say there's an easy way to end this guy's power trip." was all he said before, without any warning, he went over to the telephone, grabbed the handset, then tried to slam it back onto its cradle.

I say *tried* because he didn't really get any further after he touched the receiver. A jolt went through him suddenly, as if he had just received an electric shock. Then he began to spasm uncontrollably, the whites of his eyes showing as he convulsed. He seemed to totally lose control of his body except for one thing - he could not seem to be able to let go of the phone. Saul tried to help him but as soon as he touched Stefano he recoiled as if he'd been bitten.

"Static. All over him." was all he could say as he backed off.

Eventually Stefano stopped twitching and slumped over on the floor. His limp fingers finally let go of the handset. Forest rushed over to him and gingerly stretched out a hand to check his pulse. Whatever had taken hold of him seemed to pass and she nodded to us with relief. He was still alive.

When Malcolm spoke again there was no point in any of us trying to pretend that his voice was coming over the speaker. His words this time were clear and loud, they came from inside our heads.

"That was foolish. That was also the one mistake that I will allow you to make, and be under no illusion, if anything like that happens again I will not be quite

as lenient.” As ever Malcolm’s voice was cultured, his tone conversational as he continued, “Now, one of you has a job to do, and might I suggest that you hurry. Whilst I am a patient man, circumstances have conspired to wear away at my tolerance. I fear that I really might not be responsible for my actions if the Re-corporealisation rite is further delayed.”

After that it was easy. None of us were going to risk screwing Malcolm around now. I volunteered to go out and get what he had asked for and nobody raised a protest. Forest had to stay because he seemed to like having her on the end of the phone, Stefano was in no condition to go anywhere after getting shocked, and our great leader Saul, who had been no use to anyone so far that night, didn’t know his way around this part of Oxford. Or so he said.

So off I went. Dawn was still a couple of hours away just then, so the streets were still more or less deserted. I was glad about that. The last thing I needed at that point was to encounter any of the other crazies that might be out at that time. Of course I had no idea where I was going or how I was supposed to get hold of any of the things that Malcolm had asked for. It might as well have been Saul that had gone out for all the good I was going to do. I had no idea why I had volunteered. Maybe it was just because I wanted to get the hell out of that room and as far away as possible from the freak that was keeping us all there.

I’m embarrassed to admit it, but for a moment there I really considered just making a run for it and leaving the others to Malcolm’s mercy. I had no idea what he would do to them but my imagination came up with some pretty frightening scenarios. What brought me back and made me abandon the idea was two things: remembering what had happened to Stefano when he had tried to defy Malcolm, and thinking of what Forest’s opinion of me would be if I let them all down that way. I thought of the expression on her face if she ever found out that I had even contemplated ditching her and the others like that and the choice was made for me. I might have been scared out of my mind just then, but I wasn’t so scared that I was just going to let everyone down when, just for once, they were all counting on me.

Don’t get me wrong; I’m no hero. I didn’t have some ingenious plan to save them all. I figured that the best thing to do to get Malcolm off our backs was to simply do what he had told me to do. Anything else was just too risky. The problem was that I still had no idea where I could find all the stuff that he needed for his Re-corporealisation thing. Which left me sort of stuck.

Suddenly I felt really tired. I sat down on the side of the pavement, intending to take a break for a minute. A minute turned into five, then into half an hour. After forty-five minutes of just sitting there looking into space and feeling sorry for myself I pulled out the piece of paper in my pocket and stared at Forest’s neat handwriting. Malcolm’s shopping list started off fairly simply with ‘five scented candles’ and ‘a jar of henna’, before progressing from merely weird (‘a pig’s liver’ and ‘chalk and salt for a pentagram’) to totally incomprehensible (‘an asperger, a censer and an athame, as is normal in rituals of this nature’). If I hadn’t have been in such a hurry to get out of there I might have paused to ask him for some sort of clarification. Of course I could have gone right back just then but I had a feeling that the only thing that would come out of doing that would be a whole heap more of trouble.

As I stayed sitting down on the pavement staring at the scrap of paper in my hands I had a sudden thought. It was like a light bulb had gone on in my head - I realised where I had last seen scented candles and a henna jar: Forest’s room. It was probably unlikely that she had any of the other things, not unless she was even

wierder than I thought she was, but it seemed to be worth a shot. I certainly didn't have any better ideas at that point.

It didn't take me long after that to get back to Brookes' main campus. As I walked through what had by that stage turned from a light drizzle into a heavy downpour I was surprised by the lack of security on campus but glad. There were no security guards in sight (they were probably all too busy watching boxing or Formula One racing on cable to stare at their CCTV screens) and there were no walls or gates to stop anyone entering the university. On reflection I realised that it might have been more useful for there to be something that kept all of us *in* – maybe that would have prevented Forest, Stefano and I from going out of our way to find trouble.

My luck ran out when I got to Forest's room though. It was locked of course, and no amount of banging on the door could change that. I slumped to the floor and leaned my back against the wall. It couldn't end this way, I mean, were a jar of henna and scented candles really so much to ask for? They weren't much, but if I had brought them back then maybe Malcolm would have seen that I had tried at least. How could I return with nothing?

I swear that I didn't start crying at that point, although God knows maybe I had enough of a reason to, but I must have made some noise because the door across the hall from Forest's room opened just then. I didn't see the face that peered out of it straight away – my head was buried between my legs at the time after all – but when I looked up I definitely did make a sound, and it was a groan. The girl that was looking at me was just about the last person that I wanted to see right then, or ever, Carline Tait.

Remember earlier when I said that I was glad that Forest wasn't a wicca? Well, there was a reason for that. Back in those days, like any other school or college, Brookes had its very own contingent of 'outsiders'. You know the type – the people who no one else likes or understands who call themselves Goths or Witches, always dress in black, wear fright make-up whether they're male or female and generally act really strange. The difference between our outsiders and most other groups of that type was that they hadn't come together because no one else liked them; it was because they had chosen to be outsiders.

Don't get me wrong; I have no problem with people being different. I mean, you could hardly call Forest or Stefano dull or normal, and they were my two best friends at Brookes. What I actually liked about Forest and Stefano was their uniqueness, and how they just didn't care what other people thought of them, it was 'take me as you find me' with them and you were just as welcome to be their friend as you were to have nothing to do with them. It wasn't the same with the outsiders because they made a point of how different they were from everyone else and never even tried to hide the fact that they didn't think much of anyone that wasn't exactly the same as they were. In fact, they were just as much of a clique as any other group on campus, just much more exclusive.

Forest was one of the few people that got on with the outsiders without being one of them, which wasn't surprising as she shared a lot of their beliefs and tended to get along with just about everyone anyway, and it was through her that I knew Carline. Or perhaps I should say that I knew of her – I don't think anyone at Brookes could say that they really knew her. She tended to keep herself to herself and even the other outsiders seemed to be a little freaked out by her; I know I was. It was her eyes, I think, big and black and always staring, as if she was dissecting you in her mind or something. Taken with the rest of her, including the funereal black clothes, disconcerting tattoos and body piercings everywhere you looked as well as her

nonexistent conversational skills, Carline was not a person you tended to want to hang around for too long. It was like having an undertaker on campus.

Right then I had much bigger things on my mind than her anyway, and I dropped my gaze, hoping Carline would take the hint and leave me alone. Unfortunately my luck, which as you might have guessed just didn't seem to be in that night, did not improve.

“What are you doing out here, Morton?”

I hated the way people at Brookes always used people's second names; I mean it wasn't as if she didn't know my first name. My first instinct was to tell her to mind her own business but the way she was staring at me, like she'd caught a burglar climbing through someone's window, made me think better of it. The last thing I wanted was her attracting a security guard and making this whole mess even worse.

“I was getting something for Forest from her room.”

“Why isn't she getting it herself?” she said, suspicion heavy in her voice.

“She's sort of tied up at the moment.” I said, thinking to myself that Forest might as well have been tied up as far as her chances of escaping from Night Line's offices were concerned.

I tried for a smile that froze under Carline's impassive gaze. She clearly wasn't buying any of it. I closed my eyes, thinking that the next thing she would do was call security. The next thing she did, however, was surprise me.

“What does she need?”

Despite my shock that Carline wasn't going to turn me over straight away, I gathered my wits and decided to take a risk. I handed Forest's note over to her then, thinking: what further harm could it do?

Carline took the note from me slowly, her suspicions clearly not abandoned completely. Her eyes scanned the list Forest had written down, mouthing words like 'henna' and 'candles' as she read. She looked at me sharply, however, her eyes wide, when she mouthed 'pig's liver' and 'asperger'; all I could do was shrug in reply, as if it was just Forest being Forest. Then she said something that made me glad that I had bumped into her that night.

“I might be able to help Forest out.”

I noticed that she had said she could help Forest rather than me, but I was too glad of the help, however unlikely the source, to care. She turned around and went back into her room, allowing a few seconds to pass before poking her head back out and seeing that I was still in the same position, on the floor slumped against the wall.

“Well, are you coming in or not?” she said and I grinned and followed her into her room.

I don't know what I'd been expecting, maybe cobwebs everywhere and pentacles hanging from the wall, but Carline's room looked nothing like I'd imagined it would. It was light and very neat in there for a start, rather than being the dark little funeral parlour that I'd always pictured. Also, the room was surprisingly girly – there were fluffy toy animals here and there, arrangements of pot pourri and a pink flowery quilt on the bed. Another surprise was the poster of the Canadian singer K D Lang that I saw displayed on her wall; I'd expected Carline's musical tastes to run more towards Marilyn Manson.

I still felt uncomfortable being in Carline's room, though, and everything in her body language mirrored my discomfiture. She asked me to stay put while she got everything together and then started rushing about the room, pulling things out of her desks, cupboards and shelves as if she were a contestant on one of those tacky TV game shows. I wasn't complaining; if she was in a hurry for me to be out of her room,

I was in just as much of a hurry to get back to the others because I suspected that Malcolm really wasn't the patient type. Scary evil spirits rarely were.

Carline made a pile on the bed of what I assumed were the items on Malcolm's list. I say 'assume' because I simply had no idea what half the things on the list were and therefore had difficulty identifying them when they were placed on Carline's bed. The henna and the candles were easy enough, I even recognised a rather disgusting lump that looked like a black pudding as a dried pig's liver. God knows what Carline was doing with that, I was feeling too grateful to ask any questions. When she pulled a long black-handled knife out of her underwear drawer, though, that was a different matter entirely. At that point, I started to feel uneasy.

"It's an athame," she said, as if that was enough of an explanation for her keeping an offensive weapon in her bedroom. At my blank look she added "We Wicca use it in our most important rituals."

I turned an even paler shade of white and she sighed with obvious exasperation.

"Not to sacrifice chickens or anything! The athame focuses an individual's will and can be used to draw shapes in chalk and sand."

Whatever. I just wanted to be out of there by that stage – Carline could spare me the details of her weirdo lifestyle.

Eventually Carline came to stand in front of me holding a plastic bag full of things, a concerned look on her face. I asked her what the problem was, hoping that she wasn't going to tell me that she was missing anything.

"Do you realise what all of these things together are for, Tim?"

I could tell that she was deadly serious, from the sombre expression on her face as much as from the fact that she was, for the first time I could remember, using my Christian name.

"Would it be for a Re-corporealisation ritual by any chance?" I said, trying to inject a lightness that I didn't feel into my voice as I replied.

Carline's eyes widened in shock and I saw something that I hadn't ever seen before in them when she looked back at me. I hoped it was respect and not fear or worse, pity.

"Yes that's one of the things that they can be used for, but there's also something else," she paused, as if reluctant to go on, then said, "What have you got yourselves into?"

I wasn't going to answer that question, not because I thought for a moment that she wouldn't believe me, but because I didn't want her to get involved. Enough people were in trouble because of me already, I thought, wondering at the same time why I was blaming myself for everything that had happened.

For the first time I considered, *really* considered, what it was that I was involved in. Despite everything that had happened, a part of me was still clinging to the possibility that Malcolm was just a lunatic; some person with too much time on their hands that had decided to take out his frustrations with society on an easy target – a bunch of students. But what if he was something more? What if he was genuinely something unholy from some place that was pure evil? I wasn't a Christian, didn't even really believe in God, but I had to admit that things like that scared the crap out of me. I hadn't been able to sit through *The Exorcist* when Stefano had once rented it on DVD – how the hell was I going to cope with bringing something like that into the world for real?

All I said to Carline though was "What else can it be used for?"

When she told me I should have been even more scared but instead the first glimmerings of a plan came into my mind. Actually ‘plan’ is probably too strong a word – I was more like a drowning man clutching at the frailest of straws. Maybe something of what I was thinking had come through on my face because Carline clapped a hand to her mouth and her next words seemed to be whispered through clenched teeth.

“Don’t Tim, don’t even think about it...”

I looked at Carline’s face, so close to my own right then, and thought that, without the fright make-up and the attitude she didn’t look so bad. The former was missing because she had just got out of bed when she had heard me outside Forest’s room, and I tried not to think that the latter was absent because she was probably too worried about what I was thinking of doing to act tough. I couldn’t talk about it so I decided to change the subject.

“Maybe you and I could go grab a drink sometime, when all of this is over?”

What can I say? I was at college and opportunities didn’t tend to present themselves that often, so can you blame me for trying to make the most of this one? And I was determined to make *something* good come out of that night.

My heart rose when Carline smiled and reached out her hand to cup my cheek, but any hopes that I had been harbouring were quickly dashed by her next words.

“Thanks for the offer, Morton, but somehow I don’t think it would ever work out between us. Besides, you’re not really my type.”

I quickly put together some of the things that I had been told about Carline Tait in the past and realised that she was probably right. The KD Lang poster should have been a giveaway.

“Well thanks anyway,” I said, feeling like I should say more but only managing to add a lame, “see you around” before I left.

I tried to forget about Carline and her misgivings as I headed back towards the Night Line offices. By this time I had a firm plan in my head and nothing, neither common sense nor raw fear, could change what I intended to do. It was a pity though; I was going to miss the rest of them when this was all over, even Saul.

When I returned to the main office it was like everything was frozen, unchanged since the last time I had been there. The tableau still held – Forest clutched the telephone, Stefano was slumped on a chair nursing his arm, while Saul was paralysed in a corner trying to pretend that all of this wasn’t happening. It really hit home then that they were all relying on me to get them out of this and I couldn’t help thinking that if that was the case then we really were all screwed.

“Hello Timothy, what took you so long?”

I heard Malcolm’s voice loud and clear despite the fact that I was nowhere near the telephone. I felt like telling him to go to hell but decided against angering a vengeful spirit more than was strictly necessary. Besides, hell was probably exactly where he was already.

“I’ve got what you want,” I said, trying to keep any trace of emotion out of my voice.

“Excellent work Timothy, now let me guide you through what you need to do...”

“I know what to do.” I cut him off before he could go any further, realising as I did so that I hated being called “Timothy” even more than I hated being called “Morton”, especially by him.

By now the others were all looking at me with a mixture of shock and what I hoped was grudging respect. Stefano quirked a smile in my direction – he’d always

said that I needed to stand up for myself more. Perhaps this was as good a time as any other to start.

The look that Forest gave me was a puzzled one, obviously because she couldn't work out how someone who had always scoffed at mysticism whenever we had talked about it was now suddenly an expert at it. I mouthed Carline's name at her and she nodded although the effort of smiling seemed to be beyond her. I wasn't surprised – there was a close, oppressive atmosphere in the room and it showed in everyone's faces, including, I was sure, my own.

“Well, what are you waiting for? I haven't had a body for almost twenty years, so you'll understand that I'm keen to proceed with the Re-corporealisation as soon as possible.”

So I began the ritual, explaining what I was doing as I went along for the benefit of Stefano and Saul, if not for Forest.

“The Re-corporealisation is a rite by way of which a spirit stuck in limbo may re-enter the mortal realm,” I said, reciting what Carline had told me as I cleared a space on the floor.

“What?” said Stefano, “You mean that Malcolm isn't really dead?”

“For the Re-corporealisation to succeed, the spirit must not have crossed over to the other side completely but must in a sense have one foot in both worlds, that of the living and that of the dead.” I said, continuing as if Stefano hadn't spoken but nevertheless answering his question, however inadvertently.

“But how is that possible?” said Stefano.

One by one I took the items that Carline had given me out of the plastic bag. I used the chalk to draw a small circle on the floor then poured salt inside it, taking care to spread it evenly throughout. Using the athame I drew a five-pointed star within this circle and smeared the pentagonal shape at the centre of the star in red henna. I placed the pig's liver at the heart of the shape that I had made: a pentagram. It was only once I had done this that I turned around and gave Stefano the only answer I could to his question.

“I have no idea. Now please can you help me with this?”

I handed the candles to Stefano and instructed him to place one at each point of the pentagram. The only items left after that were the censer, which was a hollow brass tube peppered with tiny holes that had a solid base, and the asperger, which was simply a small bundle of mixed herbs. I handed both of these over to Forest without bothering to give her any instructions – she had a far better idea of what she was doing than I did anyway. She grabbed some matches that Carline had also provided and set light to the asperger, which she had placed inside the censer. Smoke started to come out of the censer, and with it a strange odour, sort of like weed but not quite as pungent.

“Gather round” was all that I said then.

Wordlessly the others did as I had asked, even Saul, who left his corner and joined the rest of us around the pentagram even though he barely seemed to put any thought into it as he did so. When I looked into his eyes they seemed blank, as if he was trying to blot this entire experience from his memory even though it was still happening. I wished I could do the same. I grabbed Forest's hand in one of mine and held Stefano's in the other while they in turn joined hands with Saul. Under my breath, barely in a whisper, I said, “Don't let go”. Finally we stood there, each one of us at one of the cardinal points around the circle, waiting.

“Excellent work Timothy,” Malcolm said into the silence, and then chuckled, “You really have exceeded my expectations of you.”

Screw you, I thought, but all that I said was “Now repeat after me...” before Malcolm interrupted me.

“That’s fine Timothy, I’ll take it from here.”

In his weird, disembodied voice Malcolm started speaking in a language that seemed to be foreign to me. I say ‘seemed to be’ because I was surprised to find that I understood bits of it. For once my studies were actually coming in useful because I recognised some Italian words in there. I was pretty sure that Malcolm wasn’t speaking Italian, however, because the language did not seem as fluent as that but was more formal, archaic, even – maybe it was Latin. The whole was still incomprehensible, but the words that I could make out, including ‘death’ and ‘blood’ made me glad that my understanding was limited.

Malcolm’s recitation went on for some time and I could feel both Forest’s and Stefano’s palms becoming greasy with sweat in my own. I didn’t dare to look at them though, in case I gave away what I was planning to do inadvertently. All that I was waiting for was the right moment but the problem was that I had no idea when this would be. You see, I couldn’t understand what Malcolm was saying so I didn’t know what stage of the ritual he had reached.

“Christ what is *that?*” said Stefano, pulling me out of my thoughts rudely.

I turned to look at him and saw that his gaze was transfixed on the centre of the pentagram with a horrified fascination. I followed his gaze and felt a sense of horror rise up inside me as well when I saw that a face seemed to be taking shape out of the henna. It was vague, just hollows where the eyes and mouth should be and a stub for a nose, but it was unmistakably a face and, I felt sure, a man’s face at that.

At that point, I decided that I couldn’t wait any longer and I wrenched one hand out of Stefano’s grip. He looked at me, probably too surprised to be scared now, as I pulled my other hand out of Forest’s and literally threw myself into the centre of the pentagram. I fell face first on the floor, then took care to ensure that the way that my body lay corresponded directly to each of the five points of the pentagram, so that my head was aligned with one point of the star and my arms and legs were lined up with the other four points. I felt an uncomfortable heat emanating from the centre of the pentagram, where my stomach was pressed against the henna face. I ignored it and closed my eyes so that I could concentrate on what I had to do next.

I lost all awareness of the room that I was in and the people around me. Instead, I imagined that the room was completely empty save for me and the pentagram that I lay inside. In my mind I then imagined lifting myself off the floor, barely registering that neither salt nor chalk nor henna seemed to have clung to my clothing. I took several steps back as a shape rose from out of the centre of the pentagram in front of me. It seemed to be the form of a man, although his skin was red like henna, there were only gaping holes where his eyes and mouth should have been and he had a stub in place of a nose.

“Silly boy,” it said, and its voice was Malcolm’s, “what do you think you are doing?”

“Stopping you.” I said, with a bravery that I didn’t feel.

“Fool!” it hissed, “You cannot stop a Re-corporealisation rite once it has been set in motion.”

The Malcom-shape advanced towards me, menace emanating from its hollow eyes. Even though this was still happening in my mind, like a dream or a hallucination, it felt no less real for that. I had no doubt that if the *thing* killed me here, then I would die in reality. So I backed away from it, my courage, which had never been particularly strong in the first place, having deserted me.

Then, as if from miles away, Carline's words came back to me.

"Everything that you've just asked for can also be used for an Embodiment rite. What's the difference? Well, they are very similar in that both rituals can remove a spirit from limbo and return it to the mortal world. The difference is that Re-corporealisation returns the spirit to its former body, whilst Embodiment is used to allow the spirit to cross over into the body of another living person."

"You're talking about Possession – like in The Exorcist?" I had said.

"Not quite. You see, only the strongest spirits can attempt a Possession, and that's something that they can do without any help. Embodiment is for weaker spirits that need outside help to cross over and even then it must be into a willing body, or 'vessel'. The vessel needs to be strong-willed, though, or else the spirit that he or she has become host to will overwhelm it. The initial battle of wills is therefore crucial."

"I'm not trying to stop this," I said to the Malcolm-shape, "and this isn't a Re-corporealisation ritual anymore – it's an Embodiment rite."

If I had expected Malcolm to be upset or unsettled by this, I was to be disappointed. Instead, his hideous hennaed face grinned at me.

"Fine. I would have preferred a more comely body to use as my own, but if I cannot Re-corporealise then I suppose I'll have to take the next best thing."

The shape continued to advance on me and I continued to back away until eventually my shoulders were against the wall and there was nowhere left to go.

"Nowhere left to run." Malcolm said, mirth in his dead voice as he echoed my thoughts.

I thought of the others for a moment then, Stefano, Forest and Saul, and wished that they were there to share the fight with me. Then I thought better of it as I realised that I probably couldn't have got through this if they had been there. If they'd known what I was about to do then they might have tried to stop me – after all, that was probably the sensible thing to do.

"I'm not trying to run." I said before I threw myself at him.

I really can't remember much of what happened after that. There was a flash like blinding light when I collided with the Malcolm-shape, although after that it ceased to feel like we were two people at all. We were suddenly just one entity and it was like Carline had said it would be, both of us struggling to dominate each other. I was assailed with thoughts that were totally alien to me – images of people dying; memories of cold, dark places and behind all of it a terrible anger and hatred that seemed to extend to everything and everyone. I knew the thoughts were Malcolm's and that only encouraged me to fight even harder to prevent him gaining a foothold, however tenuous, in the world.

How did I fight him? I honestly have no idea. I didn't exactly have much experience to draw upon – I mean, it's not as if I wrestled with evil spirits every day of the week. All I could do was hold onto as much of a sense of myself as I could by using my most cherished memories. I remembered the day my little brother was born, gazing at him over the top of the hospital bed as he lay snug in my mother's arms, a podgy, hairless little thing but somehow incredible and beautiful for reasons that it would take years for me to understand. Other memories flashed through my head as quickly as I could think of them – my friendship with Stefano, which had evolved from mutual antipathy to interdependence; my attraction for Forest, which had matured from a childish infatuation into something more; even my relationship with my Dad, a peripheral figure during my childhood whose death had affected me far more than I had ever wanted to admit to myself. I forced myself to face all of those memories, the bad ones as well as the good. I had to, or face losing myself.

It's not enough, a voice said to me, harsh and cruel inside my head.

I recoiled, horrified that someone, *something*, like Malcolm should be a party to my innermost thoughts and that he should cast them and me aside so lightly. Unfortunately I couldn't deny the truth of what he was saying. Despite everything, I could steadily feel my memories being overwhelmed by the hateful images from Malcolm's mind. I was losing this fight.

But maybe that was the problem, I thought suddenly. Maybe the only way that I could defeat Malcolm was by not fighting. Well it was worth a try anyway; nothing else that I was doing was working. So I relaxed, then, and gave in.

My eyes sprang open and I looked up in time to see Forest, Stefano and Saul recoil in shock. I guessed that they had half-expected me not to come back from this particular trip.

"Tim... are you all right?"

The voice was Forest's. It took me a while to work that out – I had grown more used to hearing voices inside my head while I had been unconscious.

"I'm fine," I said, "How about giving me a hand here?"

Forest, assisted by Stefano, lifted me up off the floor. Saul seemed reluctant to touch me and in the circumstances I could hardly blame him. He pointed at the pentagram, specifically at the hennaed centre. The face had disappeared, apparently smudged by my body.

"And what about..." he started.

"Taken care of." I said.

Then they all started talking at once, asking the predictable questions. I put up my hand to stall the flood of enquiries.

"Later. I'm tired right now but I promise I'll answer all of your questions later. Can we get out of here?"

None of them seemed satisfied with my lack of explanations but by that stage I think we were all quite keen to leave that room.

"There's just one more thing though." I said, as they were all about to leave. Three faces turned to look at me, their expressions quizzical.

"Let's rub out that pentagram."

There isn't really a huge amount to tell after that. Our lives – or their lives anyway – all pretty much returned to normal. Of course none of us saw much of Saul after that, in fact, no one did. He quit Night Line and stayed away from his old offices and from Forest, Stefano and I, becoming something of a recluse on campus from that point on. I could hardly blame him and it wasn't as if I missed his company or anything, but I have to admit that I was a bit disappointed with his attitude. At least nothing much changed between Stefano and I. If anything, he actually seemed to go out of his way to make sure that he wasn't as inconsiderate towards me as he had been in the past – tidying up after himself, doing his own coursework for a change, and actually respecting my privacy rather than using our shared room as his personal space. I suppose he must have been grateful. I spent a lot more time with Forest and Carline, going to their Wicca group, learning about things like tarot, the I-Ching and the Qabbala. Forest was pleased with me, she actually thought that I was genuinely interested in all of that. Carline was more sceptical, she thought that what I was genuinely interested in was Forest. But even she was wrong – all I was doing was trying to save myself.

You see I wasn't really alone anymore in my own body; I was sharing it with someone else. The Embodiment had worked, in that Malcolm had crossed over into

me. Whilst I had won the initial battle of wills to establish my dominance over him, that didn't change the fact that he was still there. I could sense him every time I went to sleep and had a nightmare; he was in every negative thought that I had, every temptation was Malcolm prodding at me, hoping that I would weaken enough to let him through. Things have got so bad now that I'm starting to forget where he ends and I begin. The trouble is, from what Carline tells me and according to every book that I've read since then, there's nothing I can do to get rid of Malcolm; he's here to stay. And that scares the Hell out of me.

BOOK OF THE DEAD

Toby looked up, distracted from his book by the sudden sound of someone slamming something down on the table at which he was attempting to get some work done. The someone was a girl that he had never seen before and the something was a battered satchel full of several heavy-looking books that threatened to burst out of their container if it were moved again.

"Is this seat taken?" she said, although she managed to make it sound less like a question than a challenge, as if she were daring him to make up a reason why she could not sit down. She had a Home Counties accent but her dark curly hair and fierce eyes, coupled with her deeply tanned skin, gave her a faintly exotic appearance.

For a moment or two Toby simply stared back at her, unsure of what to say as this was an entirely novel situation for him, since everyone at Christ Church knew that he preferred to sit alone while studying in the library. In any case it just was not the done thing for people outside of one's circle of friends to sit at the same table as another student at the college. The fact that the girl was obviously a fresher, as was abundantly clear from her manner and from the fact that he didn't recognise her, only made matters worse. Being new really was no excuse for bad form.

Toby sighed. Perhaps he was being uncharitable. He remembered being a first year himself, only a year ago, and the difficulty that he had had adjusting to the seemingly arbitrary code of conduct that all of his fellow students seemed automatically to be aware of. Christ Church remained the most resolutely traditional college in Oxford, despite the best efforts of its staff to modernise it, and new students soon discovered that one did not attempt to adapt the ancient institution to oneself, the college was something to be adapted to. Toby was sure that the new girl would soon work out the way things were done here. In the meantime, it wouldn't hurt to give her a lesson in etiquette.

"Look..."

"I'm Lola. Lola Reid."

The name suited her, combining as it did the vaguely foreign with the familiar.

"Hi Lola, I'm Toby. Look, I can see that you're a fresher, so you can hardly be blamed for the fact that no-one told you this, but I really can't concentrate properly unless I sit alone so..."

For the second time, much to Toby's exasperation, Lola interrupted him without so much as an apology. The girl really required an education with regard to the social interaction of first and second years!

"Oh I knew that – *she* told me," she said and pointed to the librarian's desk. Toby followed her finger and was not impressed to see Karagh MacFarlane watching their interplay, amusement plain on her face. Karagh was a friend but she had the

oddest sense of humour sometimes and it was apparent that she was taking unseemly pleasure out of his present discomfiture.

Toby forced himself to nod at Karagh, determined not to give her the satisfaction of knowing that the situation was getting to him, but could not quite manage a smile.

“I see,” he said to Lola, “but you’ve still come over to join me?” He tried to make himself sound as reasonable as possible since the last thing that he wanted was a scene. It was the start of term, after all, and as a second year he had a reputation to maintain amongst the new intake of freshers. A slanging match in the library would hardly assist the well-heeled image that he was taking such pains to cultivate.

“I didn’t want to join you,” she said, making it sound a ridiculous concept, a smile that might have been mocking on her face. Toby couldn’t help bristling at that – he had not wanted company but the idea that someone would want to sit next to him was surely not that far-fetched!

“Well what on Earth did you want then?”

“I only wanted to see what you were reading.”

Too bemused by this request to protest further, Toby raised the set text that he had been studying so that she could view the title on its cover.

“Faust – interesting choice,” said Lola, but somehow she seemed disappointed, “Not what I was looking for though.”

“It was hardly my choice I’m afraid. I’m more of a Shakespeare man than an admirer of Marlowe – I find him far less consistent in terms of quality,” said Toby instinctively, then added, warming to his subject, “Considering how much less prolific he was – Marlowe I mean – I’d regard that alone as proof of his inferior talent, wouldn’t you?”

“I suppose so,” Lola said, disappointing Toby, who had been expecting more of an argument on the subject, “But it’s an interesting concept, isn’t it, selling your soul to the Devil? I think that Marlowe started out with a great idea but wasted it, though. I mean, what did Faust do once he’d sold his soul? He just squandered his life on the usual things like women, wealth and power. If I’d written the play I would have used a lot more imagination.”

“Oh really, what do you think a man who makes a bargain with the Devil would expect in return?” said Toby, intrigued in spite of himself.

“*The Other Side.*”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s the book I was looking for, it’s very rare and was written by Philip Spencer in 1879. It wasn’t on the shelves so I thought I’d check whether anyone has it out. I’ve checked with everyone else in the library and you were my last hope.”

She sounded suddenly very downcast. Toby reflected that in their brief conversation Lola had exhibited a wider range of mood swings than might have been thought strictly healthy.

“Look, I’ve never heard of it but I’m sure that it will be in here somewhere. This is a copyright library, after all, or at least it used to be.”

“What’s a copyright library?”

Toby was more surprised to hear Lola admitting her ignorance of something than by the fact that she did not know what a copyright library was. He assumed the lecturing tone that he usually reserved for sessions with his tutor, Professor Houghton.

“It’s a library that automatically gets a copy of every book printed in this country. Christ Church’s library used to be one until the 1960s, when it was completely renovated and lots of the older material was sent over to the central

university collection at the Bodleian Library. They still keep some of the older books down in the archives though, so your book may be down there too.”

To his further surprise the look of disappointment only deepened on her face.

“But first years can’t use the archives without permission.”

“That shouldn’t be any problem,” Toby said, puzzled, “Just ask your tutor - he or she should be able to get you a key without any problem. Who is your tutor?”

Lola suddenly looked distinctly uncomfortable. She did not answer straight away and when she did it was as if the words were being dragged out of her involuntarily.

“It’s Professor Byrne.”

Toby did his best but was sure that he failed to hide the surprise that he felt on Lola’s admission. Professor Byrne was the Mathematics tutor – what could Lola possibly need a book entitled *The Other Side* from 1879 for?

“It’s for personal use,” Lola said when he put the question to her.

“What’s this book about?”

“It’s... esoteric.”

Toby waited but it became clear that he wasn’t going to get any more out of her on the subject. He glanced sidelong at Lola’s open satchel on the table and registered the title of the topmost book: *The Supernatural World*. Esoteric indeed!

Toby looked back at Lola and saw that her eyes were no longer fierce, and that her face had softened into a pleading look. Her eyes were quite pretty when they weren’t fierce. So was her face.

He shifted uncomfortably. If he was being honest with himself he wasn’t entirely averse to Lola’s attention. Most of the girls at Christ Church thought that he was odd and eccentric, as he rarely surfaced from the library during term time and when he did it was not to join his peers down in the college bar or at a room party but to do something rather more old-fashioned, like take in a play or a concert. Being at university for a year had not made it any easier for him to get on with the fairer sex, of whom he had little prior experience, having been educated at an all-male boarding school. For this reason he tended to keep male company and the girls that he knew, such as Karagh, regarded him fondly but platonically.

“Wait here.” He said to Lola, coming to a decision.

He walked over to the librarian’s desk where Karagh was attempting, without much success, to pretend that she was not watching his interchange with Lola. She looked up in mock surprise at his approach.

“Picking up freshers in the library, Toby, I never would have thought it of you.”

Toby groaned inwardly. He had no doubt that, whatever he said now, that would be the official version of events that would be spread around the college the next day.

“She just needs some help with a... a science project. Can I have a key to the archives?”

Karagh’s grin widened, became more wicked.

“You old dog - the archives!” she gave him an appraising look, “It really is the quiet ones that you have to watch, isn’t it? Of course you can have the keys.”

Karagh handed the archive keys over and it was all Toby could do not to snatch them out of her hands. He was sure that he had turned bright red at Karagh’s lewd suggestions. As he turned around to walk back to his table he heard a snort and an exclamation of “Science project indeed!”

Not trusting himself to speak, he beckoned for Lola to follow him and she did so, pausing only to pick up her battered satchel.

“What did your friend find so funny?” she said.

“Oh she’s not really my friend,” he said, then added, “She’s very strange” as if that would explain everything.

They left the main library and walked out into the entrance hall. On one side were the massive main doors, wide open because they were only ever closed outside library opening hours. As it was early October the sky outside was still light even though it was five o’clock in the evening. Opposite the main doors were the steps leading down to the archives.

As he headed towards the archives Toby noticed that Lola was staring wide eyed at the statues and Old Master paintings that lined both sides of the entrance hall. That brought out a twinge of nostalgia since it reminded him of his own awestruck reaction to the library on his first visit. It was easy for someone like him, who used the place on a daily basis, to forget how impressive it could be for a newcomer.

“Originals.” He mouthed at Lola and noted with satisfaction that she seemed even more impressed if that were possible.

“You’re so lucky Toby.” Lola said.

Toby stopped, struck by what an odd thing that was for her to say.

“You are too Lola, after all, this is your college as well now.”

Lola smiled crookedly but did not say anything and, rather than let the sudden awkwardness between them linger, Toby opted to lead her straight on down to the archives.

“It’s very dark down here.” Lola said as soon as they had descended the spiralling staircase that led to the archives.

Toby could not disagree. It had been a long time since he had last been down in the archives and he had almost forgotten how dingy and desolate a place they could be. Unlike the airy, aesthetically pleasing upper library, the emphasis down here was purely on functionality. This became clear as soon as he switched on the lights, revealing row upon row of books lining the walls, packed together so tightly that they almost appeared to strain at each other for room to breathe. The shelves were wide and tall and seemed to stretch away into infinity – there must have literally been thousands of books housed in this place.

Toby shivered involuntarily. The only company that he and Lola had down here were the books; there were no other human beings in sight. That in itself struck him as odd. Of course, it was rare for undergraduates to use the archives – the nature of their courses meant that it was unlikely that they would require any of the obscure texts that were located down here. Still, it was odd that there were no anxious Finalists or post grad students around, even at the start of term. A few other people would have made the mood seem much less oppressive.

Toby was surprised at himself. He had never found the archives particularly disconcerting before, if anything, he had found them to be a relaxing environment, where he could get work done without having to worry about distractions or interruptions. But there was something subtly different about the atmosphere in the archives today, something that he had felt when he had first come down here and been affected by the troubling darkness. The disturbing feelings had not departed since he had flicked on the light switch, for there was nothing particularly comforting about the light, which was cold and antiseptic, making the place seem more like a laboratory than a library.

He almost jumped when Lola touched his arm.

“Thanks Toby, but you don’t have to stay. I can manage from here.”

Toby looked at her sceptically.

“Look at the size of this place – do you even have any idea where to start?”

Lola blushed, looking very pretty as she did so. Toby realized that he was enjoying her company far more than he would have liked to admit.

“Okay,” she said, “I suppose it would help if you take the hundred thousand books on the left while I take the hundred thousand books on the right. Give me a shout if you find anything.”

He nodded and they headed off in opposite directions. After a couple of turns down the book-lined corridors Toby lost all sense of there being anyone else in the room with him. The shelves stretched endlessly in every direction that he looked and he could not hear a sound once Lola’s footsteps receded in the distance. He reflected that it was a good thing that he knew his way around in here, otherwise he could easily have gotten lost. Toby tried not to think of how long it would take to find his way out if that actually happened.

He was surprised at himself, since he was not usually the type to get scared by a place, even one that had become as bizarrely menacing as the archives. Even as a child he had never found ghost stories or horror movies particularly frightening for the simple reason that he found them totally illogical. There was rarely any consistent explanation for the supernatural phenomena in such fiction, and without that the whole concept failed for him. If something made no sense to Toby then he could not find it affecting, let alone frightening. The opinion of his friends was that he simply had no imagination and, while Toby did not necessarily agree with this assessment, he was willing to accept that he had a very practical, rational mind, which perhaps to some might have been interpreted as a lack of imagination.

Right then Toby came to the decision that the only way to shake off the peculiar sensation that was affecting him was to apply the practical part of his brain to the problem in hand: locating Lola’s book. He knew that it was a task that would require all of his concentration because the arrangement of books in the archives was anything but logical. Rather than being categorised in order of subject area or even author name, the volumes were roughly arranged by date of publication. This made it particularly difficult to find a book published in 1879 given that the tomes housed in the archives dated from 1562, the date when the original Christ Church library, housed in the former refectory of St Frideswide’s Priory, was founded, to the 1960s, when the changes in the upper library had taken place.

Toby looked around to get his bearings, then grabbed a book at random from the shelf nearest to him. He opened it gingerly, for the pages were yellow and fragile with age and the spine seemed to be held together by good will alone. He smiled when he saw the date of publication however: 1905. He could not be far off what he was looking for.

For a moment or two he forgot his misgivings about the archives as he was overtaken by the thrill of the hunt. This was what had attracted him to Oxford in the first place – the pursuit of knowledge. It was what he understood best, books and libraries, and he felt like it was only since he had arrived at university that he had been granted the opportunity to indulge his consuming passion. At his old school his interest had been regarded as odd, unhealthy even and was yet another eccentricity that marked him out as different to his fellow pupils. Here, however, at Christ Church his interest in books was simply regarded as a quirk, not particularly out of the ordinary and one that was usually found endearing rather than abnormal.

An almost feverish glint came into Toby's eyes as he thumbed through the books stacked on the shelves, noting the names on the spines at speed and then just as quickly disregarding them and moving on. He was getting close - he could sense it.

At last he spotted a book by Philip Spencer. The title was *The Book of the Dead* and on inspection Toby saw that it had been published in 1888. He pulled it out and set it aside on the floor next to him. Further books were revealed on the neighbouring shelves: *The Hardinger Prophecy*, *Twilight Worlds* and others with similarly obscure and ominous titles. Toby stopped what he was doing and leafed through Spencer's books, suddenly curious.

The man appeared to have been obsessed with death and the afterlife. *Twilight Worlds* seemed to be mainly concerned with records of near death experiences, accounts of hauntings and narratives of first or second hand encounters with the supernatural. That was almost light reading compared with his other books. *The Hardinger Prophecies* was a tome that was filled with what looked like spells and incantations accompanied by occult diagrams while the contents of *The Book of the Dead* were even more disturbing – it was filled with what Toby hoped were pictures (rather than photographs) of what looked like dead people arranged in various poses. Some of them were naked and spread-eagled, while others, fully clothed, were sitting or standing doing normal things. It was those pictures that Toby found more distressing, because while the people in them might have looked to be simply asleep or have their eyes closed, he could not mistake them for being anything other than dead and he wondered at the mindset of whoever had painted the pictures. Although, on closer inspection, Toby was now fairly sure that they were not pictures at all but photographs.

Toby, who had always been interested in ancient Egypt and had briefly considered doing a degree in Egyptology before coming up to Oxford to read English Literature, had heard about *The Book of the Dead* before. It was the common name for the ancient Egyptian funerary text known as *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*. The Egyptians had strange ideas about the afterlife and what waited for the soul at the end of life's journey. For them, the body was not simply a shell, but a vital part of a person's soul. *The Book of the Dead* was a description of the ancient Egyptian conception of the afterlife and a collection of hymns, spells, and instructions to allow the deceased to pass through obstacles in the afterlife. It had been discovered on the first Archaeological digs in Egypt's Valley of the Kings, written on a papyrus scroll which had been placed in the sarcophagus of a long-deceased Pharaoh. When it was later brought back to Britain in the reign of Queen Victoria it had caught the imagination of the aristocracy, who at that time were strangely fascinated by death and all its trappings. It seemed that Philip Spencer fell into this category – had he perhaps written this book in homage to the original Egyptian text? If so, what did all of these disturbing pictures signify?

Toby then remembered that he had also read somewhere that in the Victorian era the practice, at least among those who could afford it in those times, was for a picture to be taken of a loved one's body once they had passed over in an attempt to preserve the sanctity of their soul. Toby did not really understand the reason for this and had never really been moved to take the time to find out. He was a firm atheist himself and believed the evidence of his own eyes before he would take something on faith alone. That was probably part of the reason why he had always had such little time for horror movies and fiction in the past. The otherworldly and the paranormal belonged to the world of children's books and trashy pulp television and did not hold much fascination for him. Had he known that this was Lola's area of interest he might

have thought twice about helping her gain access to the archives, no matter how pretty she was.

Still, true believer or not, there was no question that this place was beginning to unnerve him. Although he now knew that there was at least one other person down here – Lola – it was still eerily quiet and the weak light did nothing to make the long, lonely corridors of bookshelves any more welcoming. Being in a section that was dominated by the works of a man who appeared to have been fixated on death and its many applications did not help either. Toby was struck by the sudden strong desire to get out of the archives as quickly as possible and would have done so straight away had he been on his own. He had always considered himself a gentleman, however, and had no intention of abandoning Lola just because he had acquired a case of the jitters. There could surely not be any harm in getting her to hurry slightly though.

Feeling glad to be moving away from Philip Spencer's books, Toby headed to the end of the shelf, sure that it would take him back in the direction from which he had come. However, to his surprise he found himself in an unfamiliar section, this one filled with books from 1860 to 1870. He paused to get his bearings and resolved to double back the other way. When he got to the end of the opposite row, however, he found himself in another section that he did not recognise, this one filled with books dating from the 1850s. That could not be right. It made no sense for the books to be arranged in such a haphazard manner, otherwise how on earth would anyone be able to find what they were looking for? Besides, he was almost positive that the shelves had been arranged logically, in reverse chronological order, when he had made his initial search. They could not simply have rearranged themselves in the interim.

Toby paused for a moment to get his bearings. It was not easy, since the aisles between the bookshelves were exceedingly narrow and each corridor of books seemed to stretch on as far as the eye could see. For this reason, he could not simply look down the aisles to locate the door through which he and Lola had entered the archives. He was forced to wend his way through the shelves, one corridor at a time, constantly searching for some sign that he was going back in the direction from whence he had come. His efforts were starting to seem fruitless, each course he followed only serving to take him down yet another unfamiliar route, when he finally saw a door at the end of a line of shelves.

Toby squinted at the door, not sure in this bad light whether it was the same one through which he had gained entrance to the lower levels. Suddenly he saw a familiar figure outlined in the doorway, unmistakable with her slender frame and dark curly hair.

"Lola..." he began but stopped abruptly when the figure disappeared through the door.

Puzzled, Toby followed her out into the alcove at the bottom of the stairs leading from the upper library and was surprised to see no sign of her there. She had, after all, only been slightly ahead of him and should not have disappeared completely like that – unless she had been in a hurry of course. But what had Lola been in a hurry to do – go somewhere else or simply get away from him?

A wave of paranoia swept over Toby and his earlier misgivings came back with full force. There had been something not quite right about the whole situation and, deep down, he had known it. Toby forced himself to admit that he had been infatuated with Lola, the girl with the exotic good looks and funny moods. He should have known that she was only using him, and although he was not sure for what exactly, he could hazard a guess. He was after all the college swot who spent most of

his time in the library, why else would a girl like that show any interest in him? Unless...

Toby suddenly felt a cold sweat come over him and without another thought he ran up the stairs into the hall of the upper library. He did not even bother to look around for any signs of Lola this time – he knew that he would find none. He had more serious concerns.

When Karagh saw Toby approaching, a teasing smile appeared on her face – a smile which quickly disappeared when she saw that he was in no mood for their usual banter. She saved what she had been working on and spun round on her chair to give him her full attention.

“What’s wrong?”

Toby was feeling too heavy-hearted to appreciate that this was almost the first time that he and Karagh had had a conversation whose content was by any stretch of the imagination serious.

“I think I’ve just made a terrible mistake.”

Toby ignored Karagh’s questioning look and wearily asked her to check the library catalogue for books by Philip Spencer. The result, impossible as it was, was somehow no surprise to him.

“You’re sure?” he said.

“Yes, absolutely positive. We have no books here by Philip Spencer – in fact there’s nothing to show that such an author ever existed.”

It was Toby’s turn to look puzzled this time.

“As you know, this used to be a copyright library,” Karagh said in answer to his unspoken question, “It has a copy of every book published by every author in the British Isles up to about 1960 so, if we don’t have any books here by someone who was supposed to be around in the late nineteenth century...”

“Then he probably didn’t exist.” Toby finished for her. He was clever enough to figure that part out for himself.

“Toby, are you going to tell me what happened to you down there?” said Karagh, moving the mouse in her hand to close down the catalogue screen that was open on the computer in front of her, “Where did that girl – Lola – go?”

Once again, Toby ignored Karagh’s query and instead wordlessly reached across to place a hand over hers – the hand holding the mouse at the ready.

“No, don’t close it down yet. There’s just one more thing...”

It was a few days later that Toby received a knock on his door. He had been in the middle of his dissertation on *Faust* once again, sat at his desk with books piled on either side of his laptop. He had not been back to the library since the day he had met Lola there; in fact he had barely left his room at all or talked to anyone since then.

“It’s open,” he said, knowing who it would be.

Karagh’s head poked in, looking oddly like that of a tortoise peeking out of its shell, unsure whether it was safe for her arms and legs to follow. Toby saw her out of the corner of his eye but did not look in her direction or say anything. He knew that he was being unfair in not making this easy for her but at that moment in time he could not have cared less. Still, Karagh somehow sensed that it was okay for her to proceed, albeit with caution, and finally entered fully into Toby’s room.

For a few long, awkward moments neither of them spoke. Toby realised suddenly that it was the first time that Karagh had ever been in his room in all the time that they had known each other. She was looking around nonchalantly, as if this was just a social visit, staring at his Bob Dylan poster, the framed family photograph

that hung over his bed, the collection of Dickens novels along his bookcase – anywhere but at him. Toby knew that she was not really looking at any of these items, however, but was just putting off what she had to tell him. He was clever enough to deduce from her behaviour that the news Karagh had for him was not good.

“Well?” he said when his curiosity finally got the better of him, not caring whether the question sounded polite or not.

“I went to the main Bodleian Library and checked for books by Philip Spencer,” said Karagh and then turned to look at him, “they’re all there – *Twilight Worlds*, *The Hardinger Prophecy* – all the ones that you mentioned.”

Toby nodded dully. He could not bring himself to feel any satisfaction at this news – he had known all along that this would be the case.

“And *The Book of the Dead*?”

This time, once again, Karagh could not meet his eyes.

“Yes, that was there too.”

“Do you have it?” said Toby, desperately hoping that she would say no.

“Oh Toby...” said Karagh, turning round. He was shocked to see that this time there were tears in her eyes.

“What is it?” he said softly.

“I checked with the admissions office for both Christ Church and the entire university but I got the same answer from both. There was no listing for a Lola Reid anywhere – not even on the National Union of Students database. She just doesn’t exist.”

“So what are you saying Karagh?” said Toby, attempting to keep the desperation out of his voice, “that she was a ghost? We both saw her for God’s sake!” Not just them either – there had been over a dozen other students in the library that day, all of whom must have noticed Lola.

“That’s not all,” Karagh said, hesitating briefly before she went on, “I did some more research. You know what a Book of the Dead is Toby?”

Toby nodded irritably.

“Of course I do,” he said, and recited what he knew about them, all the thoughts that had come into his mind while he had been down in the archive room.

“Yes all that’s right but there’s more,” said Karagh, assuming a lecturing tone which Toby found annoying. It came to him that it was probably a tone that he had used on others many times before and had the horrible thought that perhaps this was one of the reasons why he had so few friends at Christ Church, or anywhere else for that matter.

“In ancient Egypt there were some who believed that painting pictures of the dead and placing them in the Book of Coming Forth by Day wasn’t simply a means of preserving the sanctity of their souls, it was a way of controlling them beyond death. The people who believed this called themselves Necromancers – magicians who thought they had power over the spirits of the dead.”

Toby shivered involuntarily, troubled by what Karagh was saying for reasons he could not even have identified let alone admitted to. It all sounded so fantastical, ludicrous even. Had Karagh not shared the experience with him perhaps Toby could have told himself that none of it had happened but as it was he did not have that luxury.

“So what are you saying – that Philip Spencer was a latter day Necromancer? What does that make Lola – one of the spirits that he controlled?”

Karagh said nothing, although whether that was because she had no answers to his questions or had them and was simply unwilling to speak them out loud he could not tell. In truth, he did not really know whether he wanted any more answers.

“I don’t know Toby,” said Karagh at last, “I just hope she found what she was looking for, whatever it was.”

For the first time in days Toby smiled, thinking of Lola and remembering her crooked grin and laughing dark eyes.

“I hope so too,” he said, and meant it.

THE LOST ONE

On her very first day as an undergraduate at Oxford Perdy had sought out the famous chapel of her college, Merton, which she had not had the time to visit on the last occasion she had been there, when she had been a bundle of nerves during her interviews. Small yet eerie, it was a place that might have been missed easily if one had not been specifically looking for it, as Perdy had, for it melted into the antiquated surroundings with ease. It was rumoured to be the oldest part of the college and Perdy could easily believe this, for its walls were dark and pitted with age. This was in contrast to the bright, airy and well-preserved quadrangle, called Front Quad, leading up to it and the dichotomy surprised and troubled her. Why had this, a place of worship of all things, been so overlooked when its surroundings had been tended with such care? What could have warranted such concentrated and seemingly purposeful disregard?

If she was to be honest with herself, Perdy might have mistaken the chapel for part of a different building entirely from Merton; so solemn a place of worship did not appear to be an appropriate addition to an educational establishment. No, it belonged in an abbey or monastery, a place where silent men guarded their lives and secrets from the rude gaze of the outside world. And perhaps that was not too far from the truth of the matter, after all Merton had only deigned to open its doors to female students some seven hundred years after its foundation in the middle of the thirteenth century. Before that time the monastic comparison might have been most apropos.

Perdy had chosen Merton because it was not a noisy college like Christ Church or Queen’s, not flashy like Magdalen or New College, and its greatest claim to fame was its antiquity. They called Merton the Mother of All Colleges for, while nearby Balliol and University College could narrowly claim greater age, Merton was the first real college as they came to be known at Oxford in the sense that it was the first self-governing community of scholars administering its own principles under its own statutes. When the Bishop of Ely was founding the first college in Cambridge, Peterhouse, he had sent for Merton’s statutes to be used as a model. Mob Quad, on whose uneven flagstones Perdy had stood earlier that day, was Oxford’s oldest quadrangle and closing her eyes she had imagined that she could still feel the last remnants of the Middle Ages beneath her feet.

“Can I help you Miss?”

Perdy’s eyes snapped open as she spun around, surprised at the sudden interruption, and immediately identified the voice as belonging to an aged porter who had come upon her so quietly that, even in the sepulchral silence of the enclosed quadrangle, she had been taken unawares. ‘Aged’ was the adjective that Perdy had instinctively applied to her new acquaintance at first sight and a closer inspection did not bring to mind any further descriptive words of greater aptitude. Clad from head to

toe in a hat and overcoat in the college's colours, a dark blue that she found unnerving due to the resemblance that this lent his clothes to the garb of an undertaker, all that Perdy could see of the man behind the uniform was his face. It was a lined and gaunt visage, and made no more favourable in countenance by the cloudy spectacles that the porter wore, which had the strange effect of obscuring their wearer's eyes rather than emphasising them.

Realizing that she was staring, and fearing how the porter would react to such a frank appraisal, Perdy decided to answer his question. After all, it wouldn't do to be rude to the college staff on her very first day.

"No, I'm fine thank you. Just looking around – I'm new to Merton."

But the porter had already moved past her, ignoring her response in the process. He took a few steps towards the entrance to the chapel then stopped, removing his hat in a gesture that might oddly have been interpreted as the paying of his respects. Perdy accepted that he was standing before a chapel but still felt that such a motion was inappropriate, given that it appeared more suited to a place of burial than a place of worship. Nevertheless, feeling distinctly uncomfortable, she decided to leave the old man alone there. Before she could go, however, she was surprised to be addressed by him again.

"It's sad what's happened to the old place isn't it?"

"Yes I did notice that it seemed rather dilapidated," Perdy said, before feeling an immediate need to qualify her words for fear of offending the old porter, "at least in comparison with the rest of the place I mean."

"It wasn't always like this you know. Along with the hall, once this was the most important part of the college, where academic ceremonies were held as well as religious services. Some of the greatest names in the history of England have passed through those doors – and some have never left."

More than a little taken aback by his words Perdy felt moved to ask a question.

"What do you mean when you say they never left?"

"Walter de Merton was Bishop of Rochester as well as Henry III's Lord Chancellor and the college he founded produced four Archbishops of Canterbury in the fourteenth century alone. He and many of Merton's Fellows are buried in the chapel, as well as Sir Thomas Bodley, who founded the Bodleian Library," the porter said. Then his expression grew almost smug as he turned to her and finished by saying "That's a place that you'll probably become quite familiar with before too long."

Perdy had had little experience of college porters in Oxford but she suspected that they rarely talked in a manner as educated yet at the same time as condescending as that which her companion was doing right now.

"You're very well informed, Mister..."

"Yes I certainly am. And it's Professor, by the way: Professor Isaac Mordalfus."

There was nothing ambiguous about the old man's expression this time; there was a wide smile on his face and Perdy was fairly certain that his obvious mirth was directed at her. And rightfully so, after all, she had just mistaken one of the most distinguished members of Merton's faculty for a porter! The fact that he looked the part was beside the point, given that everything in his demeanour screamed out his academic credentials. The worst part of it was that Professor Mordalfus taught her subject here and her first tutorial with him was scheduled to take place on Monday morning.

“Pleased to meet you Professor,” were the only words she managed to get out, deciding to make her excuses and leave with as much haste as was seemly, “But I really must be moving on.”

“Yes of course, but I hope you’ll forgive me for asking you to answer two of my questions.”

Perdy, who had been ready to walk off in the opposite direction, stopped, suddenly uncomfortable under the Professor’s cloudy gaze. However, she couldn’t very well refuse to answer his questions, especially when he had been so forthcoming with her.

“How can I help you?”

“As you have told me, this is your first day in our esteemed college but rather than meet the other new students I’m curious as to why you have ended up here, in so dark and ill-favoured a place as this one?”

“I just needed a break from everything for a few moments. You see I’m not too good with lots of people for too long,” she said, wondering as she did so why she had to answer such a personal question at all, “Hence the search for isolation, as you put it. I’m surprised at your description of this chapel as ‘dark and ill-favoured’ though; I think it’s a sweet little place.”

The Professor’s face registered surprise.

“But surely you must have heard the stories about this place.”

“What stories?” Perdy said, puzzled, “The college prospectus doesn’t mention anything like that about the chapel – it only says that regular services are held here and that it is occasionally used for concerts and plays.”

At that the Professor shook his head in seeming disappointment.

“I can see that you need a history lesson. You’re one of my students aren’t you?” at her nod he reached into the capacious pockets of his overcoat and pulled out a small writing pad, scribbled on it, then tore off a page and handed it to her. Perdy saw that he had written the titles of half a dozen books on the page and she looked up with a quizzical expression on her face.

“Just some light preparatory reading, for our first tutorial.”

Although she was inwardly cursing her luck, Perdy did her best to smile sweetly and excuse herself. It was only as she was leaving that she turned around, remembering that the Professor had failed to ask her his second question.

The Professor, who appeared engrossed once more in the chapel’s architecture, took a moment to register her return and looked up with a blank expression, as if he had already forgotten who she was.

“My other question?” he said in surprise when she asked him, then nodded, “Oh, I just wanted to know what your name was. After all, you do have an advantage over me in that regard.”

Perdy coloured slightly then replied “Of course, it’s Perdita Murray. Call me Perdy.”

“Oh my goodness, you’ve met the Ghoul already!” said Hilary, her voice rising to a half-shriek.

Perdy did her best to suppress the chuckle that threatened to erupt from her throat when she heard the nickname that Hilary had for Professor Mordalfus – it was so fitting given the don’s gaunt appearance and the grave expression that had never seemed to leave his face when she had met him the previous day. She had already giggled a great deal since she had met Hilary, who was her aunt. She was not Perdy’s real aunt of course – it would have been odd if she was given that Hilary was only one

year older than her – that was simply her semi-official title. As a college aunt, Hilary was the second year student who was supposed to look after Perdy during fresher's week. Usually 'looking after' in college terms simply meant that the aunt in question told the first year student to whom they had been assigned where the nearest pub was and then left them to their own devices. For this reason Perdy had not had high expectations and she had therefore been pleasantly surprised to find a nice (if virtually indecipherable) handwritten note in her pigeonhole earlier that day inviting her to come up and have tea and cakes in Hilary's room.

Having nothing better to do, Perdy had taken up the offer, albeit with a certain amount of trepidation. Fortunately, it turned out to be a decision that she would not regret. Hilary, barely five feet tall with a shock of electric red hair, was one of those people that it was almost impossible not to like straight away. She had an infectious laugh and a ready smile that rarely seemed to leave her face. Best of all she was full of stories about Merton, which meant that there had been no uncomfortable silences between them, since, as soon as one or the other of them had run out of things to say, Hilary had taken that as an invitation to launch into another one of her anecdotes. The girl was a born raconteur! Not that Perdy was complaining – she was quite happy to stay in Hilary's room as long as her aunt would let her. Hilary was lucky enough to be staying in St. Alban's Quad, a delightful quadrangle filled with double rooms dating from the Edwardian era, the most sought after quarters in the college. Each room was divided into two bedrooms, both of which were individually as large as Perdy's rather more modest accommodation in the Holywell Buildings, a hideous concrete goldfish bowl erected in the sixties on St. Cross Road, some way away from the main college, where most of the post grad students tended to be dumped (along with a few unfortunate undergraduate freshers like her). Hilary also had a living room that was larger than both of the bedrooms combined, as well as oak-panelled to boot, and with her aunt's home-made Battenberg cake and loose leaf Darjeeling tea thrown in, it was rather like Perdy's idea of heaven, at least by student standards.

The gossip that Hilary shared with Perdy had largely concerned people that she did not really know, but all of the other girl's stories were so hilarious that it hardly mattered. In some ways Perdy was glad that she did not know the people who were the subject matter of Hilary's stories, since she felt sure that she would be unable to stop herself from laughing if she encountered them and associated them with what she had learned from her aunt. Some of Hilary's tales about the faculty of Merton bordered on the truly scandalous, in particular a story about one of the married tutors and their relationship with a current undergraduate student (of the same sex). On the subject of the faculty, Perdy had felt compelled to mention her own encounter with Professor Mordalfus earlier that day and this had led to Hilary's revelation concerning his nickname.

"Why do you call him the Ghoul?" Perdy said.

"Well you've met him, so you can see the resemblance," said Hilary, a mischievous grin on her face, "although to be honest there is actually much more to it than that". Hilary paused then, as if uncertain for the first time as to whether she should go on.

Perdy leaned forward, intrigued.

"He's been around for a very long time, you see, and there are all sorts of stories about him," Hilary continued, then frowned slightly, "I think he was in the Church of England at one point, before he became a lecturer I mean."

Perdy nodded, "That makes sense – he teaches Philosophy and Theology, doesn't he?"

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Hilary, although there was now a note of something that Perdy could not quite identify in her voice, “that’s not his speciality though.”

“What is then?” said Perdy, although she was suddenly not quite sure that she wanted to know the answer.

“Demonology.”

Perdy could not quite believe what Hilary had said and asked her to repeat herself.

“Demonology – you know, the systematic study of demons and beliefs about demons – all of that weird stuff,” said Hilary, waving her hands in the air vaguely. “The Prof’s particular expertise is in the area of Exegesis – I think that means interpreting holy texts like scriptures and the like – in fact, I think he’s sort of the global authority on it or something. There’s even a whole wing of the college library devoted to the subject, even though he’s the only one here who lectures in Demonology and he has at most one or two post grad students a year to supervise.”

“I’ve heard of Demonology and Exegesis before,” said Perdy, determined not to appear ignorant, “I’m just surprised that it’s taught at Oxford as a, you know, serious subject.” What did not surprise her was that Professor Mordalfus was the one who taught the subject – spending all of his time talking and reading about the bizarre and the unexplained probably suited him.

“Oh, the Prof takes it very seriously.” Hilary nodded and the next words she spoke were said almost to herself, “Some might even say that he takes the whole thing too seriously”.

Perdy waited, expecting Hilary to go on and was surprised when she added nothing further. Perdy almost felt uncomfortable about asking any more questions about the Professor, given how much the atmosphere in the room had changed since she had first mentioned him. The stream of information that had poured forth from Hilary’s mouth without the slightest encouragement from her had dried to a trickle, and a reluctant one at that. Perdy’s now fully aroused curiosity would not allow her to leave the subject alone altogether but she decided that if she was going to press the issue she would do so in a more circumspect manner.

“I’m surprised that the Professor left the Church at all, I mean, if he believes in the paranormal and all that other stuff then it can’t have been because he lost his faith or anything,” she said, taking care to make sure that it sounded as if she were simply voicing her thoughts out loud rather than just asking another question. She paused, then added “Don’t you think?” as if she had only just remembered that the other girl was in the room.

“Oh I don’t think that the problem was a lack of faith,” said Hilary, rising to the bait, “If anything the problem was that he believed *too much*. I mean, don’t get me wrong, the Prof’s an extremely clever man but some of his theories were a bit eccentric, almost old school you might say. Particularly when it came to Deliverance Ministry.”

“Deliverance Ministry?” said Perdy, puzzled. She had come across the term once before when she had watched a horror film at a friend’s house for a teenaged dare years earlier. She could hardly believe that it was a term that was actually used outside of the movies though. “You mean, like *The Exorcist*?”

Hilary smiled infinitesimally “I don’t know a huge amount about it but there are rumours that his departure from the Church wasn’t exactly voluntary, if you know what I mean. I don’t think he ever put aside his interest in the subject though.”

Perdy was not surprised about the circumstances of the Professor’s departure from the Church. The last thing that the constantly reforming Church of England

needed in these days of female clergy and gay marriages was a throwback to the days of faith healing and witch burnings. However, even if the Church was finished with him, it was clear that Isaac Mordalfus was not entirely done with the Church.

“He still has a thing for religion though, doesn’t he?”

It was Hilary’s turn to look puzzled this time.

“What do you mean?”

Perdy recounted her conversation with the Professor earlier that day, finishing with his cryptic comments concerning the chapel. At this point it was Hilary’s turn to look puzzled.

“I can’t remember hearing any stories about the chapel. As far as I’m aware it’s just a sweet little place, like you said, where students go when they want to have a bit of peace and quiet. It’s nothing to do with being religious or anything – I have a Muslim friend who goes there occasionally when she wants to just get away from everything.”

“But the way he spoke about it, it was as if there was some horrid secret that the chapel was hiding,” said Perdy, shuddering as she remembered his words. *Dark and ill favoured* – that was how he had described the chapel to her.

“Did he say anything else?” said Hilary.

“No, he simply gave me a piece of paper with the titles of some books that he wanted me to read on it,” said Perdy, and handed over the note in question to Hilary.

“Any suggestions, oh wise aunt?”

Hilary looked up at that and Perdy was happy to see that her earlier good humour, which had faded when they had started to talk about the Professor, was back in her eyes.

“Just one,” she said, then handed the note back to Perdy, “I’d suggest that you get yourself down to the library.”

A couple of hours later Perdy was standing back outside the chapel, a disconsolate expression on her face and a bag overflowing with books hanging limply by her side. The sun was now setting and the shadows cast by the college buildings had lengthened across the quadrangle. It was twilight, a time favoured by ghosts, Perdy recalled, because like them it existed between two states, neither night nor day, neither living nor entirely dead.

As if on cue, Professor Mordalfus chose that moment to make his reappearance. He did not creep up on her this time but strode grandly into view through the shaded archway connecting Mob Quad and Front Quad, an actor on his favourite stage. If he was perturbed by Perdy’s obvious discomfiture he did not show it, and his smile was as secret and sardonic as ever.

“Well, Miss Murray, have you had a productive afternoon?”

“Nothing,” Perdy said, “I found absolutely nothing.”

She stopped, as if waiting for the Professor to speak, but when it became clear that he had nothing to say she went on.

“I looked in every corner of the college library, even accessing the archives and the restricted books section, but there was nothing to suggest in any way that the chapel had ever been haunted. The librarian, the faculty, even the porters that I asked – none of them knew anything about a dark history being associated with this place. I’m sorry Professor, I failed.”

For a few long moments that felt more like minutes or hours Professor Mordalfus simply stared at Perdy, as if waiting for her to go on. When he realized that

she had in fact finished the Professor looked disappointed for the first time and it was then that he finally spoke.

“Did you ask anyone else?”

Startled by the question Perdy almost answered in the negative.

“No, not really, just my college aunt.”

“Hilary Turner.”

Just two words, that was all that the Professor said but for some reason it made Perdy shudder suddenly with a deep chill.

“Yes, I suppose that could be her, although come to think of it I never asked for her full name.”

“Come with me,” said the Professor, and entered the chapel. He did not even look back to see whether she followed (although, of course, she did).

The chapel was dimly lit as usual although tiny lamps flared at generous intervals throughout its gothic interior, casting an eerie light that concealed as much as it illuminated. Professor Mordalfus took a few short steps only before stopping unexpectedly and sitting down on one of the long benches at the back of the chapel. At a sharp gesture from him Perdy took a pew beside the Professor and waited, although she had no idea what for until he started to speak.

“She was a popular girl, pretty and clever, which is common in Oxford, but also kind, which is unfortunately rather more rare,” he said, not looking at her but instead keeping his gaze fixed upon the choir and beyond it the high altar at the front of the chapel, “She came from a small town on the South Coast and always loved the sea, which might have made life in any landlocked city other than Oxford something of a disappointment. Fortunately, however, with punting, rowing and the numerous other delights to be found among this city’s numerous waterways, the memory of her beloved sea never became too distant. So sad then, that that was what led her to her death.”

As the Professor had been speaking a terrible foreboding had begun somewhere deep within Perdy and had only grown stronger the longer he had gone on. With a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach Perdy turned around to look at the inscription on the bench on which she had been sitting and her worst fears were confirmed.

“IN MEMORIAM, BELOVED DAUGHTER AND FRIEND, H-”

Perdy closed her eyes in sudden grief, unable to read any further.

“How did it happen?” she asked in a whisper, not able to bring herself to look at the Professor’s face as he answered.

“One weekend Hilary went home and simply never came back. The details as they were reported back to the college were, perhaps understandably, somewhat hazy. A body had been found washed up on the beach early on a Sunday morning. It was identified and a verdict of accidental death by misadventure was returned by the coroner’s court. Suicide was ruled out.”

Unable any longer to hold back the tears that had for some time threatened to fall, Perdy began to cry silently. Either because he did not notice or did not care, Professor Mordalfus went on inexorably with the story.

“The college made a low key announcement about the whole thing, not least because there was a concern, never voiced, that the parents blamed Oxford with all of its attendant stresses and pitfalls for their daughter’s death. Her friends felt that there should be something to commemorate her within the college and at their request the chaplain sanctioned the inscription on this bench. A happy ending, all things considered, don’t you think?”

Perdy, shocked by his callousness, shook away her tears angrily.

“How can you say that? She was so young, had so much more to experience and give...”

“Yes of course,” said Professor Mordalfus, his tone changing from dismissive to eager as he went on “but I’m talking about you now.”

“Me?” said Perdy, taken aback.

“Yes, you *saw* the lost soul, Perdita Murray whose name means lost one, saw it and communicated with it. There’s so much more we have to talk about.”

Perdy backed away from the Professor as sudden understanding dawned.

“You knew all along. It was some sort of test!”

“Calm yourself down now, let’s talk about this like adults...”

“Never!” Perdita half-shouted, uncaring of the hallowed nature of their surroundings, “I’ll never speak to you again.”

She picked herself up off the bench, wiped her tears and fled out of the chapel, not pausing to look back. Mordalfus watched her go impassively, only a slight frown at the corner of his mouth betraying his disappointment.

“Have no fear my little lost one, we will speak again. After all, we have three years together,” he said aloud but to himself, then smiled suddenly, “and our first tutorial is on Monday.”

CITY OF RAVENS

This is hard for me, writing all of this down. I’ve never been particularly good with words, and I hate sitting here, straining my eyes in the dim light cast by the street lights opposite the roof that I’m on, trying to remember who I was when all I want to do is fly away and forget all those old worries.

And I could do that too – fly away, I mean – after all I am a Raven.

I suppose I should start with my name since I remember names being important in the world that I left behind when I became a Raven. Although it’s not really true to say that I *became* a Raven because that’s what I always was inside, the human side of me being just a shell. Jack says that it’s like I was a caterpillar before, and that all I did was break out of my cocoon so I could be a butterfly, like I was meant to be. I suppose that means the rest of you, those that don’t have Raven in their blood, are still in your cocoons.

Jack. That’s the name that he used when I first met him, although that isn’t really how I think of him anymore. Like I said, names aren’t how the Ravens relate to people, or to things. Let’s take something like the sky as an example. Such a small word isn’t it, sky, just three letters. Yet it encompasses such a huge thing and when we, the Ravens, think of it that’s what comes to mind – a vast empty space that goes on forever, even if you spent your entire life flying you couldn’t explore more than a fraction of it. And that’s how we express it to each other, in the Raven language of thought and memory – emptiness, endless and untamed. But maybe I’m getting ahead of myself there, since there’s so much more that you have to understand about the Ravens before you can get what I mean when I talk about the Raven language.

First I should tell you more about Jack – after all, he’s where it all started.

When I think of him what comes to mind is the image of an old crow, grizzled and bad-tempered, just perched on a ledge watching the world go by. That’s his use-name, by the way, Old Crow, although he doesn’t mind me just calling him Jack. He’s

just about the only one that I let call me by the use-name the Ravens gave me early on: Little Feather. Raven or not, I still prefer to be called by my old name, Michael!

Michael Laine. When I write it down like that it's like I'm referring to someone else, so little relationship does the person that the name belongs to bear to who I am now. It all started when I met Jack. Even now, among all the Ravens he's still the one that I'm closest to because he's the one that showed me who I truly was by introducing me to a world that I've always been a part of, even though I've only ever been dimly aware of it.

It started about three years ago, just after I turned thirteen, with the dreams. Like any child I'd suffered from nightmares that usually started as soon as my mother switched off the light after kissing me good night. Prior to that my nightmares, though frightening to a young child, were pretty normal – I was scared of monsters hiding under my bed and in my wardrobe, and whenever I heard the floorboards inside the house creaking or the wind rustling the leaves of the trees outside my windows I was convinced that it was a vampire or a zombie coming to carry me away to its crypt. While the nightmares scared me they didn't tend to stay with me - the rising of the sun was usually more than enough to dispel their impact.

My new dreams were different. There were no monsters in them but they were always the same. I began the dream in my bedroom then imagined myself rising out of bed against my will. I hung there, suspended, unable to return to my bed because of some force that refused to give in to gravity and let me go. Instead, I found myself able to float around the room as if I were flying without wings. But exciting as this seemed to begin with, in the dream I became frantic as I felt myself confined in a small space when all that I really wanted was to be free. At that point the dream became a nightmare. I began to throw myself against what I now saw as the walls of my prison, like a fly or a wasp that had been contained in a glass jar. Eventually I kept throwing myself against the only weak point in the room – the window. The inevitable always happened when I did this, the window broke and I fell out onto the hard ground outside.

I always woke myself up before I could actually hit the ground in the dream, but that did nothing to settle me. The dream, which took familiar elements such as my bedroom and my house and twisted them into something dark and unsettling, always stayed with me for the rest of the day. Unlike my other nightmares the sun was powerless to banish it, and so I constantly found myself thinking back to the dream during the day, while I was at school and when I got home, dreading that it would be repeated.

It wasn't like I could talk to anyone about it. My father was a criminal lawyer and the only times that I ever saw him were mornings, when he was in too much of a rush to have time for me, or late in the evenings when he was usually blissfully stretched out in front of the television and I could tell that the last thing that he wanted to do was have a deep and meaningful conversation with his awkward teenaged son. It was a similar story with my mother. She was a district nurse, which meant that while her hours weren't as hectic as those of my father it hardly mattered because, between having to cook all our meals, drop off and pick up my younger brother and I from school, and generally make up for everything that the three men of the house didn't do, it wasn't as if she had a huge amount of time to hear about what I was going through either. As for my pain-in-the-backside little brother Daniel, well, at the time he was having far too much fun making my life a misery to listen to my problems, even if I'd wanted to tell him about them, which I didn't.

But really, what teenager shares his growing pains with his parents, especially when they were as weird as what I had to cope with? The only people that I could really have talked to were other people my own age – I think they were called *friends* – and I'm big enough to admit that I didn't really have any, either at school or in my neighbourhood.

Wow, reading that last sentence back to myself now it sounds like quite an admission: I had no friends. In case you think I'm a total loser I'd better qualify that. (Of course it's not as if I really care what anyone who reads this thinks about me anyway, but since I'm taking the trouble to write all of this down I might as well make sure that you get all the facts straight). I wasn't bullied or isolated on purpose while I was at secondary school; it was more that I simply didn't register on most people's radars. I can't really explain why.

The comprehensive that I used to go to was a pretty rough place. It was right in the heart of the Oxford suburb of Blackbird Leys, a mean, run-down area whose inhabitants seemed to spend most of their time trying to think of ways to escape from there with varying degrees of success. At fifteen I suppose that I just managed to leave earlier than many of the others. I can't think of anyone from Blackbird Leys comprehensive that ever managed to pass a single 'A' Level exam, let alone go on to university. Apart from my Dad of course.

I know that doesn't make much sense – I mean, why was I at a crappy school if my Dad was a hotshot lawyer? The simple answer was that when he graduated from university he had what I suppose you'd call an attack of conscience and instead of heading to the City to make pots of money he chose to 'give something back to the community' as he put it, so he became a criminal defence solicitor in Oxford. All of his clients are on legal aid, hence the reason why our family lives in a matchbox-size terraced house in Blackbird Leys instead of in one of the more upmarket areas of Oxford, like Norham Gardens, where all of the dons and commuters from the City live.

A place like Blackbird Leys, where life is a constant series of setbacks and broken dreams, breeds a hard kind of person and, unfortunately for the children at the local comprehensive, the dehumanising process that makes someone like that begins while they're young. You see, the school was more like a prison or a juvenile detention centre than an education establishment. Hard-eyed children wandered around in groups looking for weaknesses in others that they could exploit. There was no point looking to the teachers for help or protection – they walled themselves away in the common room when they weren't teaching, like wardens in a prison, blissfully ignorant of what the inmates got up to in their own time. There were only two ways to survive in a place like that – either you joined a group for safety or you tried to do your best to avoid attracting attention. Most people tried the first option because in the majority of cases the second option just didn't seem to work.

Now as I've already admitted I was a nerd when I was at school it shouldn't come as any surprise that joining one of the groups wasn't really a choice that was open to me. I mean, it wasn't as if anyone was going out of their way to attract pale, thin, bespectacled boys who preferred computer games to joyriding. So I went for the other option – I tried to disappear. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, depending on how you look at it, it was a course of action that worked a little too well. Okay, so I was never bullied or anything, and perhaps I should be grateful for that, but in a strange way I might almost have preferred that to being ignored. At least if people thought you were important enough to make the effort to bully you then it meant that

they had registered that you existed. It meant that you were somebody. I wasn't special or even different - I was just nobody.

So I decided to do something about it and get myself noticed. It wasn't like I wanted to be part of the in-crowd or anything that stupid (Thank God I wasn't that shallow). I really couldn't say what I was thinking at the time, I just remember being so *frustrated*. It was everything – my family, my school, my entire life. I was sick of just waiting for something to happen, for things to get better, so in the end I just decided to make things happen. Quite why I thought that robbing the local convenience store would make things so much better is something that, looking back, I really can't explain.

It was a stupid idea and of course, perhaps deservedly, I ended up getting caught. It wasn't like I had a clue what I was doing. I planned the whole escapade by myself (after all, who was I going to ask: my parents, one of the school bullies? I may have been looking for attention, but not that kind of attention). Planning is probably not the right word to use either – I just sort of bunked off school one afternoon and picked the first shop I saw. I can't remember what it was that I tried to hide up my sleeve, all that I recall is that it fell out long before I reached the door. The shopkeeper, a Turkish man called Mr Ali was actually surprisingly blasé about the whole thing. I think it was because he had had a few brushes with the law in his time and fortunately for me my father had represented him a couple of times. He decided not to press charges but that didn't mean that I got off particularly lightly.

Mum got mad at me, which was pretty hard to deal with. You see, she wasn't the type to shout or scream at you, she just let you know how disappointed she was that you'd let her down and it left you feeling really small inside, like you'd let yourself down as well. Dad went ballistic, which I considered an achievement on my part, as it was rare enough for him to play any part in the lives of Daniel and I, let alone get that worked up about it. I still think that he was more indignant about the fact that I had given the Oxfordshire Constabulary ammunition to make jibes about him when he was on the duty rota at the local police station than anything else, though. Daniel, of course, loved the fact that I was *persona non grata* in our house, and took even greater pleasure in reminding me of this whenever he could.

They took it pretty seriously at school as well. I had been looking to get noticed and I suppose that I got my wish granted. I certainly didn't find myself surrounded by lots of new friends who were impressed by my newfound criminal record, but then I hadn't really been expecting that either. What I did notice though was the fact that I suddenly registered on people's radars, wherever I went I could hear the pupils exchanging theatrically loud stage whispers: *He's the boy that got caught shoplifting*. The teachers looked at me differently too. Before I was like a bug that they'd stepped on and were trying to scrape off their shoe as unobtrusively as possible. Now there was wariness in their eyes, like I was a bug with a sting that could hurt them if it wanted to.

It was more than that because the teachers, the headmaster, the school didn't know what box to put me into and that scared the life out of them. I wasn't a typical juvenile delinquent, you see, because I'd never offended before, I came from a nice family, and I didn't hang around with the bad kids. Of course, that was only because the bad kids thought I was a loser, but they weren't to know that. They didn't know what to do with me because all the usual coping mechanisms, lines, detention, suspension even, suddenly seemed inadequate, childish even. So they did what adults generally do when they have a problem that they don't really want to deal with – they called in a therapist.

At first I actually regarded it almost as a badge of honour, having my very own therapist. That was something that was normally reserved for the *really* bad cases – the ones that, just five or ten years ago, would have been permanently excluded in the first instance. In this age of touchy-feely discipline in schools, however, teachers who would quite happily have expelled the pupils that caused them too many problems were obliged to give them counselling before they could take more extreme measures. It was a soft option and everyone knew the real reason it existed was to limit the school's liability rather than actually help the children who were the supposed beneficiaries of this 'punishment'. In all honesty I couldn't have cared less what would happen to me by that stage – they could have reintroduced corporal punishment and I wouldn't have flinched. I have to admit though that I was shallow enough to get a sort of thrill while walking down the corridor between periods and having everyone who passed me know that I was heading for therapy. They even called in a special counsellor for me – that's how I met Jack.

Appropriately enough, things between Jack and I got off to a weird start. I was just sitting in the sanatorium or 'san', the school infirmary where all of the counselling sessions were conducted, waiting for someone to turn up and collect me. It was a wildly inappropriate place for therapy to take place – a large, brightly lit room with a strong smell of antiseptic in the air. There was no comfy psychiatrist's couch, only a couple of hard plastic chairs and a low bed with damp, moth-eaten old blankets that surely weren't hygienic. I'm not sure what the reasoning was behind the choice of the san for this kind of thing – maybe because they thought the sickroom was the best place for disturbed kids as well as injured or ill ones, or maybe it was just because they had run out of space anywhere else. The place was just beginning to creep me out – it reminded me of a mortuary on a television crime drama – when one of the doors on the left hand side of the san opened. In walked a little old man, who crossed to the right hand side of the room and then walked out again without even looking in my direction. For a second I thought I had imagined the old man until he popped his head around the door and regarded me for the first time.

"Well, are you coming or not?"

Although his face was all wrinkled up like old leather, the old man's eyes were incredibly clear and penetrating and I think I'd have followed him even if he hadn't asked me, just out of sheer curiosity if nothing else. What struck me immediately, and this is really ironic considering what happened later and what's happening to me right now, is that everything about the old man was birdlike somehow. His movements were jerky, his voice crisp and shrill, and even his clothes, a tatty jacket and corduroy trousers with an ultra old fashioned cravat tie, hung on him as loosely and untidily as a bird's ruffled feathers. Despite the strangeness of his appearance and behaviour it didn't even occur to me at the time that he might not even be a professional counsellor at all – from the way he looked and acted I'd probably have been justified in thinking that he was more likely to be a tramp who had just wandered in off the streets.

We walked out of the san and into the hallway, which was strangely empty and silent, even allowing for the fact that it was between periods. Most of the teachers and pupils would be in classes but there still should have been the occasional sixth-former on a free period or a caretaker carrying out an odd job wandering around. As it was it felt like we had the whole school to ourselves – almost as if time had stopped and we were the only ones who had not been affected. At least the old man – whose name I still didn't know because he hadn't spoken since he had asked me to follow him – seemed to have a clear idea where he was going. This was probably just as

well because I was starting to feel a bit lost. Blackbird Leys Comprehensive was an oddly vertical building, several storeys high with each floor having just a handful of rooms on it, and it towered over the other structures, mostly small terraced houses and shops, on the street on which it was located. The old man took the steps up without a backward glance and I followed him, first to the first floor, then the second, then the third. And he didn't stop there.

It seems a bit odd that I didn't speak up at this point, if not to ask him where he was going at least to ask his name, and I'm not really sure that I can explain why. Perhaps because I was out of breath from climbing all those stairs or maybe because the whole thing was starting to feel like a dream and, as with any dream I didn't feel the need to ask any questions but just went with the flow. But even I, accepting as I had become about the strangeness of the whole situation by that stage, was surprised when we ended up on the roof.

I turned and looked at Jack and it suddenly seemed as if a strange change had come over him. His clothes and body were as shabby and worn as ever but it was as if a veil had lifted from his eyes and face and being out in the open there on the roof seemed to energise him somehow. He closed his eyes, turned his face to the sky and just stood there, breathing in and out deeply several times. In other circumstances I might have been content to just let the old man stand there like that for as long as he liked but since it was late Autumn, there was a distinct chill in the air, and I was beginning to feel increasingly uncomfortable the longer I spent in his company, I attempted to excuse myself.

"I'd better be heading back to class, Mister..." I started, but Jack, who at that point had still not even told me his name, cut me off.

"Isn't it beautiful up here?" he said, opening his eyes and staring into the distance.

Startled by the question, I looked around trying to see what it was that he was looking at that seemed to stir him so. I saw nothing particularly spectacular – just the dull, grey skyline of Blackbird Leys with housing tenements, shops and roads in every direction as far as the eye could see. I turned to him puzzled and for a moment a look of exasperation crossed Jack's face.

"Use your eyes boy – the senses you inherited with your blood."

I had no idea what the old man was talking about – both of my parents wore glasses so if anything bad eyesight would be the only thing that I should have inherited with my 'blood', as he put it. Still, the old man seemed certain that I was missing something so I looked again.

At first I could make out nothing more than I'd seen when I'd looked earlier but after some time, when I'd strained my eyes so hard that they began to hurt, I began to make out the dim outline of the elegant towers, smooth domes and intricate crenellations beyond the smog of Blackbird Leys. It was the other Oxford that those in my suburb rarely saw, the city of dreaming spires that was dominated by the grand colleges of an ancient university. My breath suddenly taken away, I felt unable able to form complete sentences and the next words out of my mouth were single ones.

"Oxford" I breathed, before turning to Jack with puzzlement in my eyes and saying one word more, "How?"

I knew that what I was seeing was an impossibility. We were far enough away from the city centre that the university buildings should have been no more than vague outlines on the clearest of days, yet here I was, able to perceive with perfect clarity the contours of Magdalen Tower over two miles away – and that on a cloudy October day when visibility ought to have been poor.

“I already told you boy, it’s in your blood.” Jack said, and smiled.

I grew irritated then with the old man’s evasive manner and the obscure answers that he insisted on giving.

“My name isn’t ‘boy’, it’s Michael.”

“Okay Michael,” Jack said, although the smile never left his face and his voice held an annoying tone of condescension as he continued to speak, “Would you like to see more?”

I nodded impulsively, without really thinking about what it was that I was agreeing to, and before I could take back the gesture Jack grabbed my hand and the world went black. I mean literally – one moment we were both standing on the roof, our clothes and hair buffeted by the wind, the dull autumn sunlight on both our faces, the next I seemed to lose consciousness altogether. When I regained my senses I was standing on another roof with Jack with no memory of how I had got there or of the intervening time.

“How?” I asked, for the second, but not the last, time that day.

Jack tutted to himself and when he answered it seemed that he was not really speaking to me, merely thinking out loud.

“I should have realised that would happen on the first flight. The human half, unable to comprehend what is happening, becomes unconscious as a defence mechanism. The bird part must have taken over completely for a few moments. Yes, very dangerous, a good thing the boy was with me – otherwise it might have been permanent.”

For a moment I tried to process what he was saying but the effort was too great and I snapped.

“First flight!” I half-screamed, heedless of the sound I was making in view of our location, high above everyone’s heads, “Are you really trying to suggest that we both flew from the school roof to... here...”

I trailed off and my rant stopped dead in mid-flow as I realised where we were now standing. This roof was very different from that of Blackbird Leys Comprehensive – for a start we were much higher up and it was considerably older and smaller, more like the turret of a castle than the top of a modern building. We also seemed to be much closer to the centre of town. Familiar Oxford landmarks were clearly visible on every side – there was the tower of Queen’s College, further on was the pointed spire of the University Church of St Mary and beyond that, its outline less clear but nevertheless unmistakable, was the blue-green dome of the Radcliffe Camera. When I peeked over the edge of the crenellation and saw the bridge stretching away beneath us I immediately guessed where we were for it was Magdalen Bridge and that meant that we were standing on the roof of Magdalen Tower, tallest of all of Oxford’s dreaming spires.

For a moment I was speechless, too taken aback by the awe-inspiring surroundings to wonder about how I had arrived in this place. This was by far the closest that I had ever been to any of the university buildings, which truly might as well have been in another world for many people who came from the poorer suburbs of the city. Most of the inhabitants of Blackbird Leys had no reason to travel into the city centre – their schools, shops and workplaces were not there and, unlike the millions of tourists that came to Oxford every year, they had no desire to see the sights that had made their city so famous. I had always regarded the university with mixed feelings of indifference and curiosity – indifference because I knew that, no matter how hard I worked at school I would never go there and curiosity because it remained a place that inspired awe for the magnificence of its buildings and its

centuries-old traditions. And here I now was, nestled in the very heart of one of Oxford's most famous and prestigious colleges, and no one was any the wiser.

"So you wanted to see more Michael – what do you think now?"

"It's incredible." That was all I could say, even though there were a hundred questions which suddenly could not take shape on my lips. Luckily, and not for the first or the last time, Jack seemed to know what I was thinking.

"You want to know how this is possible don't you?"

I nodded wordlessly and Jack turned from me to look out across the city. When he spoke again it was in hushed tones, as if what he was telling me was secret or somehow sacred, like a fable or parable.

"Among ourselves we refer to our kind as Ravens or sometimes just as the People but we have another, older name: *Corvix*. Some think that we come from both birds and humans but in reality we existed before either. In truth it is more likely that we were the source for both races for we have the ability to cross between their worlds. We are the lords of two realms – that of earth and air – but we cannot exist solely in either one."

Jack told me many more things while we were on the roof that day, although it could actually have been many days that we spent there for I lost all track of time while I was with him. Listening to Jack it was like the modern world faded away to be replaced by another place and time entirely, where there were no buildings or cars and men and birds communicated with each other as easily as they did with their own kind. I learned many things about the Ravens in that time – about their secret language and their furtive existence in the world of humans. Most of the People were like Jack, itinerants and drifters, usually without jobs or homes, living just beneath the notice of the rest of the world.

When he finally finished speaking of the *Corvix* (something ancient moved inside me in response to that name every time I heard it) Jack sat back on his heels and stared at me. He was clearly waiting for me to say something but, unsure of what he wanted from me, I dropped my gaze to the ground, embarrassed and slightly unnerved.

"Well," he said finally, "What do you choose?"

"Choose?" I repeated, "What do you mean?"

"Are you coming with me or staying here?"

Even after all that he had told me I was surprised by the request. Even if I was a Raven (and now I knew deep down, had always known in some strange way, that I was) I was still a teenager, still at school and had a home and a family that I would miss, and would miss me if I simply left with Jack. I told him this and he seemed unperturbed by my response.

"Yes, it will be difficult for you at first, but believe me when I tell you that staying here will be even harder. Have you started having the dreams yet?"

I nodded dumbly and he smiled humourlessly.

"They will get worse, your behaviour more erratic, if you continue to stay here, unschooled as to your very nature. Had you grown up amongst your own kind then you would have already been taught how to shield your dreams and control the animal side of you. There are tales of lone Ravens who, having never had contact with their own kind, have become little more than birds themselves, purely emotion, existing from one day to the next with no thought in their heads other than where their next meal will come from. The dangers of staying are too great Michael."

His words had an impact on me but I still could not get thoughts of my family out of my head – my father, coming back from work to find me gone; Mum, in floods

of tears while holding close Daniel, who had an uncomprehending expression on his small face.

“I have to go back,” I said to Jack, whose face fell until I added, “Just once more.”

Jack took my hand again but this time when we travelled by an effort of will I stayed conscious. I’m not sure whether my body changed but I felt as free as a bird as I soared through the clouds, miles above the world, the wind rushing through my hair and the taste of cold air and clouds in my mouth. I closed my eyes briefly and when I opened them again we were both standing in my bedroom at home.

If I had had any doubts about the choice which I had by then already made, they were dispelled by the journey. From being wild and free I suddenly felt horribly trapped inside the four walls of my room, which had never before felt so small. As I looked around the bedroom at the posters, books and other paraphernalia of my life I suddenly felt no connection to any of it. It was truly as if I was in a stranger’s bedroom – it belonged to the old me, the one before I had awakened to my Raven heritage.

“We should go.”

That was all I said to Jack but, although I could tell that he was pleased by my decision, we did not leave straight away.

“You should leave something for them,” he said, pointing to a picture of my parents on the wall, “so that they do not worry. A note perhaps?”

I started writing a note, but as you might have guessed if you are reading this now, I had so much to tell you that it became a journal instead. Please don’t worry Mum and Dad, I’ll be back. And tell Daniel to be a good boy, his big brother will have one hell of a story to tell when he returns.

SKINWALKER

I’ve always thought of myself as pretty normal, until I started having the dreams.

How do you define normal? Well in my case I guess you would just say boring. I’m nearer thirty than twenty (*a lot* nearer thirty), balding and kind of overweight. I haven’t had a girlfriend for years and my job sucks. It all started out so well when I first arrived in England on a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford University but unfortunately the romance of being an American in Oxford faded pretty quickly and, without my parents around to keep pushing me, so did my ambitions. You see, I was never incredibly motivated in an academic way, so when I dropped out of college I ended up getting a job as a sales assistant at the local designer sportswear shop. I thought it was a good deal at the time: a steady salary, no more studying and the opportunity, so I was told, to become manager within a couple of years. I was also spared the humiliation of having to go home and explain myself to my old man.

Ten years later and now I’m *senior* sales assistant, earning not a whole hell of a lot more than when I started and working for a kid who looks half my age and is pulling in twice what I earn. Guess qualifications are good for something after all.

Actually on second thoughts maybe boring isn’t the best word to describe the way my life has turned out – Loser is probably a better term.

Maybe I am being just a little hard on myself, but it’s only because I think I deserve it with all the little mistakes I’ve made in my life that have added up to where I am now, which is nowhere. It’s a whole lot different from where I thought I would

end up when I was seventeen and won a place at Oxford. Back then the sky was the limit, and I thought I would get it all.

You might not think it from the look of me now, but I was a real heartbreaker back in school. I was really good-looking before the hair loss and the beer-belly and, as well as being bright, I was good at sports, which meant I was popular. And being popular meant I was never short of girlfriends. Now of course things are slightly different; it's not just girlfriends that are in short supply. I'd settle for having friends full stop.

I know I'm not sounding like a person whose story anyone would like to hear, hell I'm even starting to put myself off with this parade of underachievement, but the important thing to realise is that I never actually felt unhappy with the way things are until very recently. You see lately I've had what you might describe as something of a life-changing experience. Before that I never used to beat myself up over what a loser I've turned out to be the way I am doing right now.

As I said, it all started with the dreams.

Actually, describing them as dreams might be a bit misleading. Dreaming implies being tucked up somewhere warm and cosy, counting sheep or maybe imagining yourself in the arms of one of those women who you don't stand a chance with in real life but seem to become far more welcoming when you have your eyes closed. Funny that.

What I have can happen anytime, day or night, and the one thing it isn't is a comfortable experience. I don't get any warning when it happens. Something just comes over me and I disappear into my head. That's the only way I can describe it. It's like I have a blackout suddenly, except that I don't lose consciousness. Completely the opposite in fact - I always remember everything that happens while I'm out like it *really happened*.

Okay, so the first time I lose it is in the worst possible place. You guessed it: at the store. One minute I'm serving Mrs Buxton, who's in buying gym gear for her two daughters the week before school starts, the next I'm slumped over on the till. Of course I didn't realise that until afterwards, when Stephen, the store manager, is ripping me to shreds for coming in with a hangover. He was really pissed at me for scaring off Mrs Buxton – he almost always convinces her to buy something more for her kids than she really needs whenever she comes in. The poor old girl actually thinks that he looks forward to her visits for the conversation.

Anyway, I'm oblivious to all that at the time because I'm in another place. My body was still in Sneakers (God, I wish I'd followed my instincts and walked out of the store when they changed its name – I mean *Sneakers?*) but my mind was somewhere else entirely.

It was a forest. Not your average National Trust protected area kind of place, all signs saying 'please do not feed the animals' or any of that crap. No this was one of those huge, wild woodlands. You know, the kind that you can't find in this country anymore. It was big, and by that I don't just mean that the trees were tall, although they were – I mean they reached up into the sky like goddamn skyscrapers, but they also stretched out all around me as far as the eye could see. But it wasn't as though I was caged in, even though it all felt so real. As I said, it was more like I was really there than any dream or vision I have ever had before. But, and this is the weird thing, despite everything, the dislocation, the weird new surroundings, I didn't feel afraid. If anything the best word to describe how I felt was *free*.

It was exhilarating being in those woods, and that's a feeling that's never left me, no matter how many times I go back there. And I've been back so many times

now that I've literally lost count. That first time I didn't actually do very much while I was there. That's the way I think of it when I have one of my blackouts – like I'm actually in some other place. Don't get me wrong. I'm not crazy and I don't for a second think that I am anywhere other than in some weird part of my head while I'm out. I read once that there is a part of our brains that's called the 'dead zone', which just doesn't get used unless you are a psychic or something. Maybe that's where I really go – to the dead zone.

Anyhow, I don't really think too much on the whys or the wherefores in the beginning. I'm simply too busy just *being*. Getting used to my new body.

Oh, I almost forgot to mention that part. When I blacked out and found myself in the wood, I wasn't there as me. That is, it was me as far as my thoughts and feelings were concerned, but it wasn't me the fat sales assistant. In fact I wasn't a human being at all. I was an animal.

The really weird thing is that it didn't feel strange from my point of view. I felt kind of displaced, being in a forest and being an animal and all, but I got used to it really fast. To be honest, it would probably have felt more odd to be there as a man. With all the trees and the wildness that was around me it just felt like I fit in a lot better as an animal.

Now I didn't know exactly what kind of creature I was straight away (I didn't find that out till later, when things started to get scary). After all, it wasn't as if there were any mirrors or anything like that lying around in the middle of the forest. All I knew was that it was like I was on some sort of drug, you know, the sense-enhancing kind. I only ever inhaled once in my life, when my old school friend Sonny Burke dropped in on me during a college break to share a cut of the good stuff. He was always a generous guy; that's probably why he ended up getting booted out of college when he went back and then finished off in jail. He had to learn a whole new meaning for the word *generous* inside, or so I've heard.

The weed didn't do much for me, which is why I haven't smoked it since. Hell, I don't even smoke regular tobacco – I figure the alcohol will get me soon enough on its own and that there's no need to give it a helping hand. Sonny swore that it would make me see the world in a whole new light though and maybe, for him, that's what it did. It never worked for me though. Unless what I'm going through right now is some kind of delayed reaction to that one time. Nah, I suppose anything's possible, but I'm guessing that the drink would have washed all of that stuff out of my system long ago.

But being an animal in my dream was the real thing. I could hear *everything*. Being in the forest, with the leaves falling all around me, the sound of them hitting the ground was like the splashing of hailstones in a storm. It was that loud, at least to my ears. My new ears. And the *smell* – my nose was picking up everything, from the scent coming off the trees' bark, pungent like sulphur, to the distant aroma of clean clear water, way off through the foliage. Don't ever believe anyone who tells you that water is an odourless, tasteless substance. To me, in the woods, it was like smelling a little whiff of heaven. Even my eyesight was different. Somehow, even though I knew it was night, I could see as clear as day for what looked like miles around me. It was like my eyes had their own illumination inside them, like a pair of headlights.

Listen to me, getting carried away like this with all the flowery descriptions. I'm never like this about anything else in my life. I lost the capacity to get excited about most things long ago. Even sex, on those rare occasions when I get it these days, doesn't get me going the way the visions do when they come over me. It was like being reborn.

Once I come to terms with it, with being in a new body but still being me, I get the urge to *do* something. I have all this pent-up energy inside me and it feels great because usually, as anyone who knows me will tell you, I'm a lazy sack of bones. Now though, I have this great new body with not a spare inch of fat on me anywhere and muscles in places that I didn't even know you could have them. And I want to use it.

That's when I pick up a new scent with my super-sensitive nose. Not wood smoke or water this time, but something more *alive*. I don't have a clue what it is right then, although I have a hunch that once I get more used to this body I will be able to figure things like that out. All I know right then is that whatever it is, whether it is a rabbit or a deer, it is prey. Food. Suddenly, even though I know I've just had lunch in the Waking World, I'm ravenous.

I get ready then, my muscles tense up and I'm all prepared to spring into action and...

...and I feel a tugging on my arm and that's when I find myself back in my old body, serving at the till in Sneakers.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at Betts?" yelled a voice.

I focus with my eyes, the old ones, not the super night-vision ones and see that it's Stephen, the floor manager, who has a hand on my arm. He's eight years younger than me and six inches shorter than my admittedly bulky six foot one inch frame, but the way he's yelling at me right now you'd think he was ticking off a scrawny teenager.

"You just scared off a paying customer. I'm not surprised that Mrs Buxton left, the way you just zoned out like that. Christ, if you're high I swear that this is going to cost you your job."

The guy's face is red and he is virtually shaking his fist at me, but all I can say is:

"How long was I out?"

Stephen's in the middle of another rant when I finally speak and he answers out of surprise as much as anything else.

"Fifteen minutes."

I look away to hide how rattled I am. I know I said I was fine about the whole vision thing while I was having it, but now that's it's all over the weirdness is starting to hit me. I mean I was just gone for a while back there - for fifteen whole minutes according to Stephen. It may not seem like that long but then I think about what might have happened had I been somewhere other than at work, like in my car for example...

"Look at me you stupid son of a bitch, do you know what you've cost us. You've lost me a paying customer..."

Before he can carry on my eyes snap back to look at him and I feel something wild take over, just for an instant. Suddenly I'm mad - angry at this little bug that's yelling at me, upset at being dragged out of The Dreaming Place that seemed so much better than the Waking World. I don't say anything to interrupt him but something of my mood must come through on my face because Stephen just stops speaking and stares at me, like he's transfixed. I'm shocked to see a look of fear cross his face. I break the sudden silence because I just have to.

"I'm not feeling too good" I say.

Stephen takes a couple of moments to reply, then simply nods his head.

"Take off" is all he says back.

I'm out of there so quickly that I barely hear the shop's door slam closed behind me.

No prizes for guessing what was on my mind the whole time I was making my way home after that. The first thing I did when I finally got back in through my front door was go around the flat, drawing shut all the blinds, closing the curtains, and making sure all the doors and windows were shut up tight. It's hard to describe what I was feeling at the time. All I knew was that I wanted to be alone and I didn't want to be disturbed. But it was more than that as well, see, I didn't want anyone to know what I was doing either. It felt like when I was a teenager, sneaking home when I knew my parents were out so I could be alone with a loaned copy of *Penthouse*. Okay, I know that's an embarrassing example, but I can't think of anything else I've ever done that involved the same mixture of tension and excitement.

Of course, I live on my own now but that still didn't stop me feeling weird about the whole thing. I was also starting to feel sort of stupid, standing in the centre of my room with everything all dark in the middle of the day. Why the hell wasn't I back at work trying to repair whatever damage my little episode had caused by kissing Stephen's ass? Just as I'm beginning to regret this whole experiment or whatever it is that I'm planning, this wave of nausea suddenly washes over me. It comes out of nowhere and before I know it I've lost my footing and fallen across the bed, face first.

Now at this point I had no idea whether the nausea was the prelude to another blackout. I mean, it wasn't like this the first time around. Anyway, I don't get a chance to find out right then because suddenly I hear a pounding somewhere. At first I think that it's inside my own head, but then I realise that there's someone at the door. The last thing I needed at that point was a visitor so I didn't answer immediately, but instead of going away the noise just kept getting louder. The way my head was feeling by then, I figured it would be better to open the damn door just to shut whoever the hell it was up before my skull exploded.

When I saw who was standing outside my flat I wished I hadn't bothered.
"Hey dude, what's going on?"

It was Lucas Meyer, my neighbour, sort of. He lived in the apartment above me, although to be honest describing either of our places as 'apartments' was kind of like calling a cardboard box a house. Both of our living quarters were conversions adjoining one of those huge Victorian houses, you know, the kind that you would think are actually a whole city block the first time you see them. Our landlord, Mr Newton, who was probably born in the Victorian period as well, owns the main house. For some reason he likes renting out his flats to foreigners, like Lucas, who's Canadian, and an American like me. I guess it's because he thinks we won't complain about the 'commercial' rent he charges, not being familiar with the exchange rate and all that. I never bothered to let him know that I've lived over here for the best part of a decade so I'm well aware that I'm getting shafted. Finding somewhere else to live just always seemed to be too much of a hassle and it isn't like Oxford is a place that's well known for cheap rental accommodation anyway.

Being born on the same continent is just about all me and Lucas have in common, but for him that's enough for me to be considered his best buddy. He's always coming around during the day, usually with the excuse that's he's out of sweetener so can he please borrow some sugar, or that he forgot to go to the drugstore and needs some cotton buds for his ears. You get the picture. Lucas is also a post grad student at the university, like I used to be before I flunked out. What he's studying is something that I've never been sure of exactly though – something to do with

computers I think. All I know is that his degree is being funded by some huge IT company in the States who are paying him subsistence expenses that would make many City traders green with envy. Whatever it is that he's doing for them, the university seems to be quite happy with him working whatever hours he wants and barely making an appearance at any lectures or seminars. I guess academics and employers both tend to be fairly tolerant of someone like Lucas, who has a genius-level IQ. He sure as hell doesn't mind – I bet all that freedom gives him plenty of time to get real up close and personal with all those 'special interest' websites of his.

As a person he's OK, although I prefer to take him in small doses. He can be way too talkative for my liking, and has a habit of always dropping by at the worst possible time. Like right then.

When I open the door it turns out that he's just come round to warn me that Mr Newton is on the warpath about this month's rent. That's no surprise to me, although I am disappointed as I've never been late before and I figured he might cut me some slack this one time. I try not to think about the fact that, the way things are going at work, there might be more than just a delay for my landlord to deal with this month.

I'm looking a bit of a mess at that moment and I notice that Lucas is giving me a funny look. He doesn't say anything though – he probably thinks I'm on drugs like just about everyone else right then. Hell, I'm starting to wonder myself if one of my drinks has been spiked with more than just vodka recently. But that's just crazy – I haven't been invited to a party for months, and the publican at my local sure as hell wouldn't do something like that to a valued customer like me.

For a wonder Lucas doesn't come up with an excuse to outstay his welcome this once and heads off as soon as he's delivered his news. I'm just as glad to see the back of him, but once I shut the door the last thing on my mind is trying to induce another vision. There's something about being interrupted in the middle of what you're doing that kills the mood, whether it's work or play. So, instead, I head towards the kitchen, where I keep my beer in the fridge, and grab a couple of cans.

Okay, I had more than a couple by the time I was done, a few hours later, at which point I found myself lying facedown across my bed and feeling nauseous, again. The only difference is that this time I wanted to be in that position. There must have been something about being in that state because suddenly I found myself back in The Dreaming Place. It wasn't like last time though, as there was no sudden blackout. The second time it happened it was more like I just drifted off.

So there I was, wearing an animal skin again and feeling amazing. Even though I knew, distantly, that my real body was off somewhere totally smashed, here my head was completely clear, much more than clear. Once again I felt *alive* and in a way that I knew that I never was, even when stone cold sober. God, it felt good to be back again – it still does even I return there now, years later.

Things were slightly different this time though. It wasn't night anymore for a start, and I wasn't in the middle of a forest. Now I was crouching in a place with long grass everywhere, like a moor I think, and off in the distance I could just see a hill with a river running by it. All of this was quite clear to me, which should have been a surprise because there was no way I would have noticed this stuff if I was there as me, a human. I knew instinctively that the super-eyesight was yet another perk of having a new body. For the moment though, I decided to use another one of my senses.

I sniffed the air, which was so clear I could have stayed there breathing it in all day. Wherever I was, it definitely wasn't England. That much was obvious from the landscape. There was no pollution anywhere – if there was my nose would have

picked it up, no question. Also, when I raised my head and used those awesome new eyes of mine I could see for miles in every direction and all I saw was more grass, more hills and a forest off in the distance. No houses, roads or buildings period. I'm no geographer but I'm pretty damn sure that there's nowhere with so much *space* in a country this size. If there were, someone would have stuck a car park or a shopping mall right in the middle of it long ago.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for progress. I know how long I would last without all my creature comforts back at home – microwave, television, DVD player, fridge, freezer, toaster, laptop, washer dryer, electric kettle - I could go on forever. Hey, I'm as worried about the ozone layer and the Amazon rainforest as the rest of the world (which is to say, not all that much) but I just like the twenty-first century too much to go back to how things were in the good old days when we had to club something over the head just to get a square meal. Give me a trip to Mickey Dee's any day.

Deep inside though, there's a piece of me that misses having something green to look at when I stare out of the window every morning. That's kind of why it felt so great when I had my first dream, the one where I was in the middle of a big old honest-to-goodness forest. It reminded me of the one time my dad took me to Yosemite National Park back in the States. The trees there weren't as big as the monsters in Sequoia National Park, but there was something about them all the same – their presence, knowing that they've seen a whole mess of stuff over the centuries that we only know about through the history books. That's why there's still a tiny part of me that cries every time I hear that some new part of the Amazon has been demolished, and that trees every bit as old as the ones in Yellowstone have had their lives cut short just to provide us with more timber.

Part of the reason why I am feeling so good just then is because this place reminds me of home too. The long grasses stretching for miles all around me are more like the plains and prairies of America than anything this little island can offer. That's weird though, because I never miss the States normally. I mean I've lived here for almost a third of my life now and all I can remember of the time before that is a whole lot of pain affecting everyone I was close to. It's certainly been a long time since I've had a good memory that involved my old man.

But I guess that this is just one affect that The Dreaming Place has on you. I get this incredible sense of well-being while I'm here, like I'm just so happy to be alive that nothing else even matters. I wonder if it's like this for a real animal, not just someone who happens to be wearing an animal skin. Think about it – if you've got a full belly and nothing's trying to kill you, things must be going pretty well.

Thinking about all this makes me realise suddenly that I'm still hungry. I remembered feeling this way the last time I was here and my mouth begins to water again as I think of the scent I picked up before I left. I mean that literally – I was drooling now, the saliva dripping off my tongue to land on the hard ground under me. Suddenly I want to sink my teeth into something warm and juicy, preferably while it was still alive.

If I were describing having these thoughts anywhere except in The Dreaming Place you would probably think I was some sort of psychotic serial killer. And I wouldn't blame you. I was scaring myself with what I was feeling. It felt like a red mist had fallen across my vision and the only thing I could think about was blood. The hardest thing about being an animal was adjusting to the emotions, the needs – everything was simple yet so powerful. From feeling complete peace and satisfaction,

I was now almost overwhelmed by hunger and the need to kill that it brought out of me.

The really frustrating thing was that I couldn't pick up the scent of any prey. This time there was no rabbit, or deer, or whatever it had been before nearby. I thought of the river seen from a distance earlier on and decided that if I could at least quench my thirst that it would take the edge off my hunger. Thinking of the river, something else occurred to me. I still had no idea what I looked like, what kind of animal I was. Maybe I could check out my reflection once I got to the water's edge.

So off I went, padding along like I hadn't a care in the world, just enjoying the feel of the sunshine on my fur (My *fur*? Jesus Christ!). Maybe if I'd known back then what was waiting for me down by the river I wouldn't have acted so casual – or maybe I would have, depends on whether you see what happened there as good or bad. I'll let you make up your own minds on that one.

I first realized that something was off when my hackles started rising. It was the strangest thing, one moment I'm as happy as any dog out for a walk can be, the next I'm all tense. I didn't even notice anything with my primary senses at first. What I mean is that I didn't see or hear anything that I should have found obviously troubling – instead it was all in my gut feelings, or as I prefer to call them now, my *animal instincts*. The hairs on my neck (and there were a lot of them) were standing on end, and before I knew it I was growling deep down in my throat.

For a while I stayed crouching there, belly low on the ground, waiting for something to happen. When it became clear that I wasn't in any kind of immediate danger the tension started to ease out of me. It was funny how everything seemed to be linked now, automatic even. As humans living in cities it's like we've forgotten to trust our instincts. Now I was starting to learn to let go, to allow the animal inside me to take over, literally.

Before I start getting too deep, I've got to say that I let another of my instincts take over right then. With nothing around to tense me up anymore, I realized just how much I needed a drink and just ran flat out to the edge of the lake. I stuck my muzzle in the water and for a while forgot about anything else apart from slaking my now quite considerable thirst. I guess that's how I was caught unawares.

As soon as I'd had my fill of freshwater and turned around I saw that I was surrounded.

Wolves.

There were about half a dozen of them: a whole pack. They were all huge – I mean I've never encountered a wolf before for real but I've always imagined that they wouldn't look too different from your average Alsatian. Not these critters though. They were lean and mean and looked as if they hadn't had a square meal between them for months. We're not talking Discovery Channel here – there was nothing cute or cuddly about these wolves. They were all teeth and muscle and hard yellow eyes: six pairs of yellow eyes and all of them staring a hole right through me.

Unsurprisingly I backed up then, right up to the water's edge. I'd been sure for some time that I was some sort of predator, what with all the hunting and killing I'd been thinking of doing, but right then I wasn't so sure. Did hunters get hunted? Whatever I was, and I still didn't know because I hadn't looked for a reflection when I was drinking out of the lake earlier on, I knew I couldn't take on this pack.

So there I was, about to become dogmeat (I know what you're thinking – it was all a dream so why didn't I just think of waking up. Well, trust me, things just don't work like that in The Dreaming Place. You'll see what I mean) and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. I could see it in their eyes – a light glowing in

anticipation of the kill. But then the strangest thing happened. Those six sets of eyes looked up and away from me and stared straight ahead. Despite my predicament I couldn't help feeling curious and I followed their gaze to back across the river. When I saw what they were looking at now I wasn't surprised that they had gotten distracted.

Standing there was another wolf, but this one was about as similar to the creatures that were surrounding me as a human being would have been. For a start she wasn't grey, her fur was a pure white, like the driven snow, and she was smaller, all sleek and delicate. Don't ask me how but I knew she was female – the same way that I knew that the pack that I was with was all male. When she moved she didn't move like an animal, she floated, as if she was a ghost.

And that was the really weird part, although there wasn't exactly anything normal about the whole situation, because she came straight towards me, treading across the river as if it was solid beneath her. Walking on water.

I couldn't have got away at that point even if I'd wanted to but that was just it, I didn't want to. All I knew was that this was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen in my life and for whatever reason she was interested in *me*. Okay she had fur and walked on four legs but the attraction was there and there was no way I could deny it. It was definitely physical, but it was also more than that. Those instincts that I was going on about before were telling me something about this she-wolf. I couldn't say exactly what she meant to me, my intuition wasn't as developed then as it is now, but I knew that there was something important about all of this.

I sensed that I wasn't surrounded any longer, and when I tore my eyes away from the she-wolf my sight confirmed this. The rest of the pack had backed off and they all had their heads bowed submissively. I had seen that kind of reaction before in every dog that I've ever encountered when their masters are around. It was acknowledgment of the dominant male; or in this case, where the pack's alpha was obviously a she-wolf, of the dominant female.

When I looked back at her I saw that she was standing on dry land again, this time on my side of the river. She fixed me with her eyes, which I noted with shock were an intense blue instead of the more natural yellow of the other wolves, and I knew I was hers. I would have done anything she wanted, and although that scares me now, looking back on it all, right then I couldn't think of anything apart from wanting to please her. What she wanted at that point was for me to go to her.

When I got up real close she leaned forward and rubbed her head against my left flank. The sensation of that silky coat touching me was like heaven, and I just revelled in the fact that the male wolves must have all been looking at us jealously. Now don't get me wrong, I don't suffer from any unnatural urges when I'm wearing a human skin, but then and there I was feeling horny - there's no other word to describe it. Believe it or not this felt completely natural, which when you think about it shouldn't really have been a surprise.

When she drew back I felt a definite sense of disappointment, but it was quickly forgotten when I saw that she was gesturing for me to do something. She looked from me to the water then back again, over and over. At first I thought she wanted me to drink, and I was trying to figure out a way of telling her nicely that I wasn't thirsty when I realised that what she really wanted was something totally different. She wanted me to look in the water.

I guess in some ways I was trying to put this off for as long as possible. I wanted to see my reflection but in reality I knew before I looked exactly what was going to be there even before I saw it. It was the knowing that put me off. But with

the white she-wolf beside me, gently but firmly encouraging me to look into the lake's depths, I knew I had to face the truth at last.

Reflected by the water was the face of a wolf – a wolf that had my eyes.

And that's when the door started pounding again, like a snare drum in the back of my head.

That's how it all started.

There isn't really much to tell after that. The person knocking on the door that time was Mr Newton, on about the rent again. I told him to stick it. Later, when someone called me from work, I forget who, I told them the same thing. In the end I didn't go to work for a week, lost in my wolf dreams. When I finally did decide to go back to work, more because Mr Newton just refused to go away on the subject of the rent than for anything else, I lasted all of one day. Stephen pissed me off again, you see, and this time I really lost it – *I bit him*.

I want to be clear about this. We're not talking a *Resident Evil* style zombie flesh eater gore fest. I mean, there was no blood; I didn't even break the skin. I got fired of course, and slapped with a community service order for common assault to boot. But what worried me more than the fact that I reacted like that (to what I don't know – by that stage even the sound of Stephen's voice would probably have been enough to send me over the edge) was that it felt totally natural. Somehow the idea of ripping out a guy's jugular just because he kind of annoyed me seemed like the right thing to do. More than that, I was acting on pure *instinct* – as if I was some kind of animal.

Of course, there was no question of me carrying on my old life after that. That's how I ended up here – right back in the good old North American wilderness, somewhere in the Pacific Northwest on the border between the US State of Washington and the Canadian Province of British Columbia. I don't even miss my old life, not really. I mean who'd be an overweight sales clerk with women and, let's face it, alcohol problems? That's the thing about being out here, it gives you plenty of time to yourself, to think, to face up to what you can otherwise put off and run away from back there, in the world of cities and roads. I don't need to worry about how to pay the rent out here, where my next meal is just a chase and a kill away. Why stress about putting a roof over your head when you can sleep under the stars? Things are so simple here, where the air tastes better and the water is clear and cold. The only cloud on the horizon will arrive at the end of summer when I need to start thinking about moving to find new hunting grounds again, south where the territories of men lie.

I don't really think of myself as human anymore. I stopped wearing clothes some time ago, as they hamper movement, and most of the time I run on four legs rather than two. My senses of smell, hearing and sight are so far superior to what they were that I might as well have been deaf and blind before (I used to wear glasses for Christ's sake!). I haven't seen or spoken to another human being for months and in all honesty I am starting to wonder whether I'd be able to hold a conversation anyway. I mean, why use all those words when there are so many, better, ways of communicating. I growl when I'm angry, I whine when I'm hurt, and sometimes, when I'm full of pride after a kill I fill my lungs and howl at the night sky. Life is good.

But there is just one thing that leaves me feeling incomplete. I continue to dream of a place at the edge of the woods where there is a clear blue lake, and of a white she-wolf, her eyes the colour of the lake's waters. In my waking hours, after I'm done with the day's hunting, I search for that place. Perhaps my search is

pointless, given that I've been looking for months without success, but the thought of giving up never even crosses my mind. I'll never be complete until I find the she-wolf, learn what secrets are hidden behind her blue, almost human eyes. Am I still a man or am I something older, a brother to wolves, a throwback to a time when the line between humans and animals was blurred in a way that it has not been for aeons?

I'm afraid though. Afraid that if I ever find the place that I see in my dreams then the person I am, Leon Betts, will die.

And I'm worried that maybe that wouldn't be such a great loss.

BLACK LINDEN

"So Isabel, is this the place you told me about?"

"Yes, Doctor Schneider, this is Black Linden."

"Strange, your voice didn't catch when you said that name, the way it does when you say it during our sessions. Why do you think that is?"

"We're far away from your surgery. And I'm not lying on the couch anymore."

"Of course - and may I say that I think that is a good thing. Already you're reacting as I'd hoped you would to this stage of your treatment."

"Is that what this is - treatment? You know I never wanted to come back here, that this is the last place I should be right now. How could you make me return to Black Linden, after everything that I told you happened here?"

"You know why you had to come here. As for those things that you say happened here, well, you've already as much as admitted to me that you aren't sure whether they happened or not. And in a way, the fact that you made that admission is what brought us here - it shows that you're ready to face the truth about everything that you've told me."

"You mean face the fact that it was all just another one of my delusions, don't you? You've been able to explain or rationalise everything else that I've ever told you, so why not this as well, that's what this is all about isn't it?"

"As I've told you many times, I believe that you think that everything that you've ever said to me about your life is true."

"That isn't the same as believing that I've been telling you the truth."

"We can argue about semantics all you want, Isabel, but that isn't going to change the fact that we're here at Black Linden, and we have a lot of work to do."

"Fine, but I don't know what it is that we're actually supposed to be doing now that we're here."

"Well, you can start by telling me something about the house and the grounds. Has it changed a lot since the last time you were here?"

"Of course it has, I mean, Jesus Christ, look at the place! There are weeds everywhere, the grass is overgrown, and there are vines and creepers all over the gates and walls. It's obvious that the house has been deserted for years."

"Really? The way that you've always spoken about the place I have to say that this is exactly how I imagined it would look, like a, well, like a..."

"Hammer House of Horror?"

"That isn't exactly what I meant to say."

"Isn't it? Well you would have to admit that it's sort of apropos now though, wouldn't you? But no, this isn't what Black Linden used to look like in the old days."

You can say whatever else you like about my father, but he treated his home like his castle. It's about all he had left by the end."

"I'd like you to tell me more about your father."

"God, you're so predictable sometimes. I knew your eyes would light up as soon as I mentioned him. Is that the real reason you dragged me out here – are you hoping that I'm finally going to give you the big inside scoop on my troubled childhood? I had to have been beaten and abused by my Dad when I was young, I mean, why else would I be so screwed up now?"

"I'm not making any conclusions about your parents Isabel, I'm just puzzled about why you don't talk about them more than you do after what happened to your mother..."

"Don't cross the line, Doctor, you know that that subject is out of bounds. It doesn't matter whether we're in your surgery or outside it. Change the subject. Now."

"Okay Isabel. Stay calm. Going back to your father then?"

"What's there to tell? He was a writer who used to work for a television studio: nothing glamorous, just the usual hackneyed soap operas, police shows and hospital dramas that TV companies never seem to get tired of. That was until he made it big and finally sold a film script that he'd been working on for years to a major film studio. You may even have heard of it – *The Dwelling?* – it was one of the rash of cheesy horror films that got made in the eighties."

"Yes I think I do remember watching it once. It was the one about the family that moved into an isolated haunted house in which another family had been murdered years earlier, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Not exactly original, I know, but it was surprisingly popular at the time with people who wanted their horror slightly more refined than *Nightmare on Elm Street*. I mean, my Dad didn't want any special effects or gore, he preferred the scares to be more in the 'imply' than 'show' category. It was supposed to be really scary as well, in a low-tech kind of way."

"You mean you never saw it yourself?"

"No, my Dad was pretty strict about that. It was rated 18, after all, and he made it clear that he didn't want me to see it until I was the right age because he thought it would give me nightmares. I can't deny that I was severely tempted to watch it, especially when I entered my teens and sneaking off to watch adult-rated movies was all that anyone my age seemed to be interested in doing. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't as if I was Daddy's little girl and obeyed everything he said. It was just that it seemed really important to him so I just somehow managed to control my curiosity. Even after I turned eighteen I never got round to watching it – I was at university and there were just so many other things that I wanted to do or had to do that seemed much more important. After university of course, when all that other stuff happened, well, watching films was the last thing on my mind."

"So that was the only reason why you didn't watch it – because you didn't have the time?"

"Yes. That was it."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"No other reason?"

"I'm sorry; I really don't know what you're getting at Doctor."

"Let me help you then: a film set in an isolated mansion with only three characters, a young couple and their only child, a troubled little girl. Bad things start to happen and the father starts to lose it. Even if you haven't watched the film I'm

sure that you're aware of what happens to the woman and child at the end. Is any of this starting to sound familiar?"

"Look, this is getting boring; can we talk about something else?"

"Of course, we're here for you after all, what would you like to talk about Isabel?"

"Nothing; I'm more or less out of words now. Consider this the lull after the storm."

"So you're happy for us just to stand here, saying nothing to each other?"

"That's fine with me."

"Well I don't know about you but seeing as we came all the way out here (and you're paying for my time) I'm inclined to do something rather more useful with the few hours that we have left. Shall we go inside?"

"No."

"But..."

"I said no."

"How about a walk around the grounds then?"

"If you want."

"Yes, I think that would be a good idea, after all this is the perfect day for a walk outdoors – cold and crisp yet clear. And I've always loved old country houses like this. How about you?"

"I suppose it looks pretty enough on the outside but as far as I'm concerned looks really aren't everything. And there's a lot to be said for modern amenities – I mean, Dad used to have a nightmare heating the place at this time of year."

"I'd gladly exchange the house that I grew up in for Black Linden. It wasn't really a house at all of course, it was an 'apartment', although that was just a posh name for a council flat in those days. My parents could only have dreamt about living in a place like this."

"You sound jealous Doctor."

"Not at all, I'm just making a point about appreciating what you have while you have it."

"Now you sound like my Dad."

"Sorry Isabel, I wasn't trying to lecture you. Look, why don't you tell me something else about this house?"

"Why? You probably know more about this place than me anyway from all the research that you have in my case file."

"It might help to put you a bit more at your ease, talking about something familiar."

"Sometimes I really wonder if you know anything about me at all if you think that talking about this place would put me 'at my ease'."

"Try it."

"Fine, what do you want to know?"

"How about Black Linden's history – previous owners, that kind of thing?"

"Well, now that you mention it there was one thing that I'd like to see now that I'm here. I think it's a little further on, just after those trees over there. Yes, I can see it now! Follow me."

"Isabel, wait, there's no need to run, let me catch up with you."

"Hurry up Doctor Schneider, here it is, just where I remember it."

"I see. But..."

"What?"

"It's a well – is it *the well*?"

“The well that my mother drowned herself in? Yes that’s right.”

“But I thought that you didn’t want to talk about your mother...”

“I know that’s what I said but I don’t know - there’s something about being back here. All these feelings and memories that I have of the place are rising up inside me, trying to get out.”

“That’s good Isabel.”

“Is it Doctor? Then why are you suddenly looking scared?”

“It’s nothing. It’s just, for a second there, your voice sounded older and perhaps it was just the light but you looked a bit different too.”

“Different how? You mean older too don’t you?”

“Yes I suppose so.”

“It looks like the treatment is working better than you could ever have hoped then, doesn’t it?”

“Isabel, please stop putting on that voice, I need you to come back from wherever it is that you’ve gone in your head. Come back to me – and please can you step away from the side of that well. You’re far too close to the edge.”

“I can’t help it, it’s just that the water looks so peaceful, still and dark like it is, just as it was when I was a child.”

“You were there that day when they pulled her out weren’t you – the day that your mother died?”

“Yes, I was, and the worst thing about it was the fact that I knew it was going to happen – expected it even. My mother talked about it, you see, for weeks beforehand. It had nothing to do with my father, despite what the press and everyone else said afterwards.”

“You never mentioned that before Isabel. How can you be so sure now?”

“Because of the way that she spoke about the well, how she felt so drawn to it, even dreaming of it. In the last weeks it was like she had become obsessed with it – completely mesmerised.”

“It’s only a well though, just stone and water when all is said and done.”

“Earth and water, two of the ancient elements along with fire and air. You know there are some people that say that’s what we’re made of – earth, water, fire and air – and that each one of us has an affinity with one of those elements”

“That’s superstitious nonsense Isabel – the elements are all as prescribed in the chemical periodic table not in some folk tale. There may be water inside us, and air too in a way, but no fire or earth!”

“Always the man of science aren’t you Doctor Schneider? It’s one of the crutches that you lean on – like the way you say my name every time you think I’m not being sensible.”

“I didn’t mean to patronize you.”

“Oh, it wasn’t intended as a criticism, I’m really quite beyond concerns such as that now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? And please come away from the edge, you’re starting to worry me.”

“It’s the well Doctor, it’s calling me home. If I just...”

“Isabel, no, ISABEL! Please, Oh God no, what have I done. Someone, please help me. HELP!”

“It’s... okay... Doctor... Schneider...she’s... here... we’re... back... together... at... last...”

“ISABEL!”

“Thank you for bringing her home Doctor.”

“Who are you? Your voice – where is it coming from? It’s like you’re inside my head. This is impossible.”

“Leave us now, man of science. I have the sacrifice that I need. You may go, Isabel will sustain me for many years to come. Her spirit burns bright and strong... just as her mother’s did.”

THE END

AUTHOR’S NOTE

All of the stories in this book are set in Oxford, that is the real Oxford of today, and, as such, it can be taken as read that every thing and place mentioned does exist. As far as the ghosts are concerned, every single one is taken from a true story or encounter passed down through the years by word of mouth or by the written word from sources as diverse as diaries, newspaper articles and correspondence. Whether or not this makes the ghosts any more ‘real’ is something that I will allow the reader to decide.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is the part of the book where published authors usually thank a veritable army of people for helping them to write it. Given that I’m self-published you are thankfully going to be spared from this since my thanks goes instead to a single source – a place rather than a person – Oxford, a city which for four years was my home and provided me with the inspiration for the book that you have just read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After practising law for many years in cities as diverse as London, Liverpool, Manchester, Chester, Ipswich, Norwich and King’s Lynn, Anil Balan now teaches it, while dedicating what little free time he has for his first love, the reading and writing of literature.

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