

The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

**Satisfying Fiction from
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**Issue
1**

Six gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet
R. A. Goli, David Bowmore, Elizabeth Montague, Peter Astle, P. A. O'Neil and more



The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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A Flicker of Time by R. A. Goli — the maker of candles for the living has a confrontation with Death.

Doctor Zennik and the Cerebrachrone by Alexander Marshall — who is the mysterious Doctor Zennik? And what can his even more mysterious device do with Time?

Sins of The Father by David Bowmore — the award-winning classic story of 1970s drama

The Little Girl Who Stole The Wind by Elizabeth Montague — a young girl captures the wind, with far-reaching consequences.

Following Gita by Peter Astle — a fast-paced private detective is about to complete his assignment — or is he?

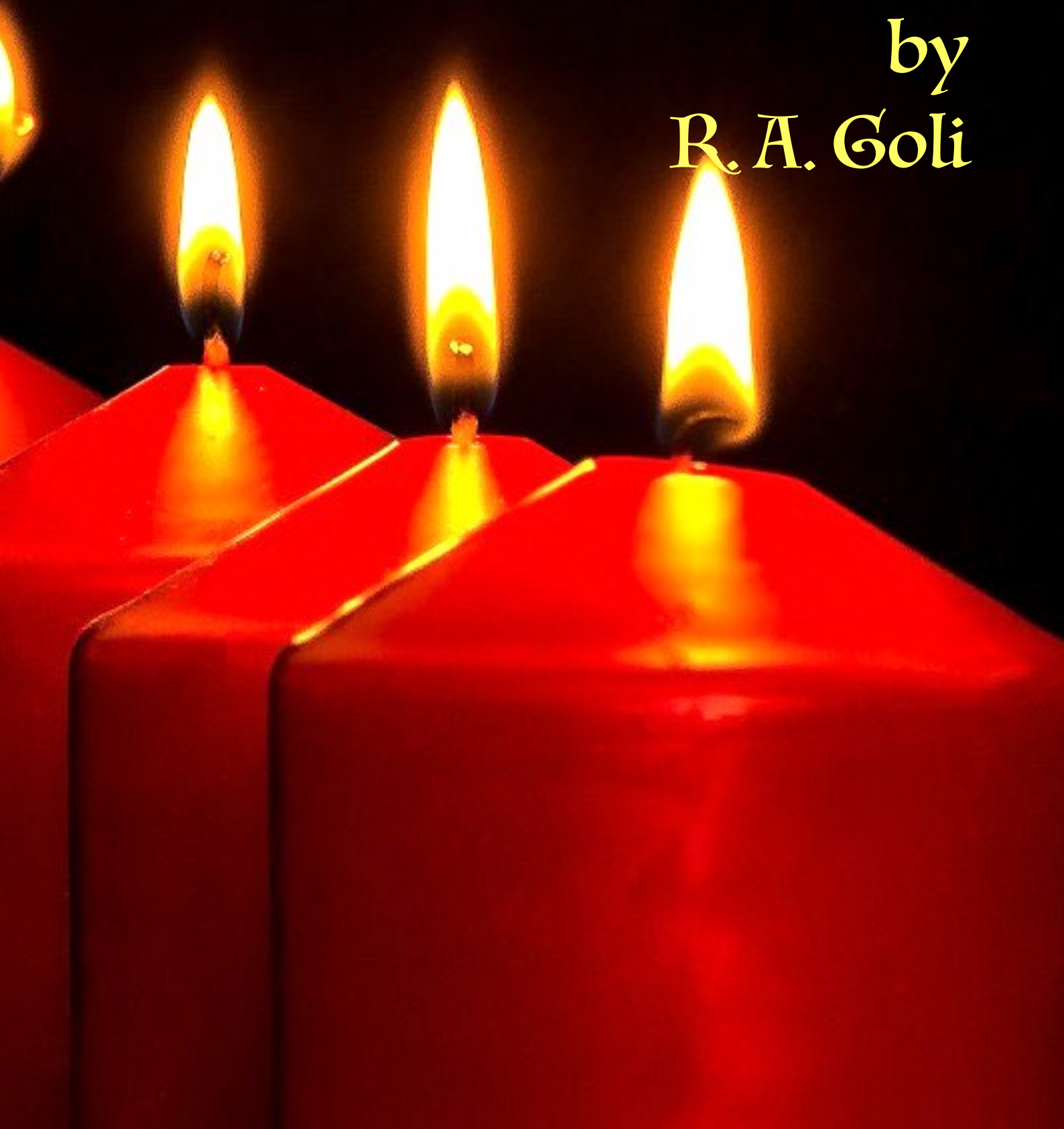
Her Sister's Keeper by P. A. O'Neil — in Edwardian London, a strange case unfolds for investigating cousins.

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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A Flicker of Time

by
R. A. Goli





Merrick Chandler worked tirelessly, rendering down beef fat to make the tallow. He had a busy day ahead due to an unusual number of women about to give birth. He'd already been cooking it for a few hours and his workshop stunk. Fortunately, the quality of fat was good and he knew how to cook it so it wouldn't smell once the tapers were lit, which was a good thing considering how many candles there were.

While he waited for it to cool, he shifted to his large oak desk and consulted the list. Death had written the names and candle sizes for each baby to be born that day, so Merrick began preparing the

wicks by cutting them to size and securing them in the mold.

Once the tallow had cooled a little, Merrick poured it into each section of the mold according to the length of the wick. He remembered when he had first started candle making, he had used the technique of dipping the wicks in the tallow repeatedly until the tapers had formed the desired shapes, then trimmed them to the appropriate length. Death had commissioned a blacksmith to make a mold so Merrick could craft hundreds of candles at once. It was physically less demanding and each candle was uniform in width.

The height of each was of course based on the lifespan of each individual.

Once they'd set and hardened, he removed them from the mold and took them to the candle room where Death waited. Calling it the candle room was not accurate. It was more like a tunnel that stretched for miles, with built-in shelves in the brickwork, which housed a million candles, all lit and burning brightly.

'Good evening, Merrick,' Death said when he arrived, for it was now early eve.

'Good evening, Death. How fare thee today?'
'Busy as always.'

Merrick pulled his candle-laden cart to the empty section of shelves and began placing the unlit tapers beside the appropriate name plaques. When he was done, Death approached, handed him a scroll for the next day's crafting, then set to work lighting the wicks. Merrick watched as Death lit the candles as each child was born, saddened by the number of short ones there were in the day's batch. Death also noticed.

'There's a pox raging through North Larkhurst,' Death said.

'Such a shame.'

Bored with watching Death work, Merrick went for a stroll through the tunnel of lights, comforted by their warmth and calmed by their flickering glow. He saw the large candles of the healthy children, and young adults in their prime, and saw the shorter ones belonging to older folk, those who had lived many years already, with lives coming to an end.

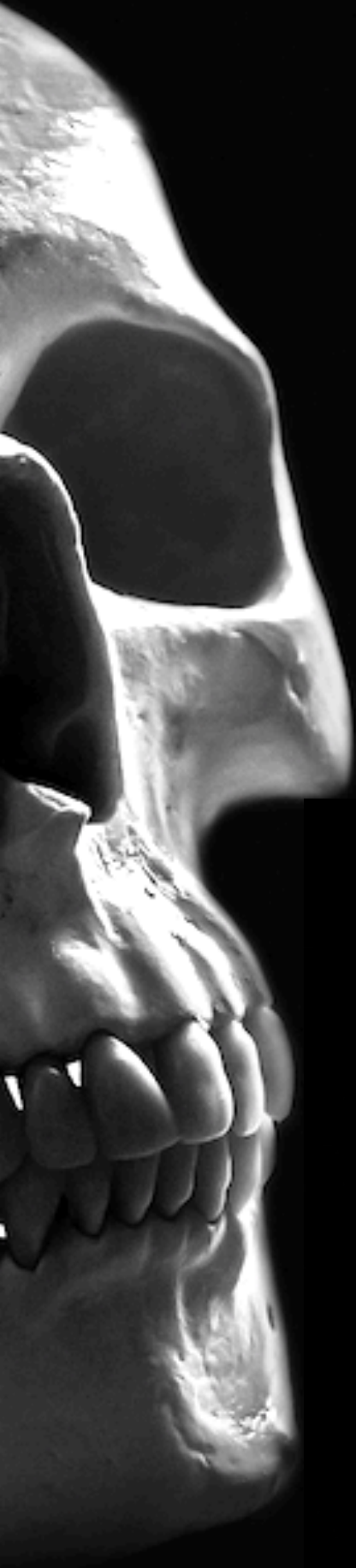
He smiled when he reached he and his wife's candle, burning so brightly, both with many, many years to go. He realized how lucky he was, Amelina was in full bloom, almost ready to have their first child. Tired as he was, Merrick almost jogged out of the candle room, suddenly eager to get home.

When Merrick unrolled the list of names for the day he almost jumped out of his skin. His son, Renick Chandler was on the list.

'Today, he's to be born today!'

Merrick's shouts of joy reverberated around his workspace until he read the rest of the entry. His breath became ragged and he felt the pulse at his neck jump under the skin.





'No. It can't be.'

A hard knot tightened in his throat as he stared at the scroll. Then anger washed over him like grey waves and he rushed to Death's office. Death was seated at his desk and Merrick threw the scroll down in front of him.

'What is the meaning of this?'

Death reached a skeletal hand forward and grabbed the scroll, then turned to him; sympathy was written across the man's pallid face.

'This is the way of the world, Merrick. You know that. It's the cycle of life and death. I cannot change it.'

'You must! I know you can.'

Death shook his head. 'It is not the way.'

Merrick dropped to his knees and clasped his hands together.

'Please Death, you have the power to make this right.'

'I'm sorry, my friend. You must make your son's candle along with the others.' He handed Merrick the scroll and placed a hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

Merrick shook it off angrily and snatched the scroll, then stood and left without a word.



He went back to his workroom, sat at his desk and cried for an hour. How would he explain it to Amelina? That their son would only be with them for such a short time? She'd be devastated, as he was. Eventually, he prepared the tallow, sorted the wicks and poured the molds. Once the candles were set, he loaded his cart and took them to Death and once again pleaded with him.

'You must do something, it's so short. It's not fair!' he sobbed as he looked at his son's candle, so small, a few days or weeks' worth of wick and tallow if he was lucky.

'Life and Death aren't always fair, Merrick,' Death said as he began lighting the wicks.

'Can't you give him an extra candle?'

'I cannot. I suggest you go home now if you wish to be there for the birth of your child.'

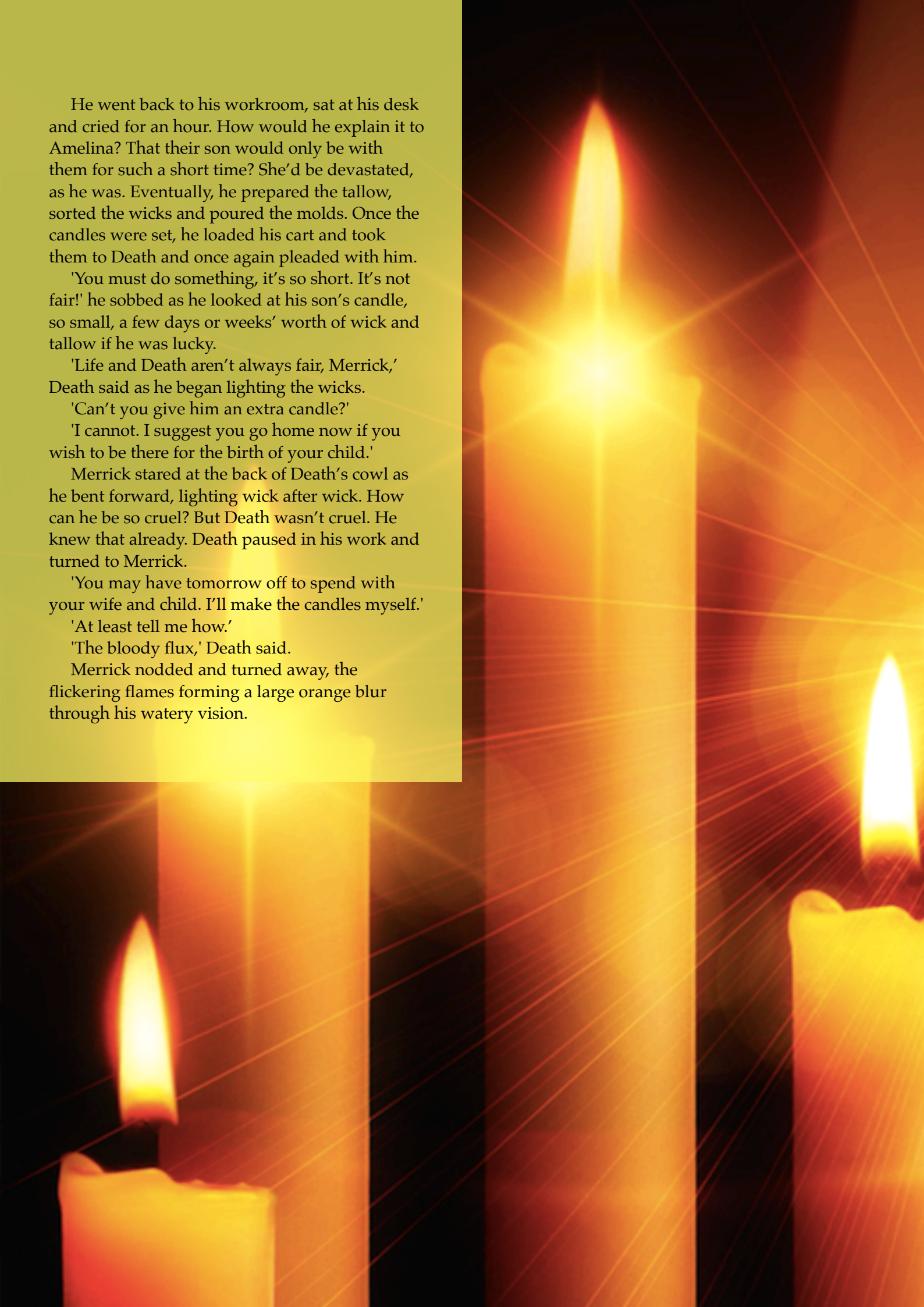
Merrick stared at the back of Death's cowl as he bent forward, lighting wick after wick. How can he be so cruel? But Death wasn't cruel. He knew that already. Death paused in his work and turned to Merrick.

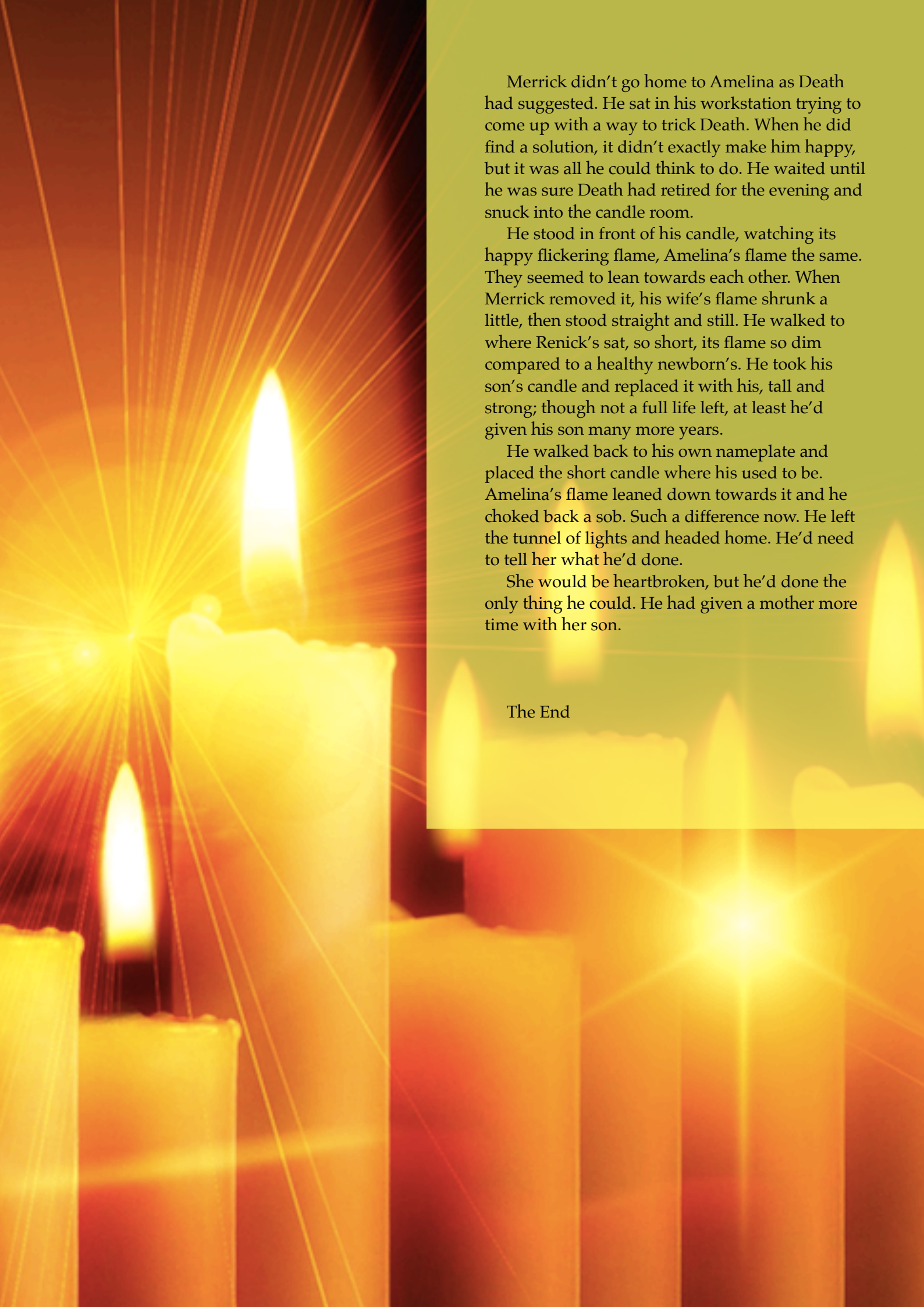
'You may have tomorrow off to spend with your wife and child. I'll make the candles myself.'

'At least tell me how.'

'The bloody flux,' Death said.

Merrick nodded and turned away, the flickering flames forming a large orange blur through his watery vision.





Merrick didn't go home to Amelina as Death had suggested. He sat in his workstation trying to come up with a way to trick Death. When he did find a solution, it didn't exactly make him happy, but it was all he could think to do. He waited until he was sure Death had retired for the evening and snuck into the candle room.

He stood in front of his candle, watching its happy flickering flame, Amelina's flame the same. They seemed to lean towards each other. When Merrick removed it, his wife's flame shrunk a little, then stood straight and still. He walked to where Renick's sat, so short, its flame so dim compared to a healthy newborn's. He took his son's candle and replaced it with his, tall and strong; though not a full life left, at least he'd given his son many more years.

He walked back to his own nameplate and placed the short candle where his used to be. Amelina's flame leaned down towards it and he choked back a sob. Such a difference now. He left the tunnel of lights and headed home. He'd need to tell her what he'd done.

She would be heartbroken, but he'd done the only thing he could. He had given a mother more time with her son.

The End

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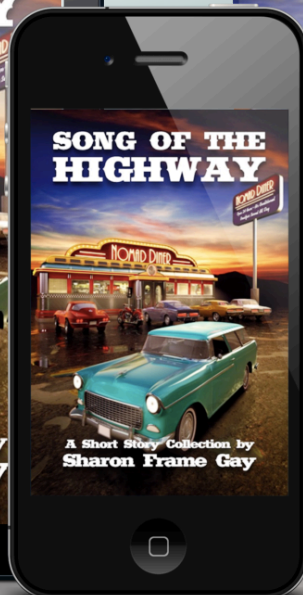


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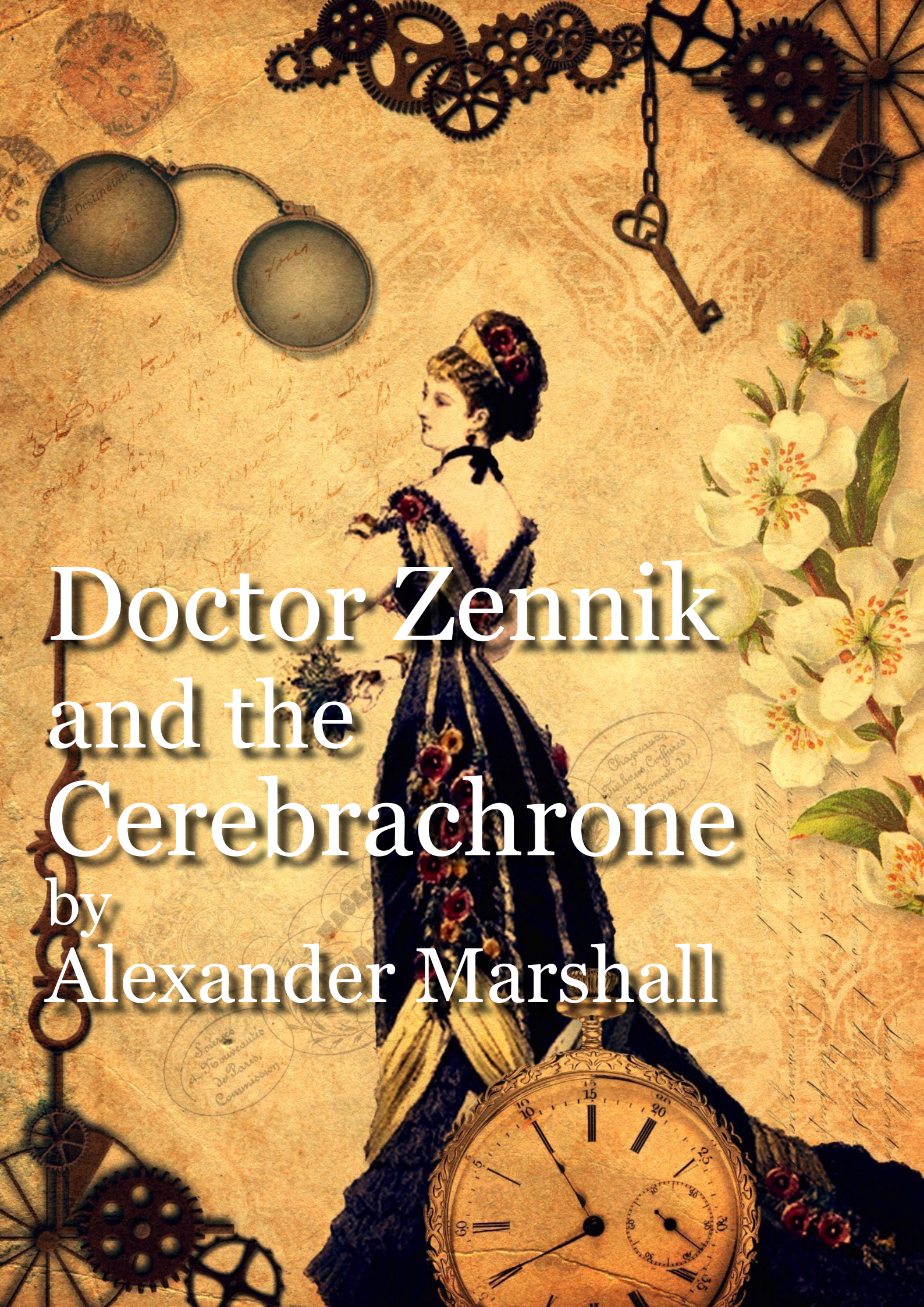
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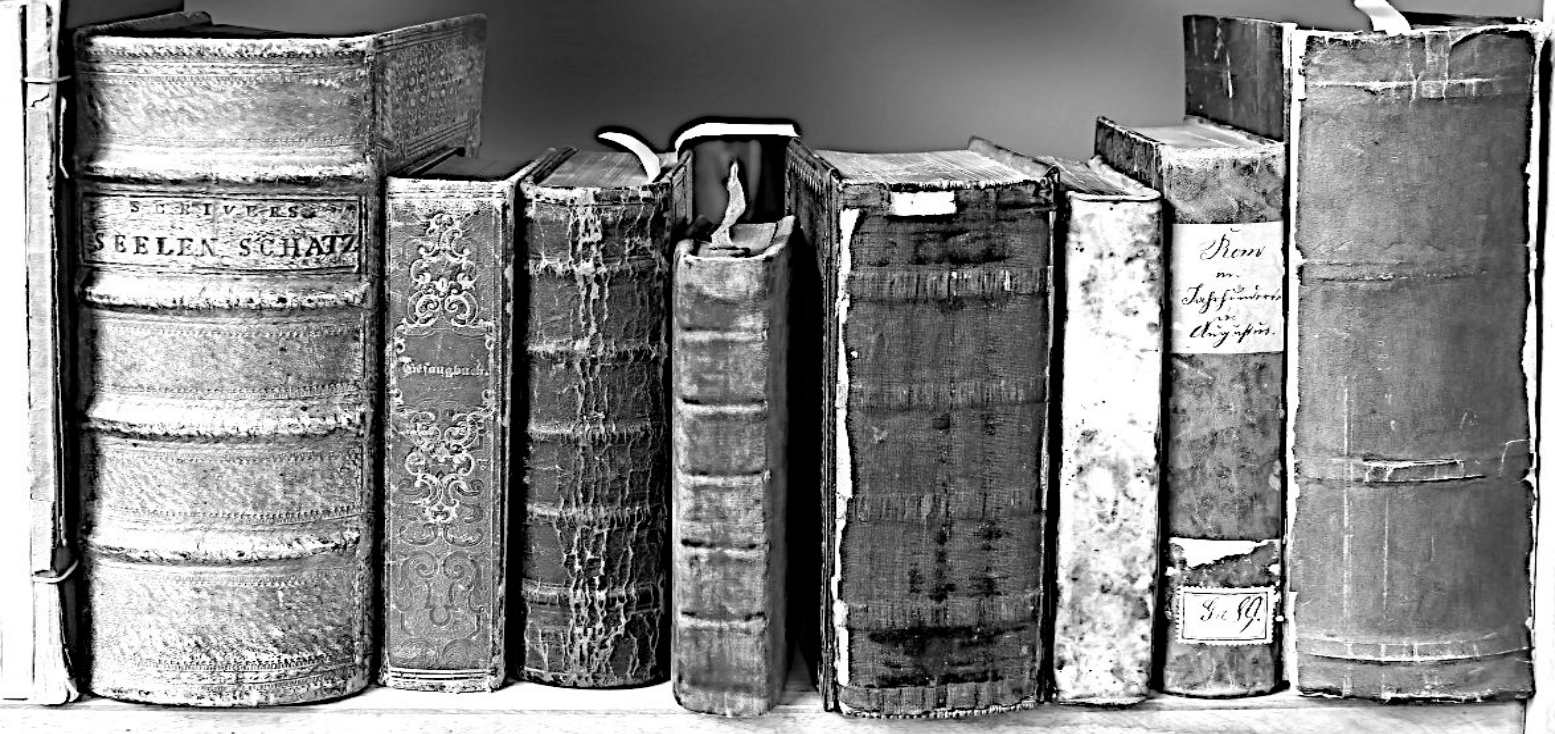


Doctor Zennik
and the
Cerebrachrone
by
Alexander Marshall



It was ten thirty by the time the chaise pulled up at the door of Dr. Zennik's rooms in Belgravia, and as the thick fog oozed about the pavement between myself and the shrouded light that glimmered above his porch I had to confess a certain reticence about tonight's meeting, a gathering of the Chronophile Club, an informal group of fellows from a variety of walks of life, all of whom shared a fascination with anything to do with time and time-keeping.

My reluctance to climb those mist-washed steps stemmed from vague and half-formed concerns about this evening's host: our society had been in existence now for two years, three days and seventeen and one half hours, but the doctor in question had joined only recently. Though we, as I have mentioned, were open to all kinds of members - and at the last meeting there had even been two women in attendance, the Lady Forsyth and her grand niece Ethel, who had expressed an interest in early Anglo-Saxon time-keeping, their delightful company in no way distracting us from the serious if insouciant purpose of our gathering - there was something about the doctor which set him apart from the rest of us, something about which I couldn't quite satisfy myself. He had a strange accent - but that alone was not it, as one of our most prominent members was the Russian scientist Pachowski, whose papers on chronolosis were widely known, and whose accent was at times as difficult to understand as his work. Doctor Zennik had dressed a little eccentrically on the few occasions when he had attended; his manner was perhaps a trifle foreign; his topics of conversation a touch risqué; his background a degree questionable or mysterious - but none of these factors alone precluded him from that set of men with whom I felt perfectly calm. Perhaps it was just the accumulation of these subtle oddities that worked on my imagination until the slight discomfort I had had on discovering that



tonight's meeting would be hosted by him developed by increments into almost a fear, an emotion which the foggy night and dim lights did nothing to dispel.

It was with trepidation that I rang the bell therefore, and with a brief but potent tremor of the heart that I crossed the threshold when the doctor's butler answered the door so swiftly that the thirteen point seven seconds I had calculated as the average response to any given sounding of a doorbell in the metropolis was sharply reduced, and I pondered suspiciously that the man had in fact been watching my approach and had intended to startle me in such a fashion as soon as he saw me climbing the steps. I resolved not to give him any impression that he had succeeded, and entered the hall in as dignified a manner as possible, half fearful that I would be the only attendee that evening.

My worst fears drew closer to fruition when I was shown into the library to find, I thought, no one else present. The room was large and dark, the flickering firelight from the healthy blaze in one corner of the sizeable hearth failing to make any lasting impression on the dusty, book-covered walls. The butler withdrew, after letting me know that the doctor would be along shortly. Apart from the distant clatter of traffic from the street and the gentle rush and sizzle of wood in the fireplace, it was very quiet. I noticed immediately, as should come as no surprise, I expect, that there was a distinct absence of clocks in the room. The presence of books dominated wherever I looked. Several had been scattered on a large table quite near the fire, and I held one up to the flames to read its title: 'The Unfathomable History of Humanity'. Another read

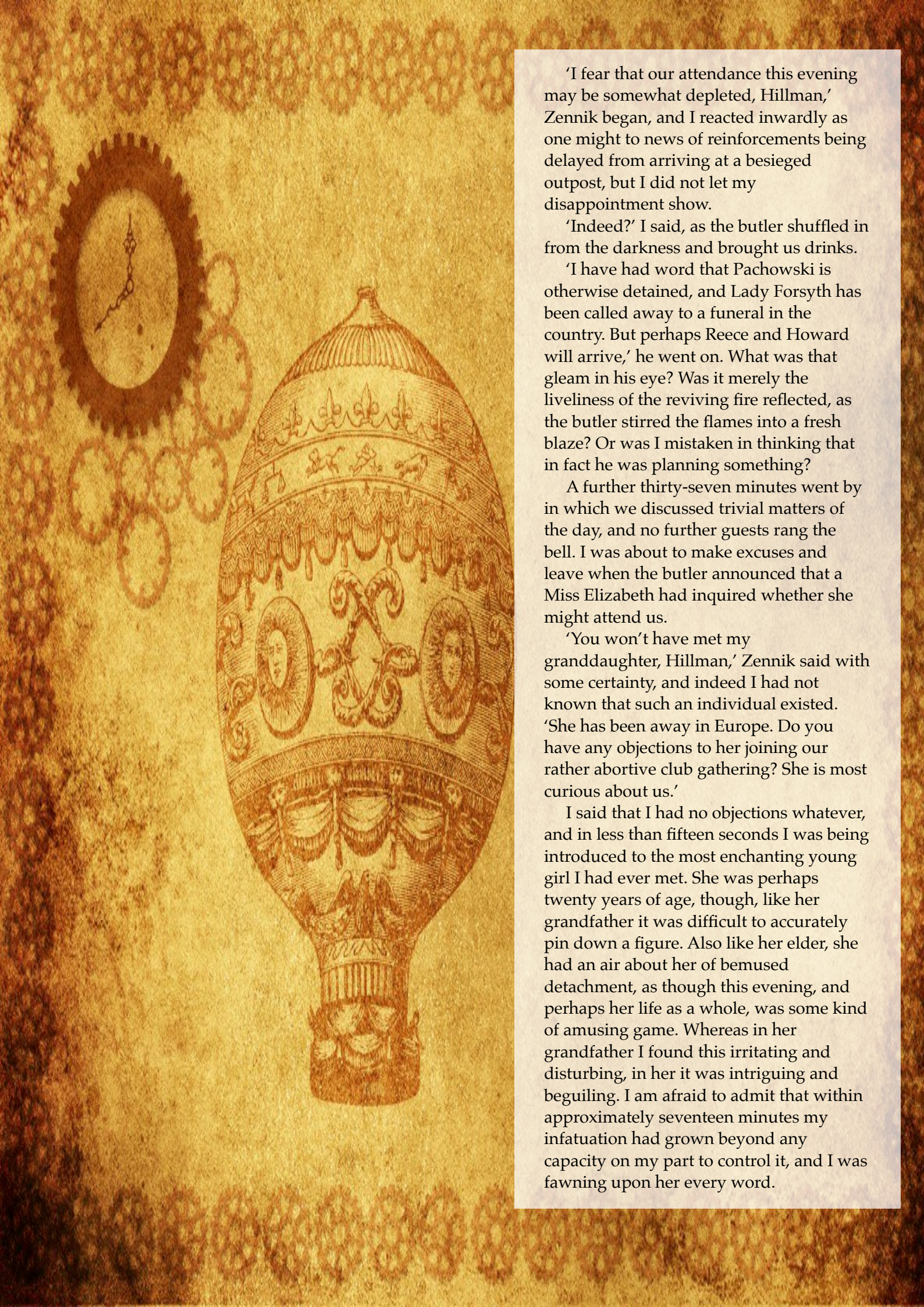
'Sidereal Timekeeping and Seasonal Variations'. Another proclaimed 'The Rest Is Silence - Ponderings on Fatalism as a Universal Philosophy', which echoed within me in that space as a log snapped in the hearth. It seemed to be some time since I had first entered. I took out my watch, an instrument of which I was rather proud. My uncle had been a watchmaker, and had made this particular timepiece with his own hands fifty years earlier. He'd told me that his own fascination with time, which he had passed on to me while I was still a boy, had begun when, in learning his trade, he had met a man in India or Africa or some such place, a mystic, who had told him that he had travelled the oceans of time in the same way that we, as modern men, traversed the oceans between Europe and the Americas. One day, my uncle told me the mystic had said, it might be possible to journey back into the time of the mighty pharaohs of ancient Egypt, or even to voyage into the distant future when perhaps the Empire itself had faded and some new world had taken shape in its place. As a child my uncle's tales fascinated me, enchanted me — as I grew older, however, I pursued my interests in a more serious fashion and read physics at Oxford. The watch that my uncle passed on to me was special, then, in that it reminded me of the roots of my own interests, but also in that, by an ingenious system of wheels and buttons, it could tell me the time in all of the Dominions at any given moment. I knew, for example, that as it drew close to eleven o'clock here in London, in the Antipodes it was in fact mid-morning of the following day, a fact which, although perfectly sensible to my scientific faculties, never failed to amuse me imaginatively.



I was smiling to myself at that thought yet again, and looking out of the window, which overlooked the street and the front door. I watched in a disconnected way as a man remarkably like myself emerged from the door and climbed into a cab. I was half-amused by the similarities between the fellow and myself, and was in a kind of semi-daydream about it, when I started as a hand fell gently on my shoulder.

'Forgive me, Hillman, did I startle you?' said Dr. Zennik, for of course it was he. I muttered some incoherent apology and greeting. The doctor looked in fine spirits, but it had indeed alarmed me that he had managed to creep up on me in such a way without me noticing him at all, like some kind of spectre. The door appeared not to have been opened, but perhaps there was some other way into the library — it was difficult to tell in the gloom.

I looked with more self-possession at my host: he was a tall man, perhaps in his mid-fifties, touches of grey about his otherwise sable and sweeping locks, a narrow but strong face, the lines of which spoke to me of many years abroad. His eyes were of that probing kind which I found unsettling, hovering as they did like those of a falcon over its prey, vacillating between hostility and amusement. I decided at that moment that it was his eyes, in fact, which were the key to my original and fundamental discomfiture — they looked me over now in a curiously dispassionate way, as I might scan over a slice of ham in a butcher's shop, seeking out any obvious deficiency. And yet I speak harshly — the impression conveyed was not altogether an unpleasant one, nor was it dominated by any sense of outright antagonism. With such a look, I daresay, a grandfather might probe a recalcitrant grandchild whose behaviour had already led one to be suspicious of mischief. But I was in no way contemplating wrongdoing of any sort, playful or otherwise, and after a rigorous moment, Dr. Zennik seemed satisfied of that fact himself and drew me more warmly to the fire where we seated ourselves in the heated leather of two great armchairs.



'I fear that our attendance this evening may be somewhat depleted, Hillman,' Zennik began, and I reacted inwardly as one might to news of reinforcements being delayed from arriving at a besieged outpost, but I did not let my disappointment show.

'Indeed?' I said, as the butler shuffled in from the darkness and brought us drinks.

'I have had word that Pachowski is otherwise detained, and Lady Forsyth has been called away to a funeral in the country. But perhaps Reece and Howard will arrive,' he went on. What was that gleam in his eye? Was it merely the liveliness of the reviving fire reflected, as the butler stirred the flames into a fresh blaze? Or was I mistaken in thinking that in fact he was planning something?

A further thirty-seven minutes went by in which we discussed trivial matters of the day, and no further guests rang the bell. I was about to make excuses and leave when the butler announced that a Miss Elizabeth had inquired whether she might attend us.

'You won't have met my granddaughter, Hillman,' Zennik said with some certainty, and indeed I had not known that such an individual existed. 'She has been away in Europe. Do you have any objections to her joining our rather abortive club gathering? She is most curious about us.'

I said that I had no objections whatever, and in less than fifteen seconds I was being introduced to the most enchanting young girl I had ever met. She was perhaps twenty years of age, though, like her grandfather it was difficult to accurately pin down a figure. Also like her elder, she had an air about her of bemused detachment, as though this evening, and perhaps her life as a whole, was some kind of amusing game. Whereas in her grandfather I found this irritating and disturbing, in her it was intriguing and beguiling. I am afraid to admit that within approximately seventeen minutes my infatuation had grown beyond any capacity on my part to control it, and I was fawning upon her every word.

'Do you travel far, Mr. Hillman?' she inquired. I was admiring the pinkness of her radiant face as she knelt at her grandfather's knee, her raven hair painted a glossy mahogany by the flames.

'A good three miles,' I replied, a little too keenly. 'I live in Bedford Square.'

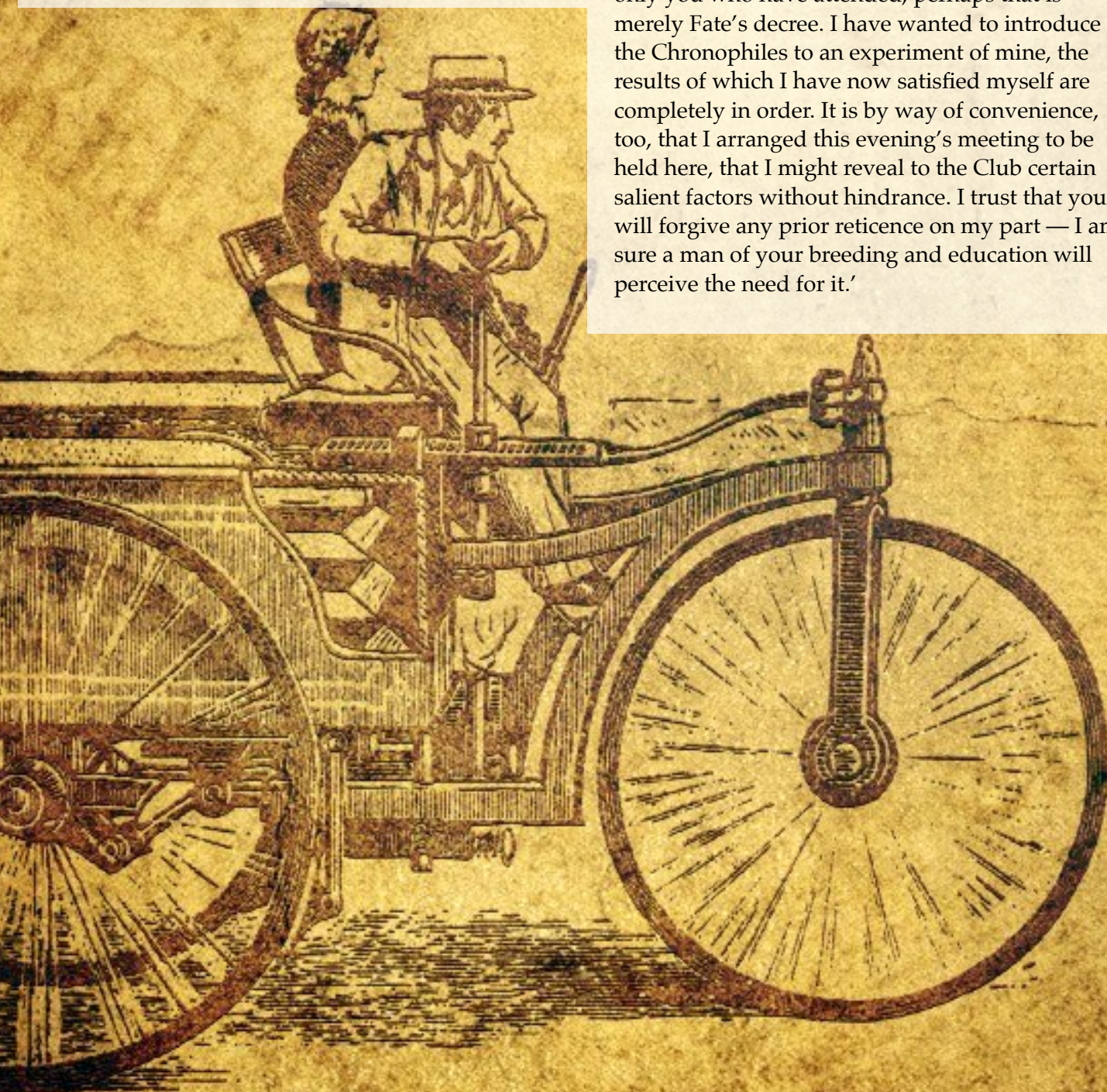
'Ah, yes. Is not the traffic frightfully noisy there?' she said, giving the impression, like her grandfather, of heavily restraining a desire to burst into uncontrolled laughter which I found peculiarly uplifting and charming. And yet I also detected an air of vague trepidation or uncertainty, as though she were not merely engaging in social intercourse but attempting a rather arduous task with attention to minute detail requiring rather intense concentration.

We continued in this idle way for some time and from her conversation I was led to believe that her education had recently been completed in Paris and that she had returned to London to work as her grandfather's secretary and librarian.

'A daunting task!' I espoused, looking around the book-laden chamber.

'Yes, grandfather has a great many books from all around the world — and a good many other things besides,' she went on, this last remark being punctuated with a glance between the two of them as though a theatrical cue had been given.

'Indeed, Mr. Hillman,' Dr. Zennik began, leaning forward in a ponderous way, 'I must confess that I have been looking forward to this evening's proceedings and while I regret that it is only you who have attended, perhaps that is merely Fate's decree. I have wanted to introduce the Chronophiles to an experiment of mine, the results of which I have now satisfied myself are completely in order. It is by way of convenience, too, that I arranged this evening's meeting to be held here, that I might reveal to the Club certain salient factors without hindrance. I trust that you will forgive any prior reticence on my part — I am sure a man of your breeding and education will perceive the need for it.'





Why, I wondered as he spoke these words, were hairs rising on the back of my neck and why did I gain the distinct impression of a conspiracy between Elizabeth and the doctor in which I was the victim? I wondered fleetingly whether the butler too was part of a plot, and whether the library door had been locked.

'Do not be alarmed, Hillman!' the doctor said, raising the broad blade of his right hand in the red light. 'I sense that you are in some way apprehensive. The experiment in no way possesses sinister ramifications, though it might, I suspect, in the wrong hands. No, it is I think something that will be of great interest to you. I do not think for one moment that it is any accident that you alone of our compatriots are here tonight, and, as I do not intend to wait for our next meeting before unveiling my device, you may well be part of an historic event in a capacity as an observer and recorder.'

With these words, which succeeded only partially in calming my nerves, he rose from his chair and went with his granddaughter to a nearby bookshelf. He reached behind a row of leatherbound volumes and brought out a small casket, which he unlocked with a key from his

pocket. With great delicacy and the air of either a surgeon removing an abscess or a midwife delivering a child he took out an object shaped like a large but slightly squashed apple. It was a bright silver in colour and from its shining surface emanated stubby pins of various lengths and thicknesses. My first impression was that it was a rather bulky and awkward pocket watch, not entirely dissimilar to my own but with more complex workings. It was attached to a heavy silver chain which Elizabeth placed around the doctor's neck with the action of a princess bequeathing a mayoral decoration. I glanced at her face and saw a peculiar look of awe, adoration and apprehension which compelled me to regard the strange object in a similar manner.

'This,' pronounced Zennik, 'is the Cerebrachrone.'

He held it up in the firelight and its bright surface bent and refracted the red and gold of the fire until the image of a pin-stuck apple was almost complete. I understood from his tone at first that the name alone was supposed to convey something of the device's purpose and function. Unfortunately, it did nothing of the sort.





'What exactly is it?' I asked bluntly and perhaps a little forthrightly, my abruptness intended to dispel my own anxiety as much as to obtain data.

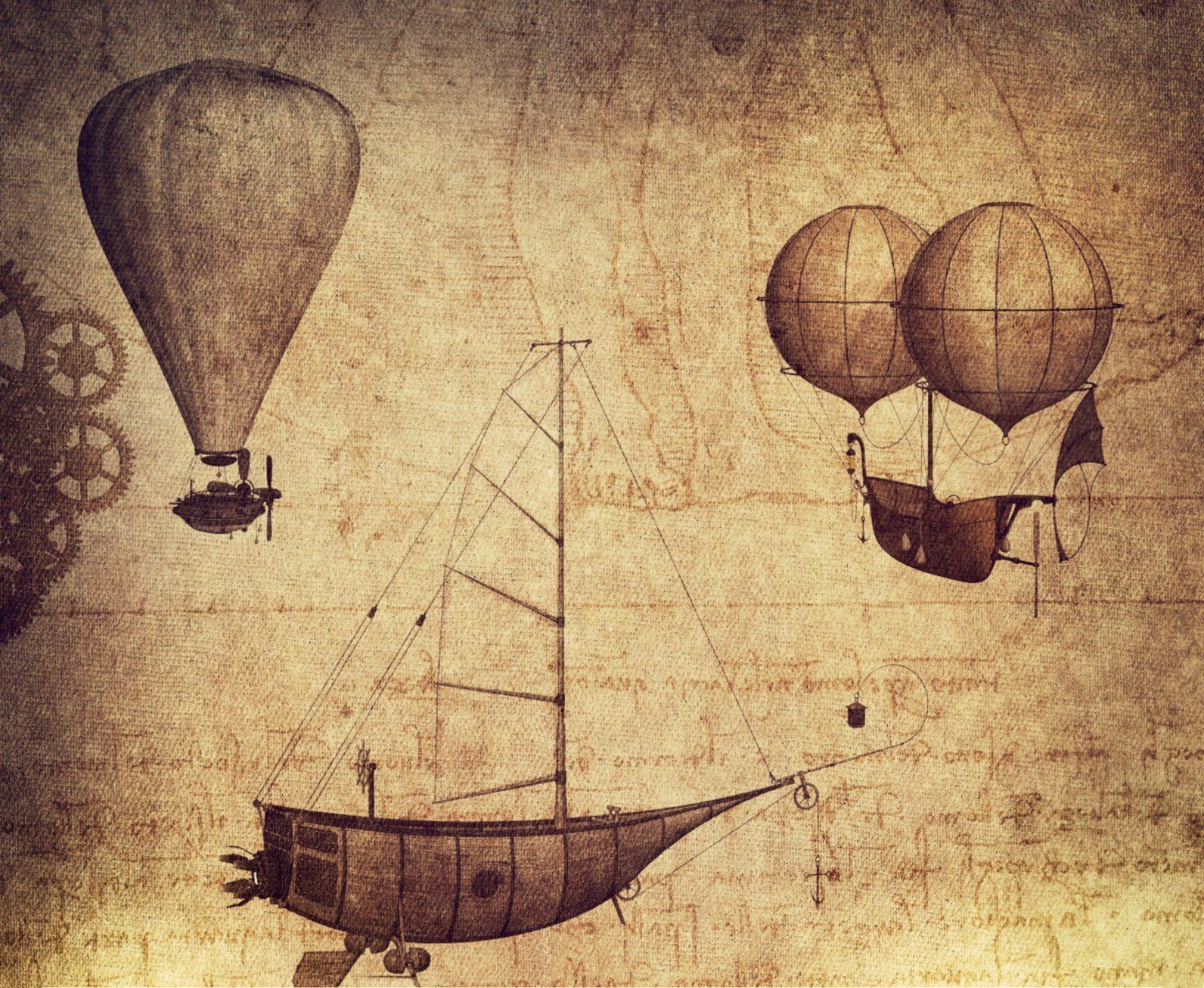
'It is a Temporal Singularity Regulator. I use the indefinite article "a", but as you must guess, no other such device yet exists, making it in effect The Temporal Singularity Regulator. Which means, my dear Mr. Hillman, that it is a device that can be used to control Time Itself.'

I took him to mean that it was an elaborate watch, and started to smile and relax and to become fascinated in a less mortified way — but he went on.

'And it has been so used. You do not appreciate my meaning as yet, Hillman. It is used to travel in Time.'

I took the opportunity that the following eight seconds of silence offered to descend into my armchair, despite the fact that Elizabeth was still standing. For some reason I did not immediately fathom, I felt no impulse to flee but rather a strong desire to rest as though I had spent a long day in heavy exertion. Zennik went on.

'I will return to your incredulity in due course. Let me first assist you with a few general facts. Time is the most subjective of the appearances of physics. Whereas it is easy for us to agree about and to measure space, matter and energy, these things having an objective and apparently independent reality outside ourselves, it is not always so possible with time. We would both agree that it is approximately twenty feet from here to the library door, for example — but on how long it takes to traverse that distance we might not easily agree. As a child we believed an hour to be an eternity in which to play and do and run and throw; as adults the same hour skips by in the same apparent time as a child's minute. As we get older, years seem shorter — but are these things a seeming only, or is there a subjectivity to time which is part of its make-up in some fundamental way which can be both discovered and utilised?



‘The answer, Hillman, is that Time is a variable between us. Somehow — and I have as yet very little theoretical basis but much experiential data — Time is linked to us, probably by the etheric field which surrounds our physical forms. This chain that I wear is not only for the convenience of carrying the Cerebrachrone, it is a medium through which my body’s electrical and spiritual energies engage with the Cerebrachrone’s delicate mechanisms and thus it enables me to become as one, as it were, with the device and able to direct it...’

The reader will forgive a moment’s incredulity on my part at this point. I felt a little light-headed, the room seemed rather unreal — Elizabeth’s bright face receded from me as though I were about to faint. I made some vague protesting motion with a hand, but Zennik again raised his own hand and went on calmly:

‘Please, Hillman, do not distress yourself — all will become apparent in time, if I may use the expression. You see, there is a special, personal

link between you and I which is why I consider it particularly favourable to reveal all this to you and I confess I am rather pleased that you are here alone after all.’

He went on, after this even more perplexing remark, to describe the inner working of the Cerebrachrone at greater length, details which I neither retained nor especially valued over my poetic apprehension of the thing. The device gleamed in his hand, and it was the play of light about it that fascinated me more than the science behind it.

‘And...have you yourself travelled in time?’ I ventured when he had come to an end. His face lit into a white grin that was more than a little frightening. Then his eyes turned inward as he reflected on some adventure.

‘Indeed — though you will think me mad,’ he said, glancing over at me, ‘indeed I have so travelled.’

'Think of it Hillman! To be at one moment walking down Baker Street on a frosty December evening, stepping across to Regent's Park, and then, with but a moment's adjustment of the Cerebrachrone, to be strolling in the primeval forest that flourished there before any Georgian wall was conceived! Or to be beside the sea at Brighton one spring afternoon and then with a mere twist of the dial to journey one hundred years into the future, take one of their astoundingly swift railway carriages back to London, travel beneath the earth in the veritable labyrinth of tunnels which our fledgling underground system is to become, and emerge into daylight at the Tower of London to see King Henry the Eighth himself pull up to the quay there in a gentle autumn rain! All this and much more have I seen, Hillman.'

'I presume these adventures took some preparation,' I said in a firm and steady voice, determined to suspend my incredulity at least momentarily. I glanced across at Elizabeth and saw her admiring eyes locked on her grandfather's face, and a feeling of pity and a

desire to rescue her from the power of this lunatic washed over me. But such savage responses were soon quelled as the doctor replied.

'Of course. One hundred years from now, for example, our currency has changed beyond recognition. The value of money has wildly varied, and pounds are issued as coins, if you can believe it. I was at first paralysed in the whirlwind metropolis of the future until I struck upon the notion of carrying with me items from my own house and selling them as antiques! I have amassed a tidy sum of twentieth century coinage of the realm now, enough to fund many journeys on their splendid mechanical vehicles! You cannot imagine, Hillman! They do not use horses as we do to transport either themselves or their goods — they have devices, like railway engines but with neither rails nor carriages, and in these they sit and pursue one another at high velocity through the streets! I am constantly bedazzled by them!'



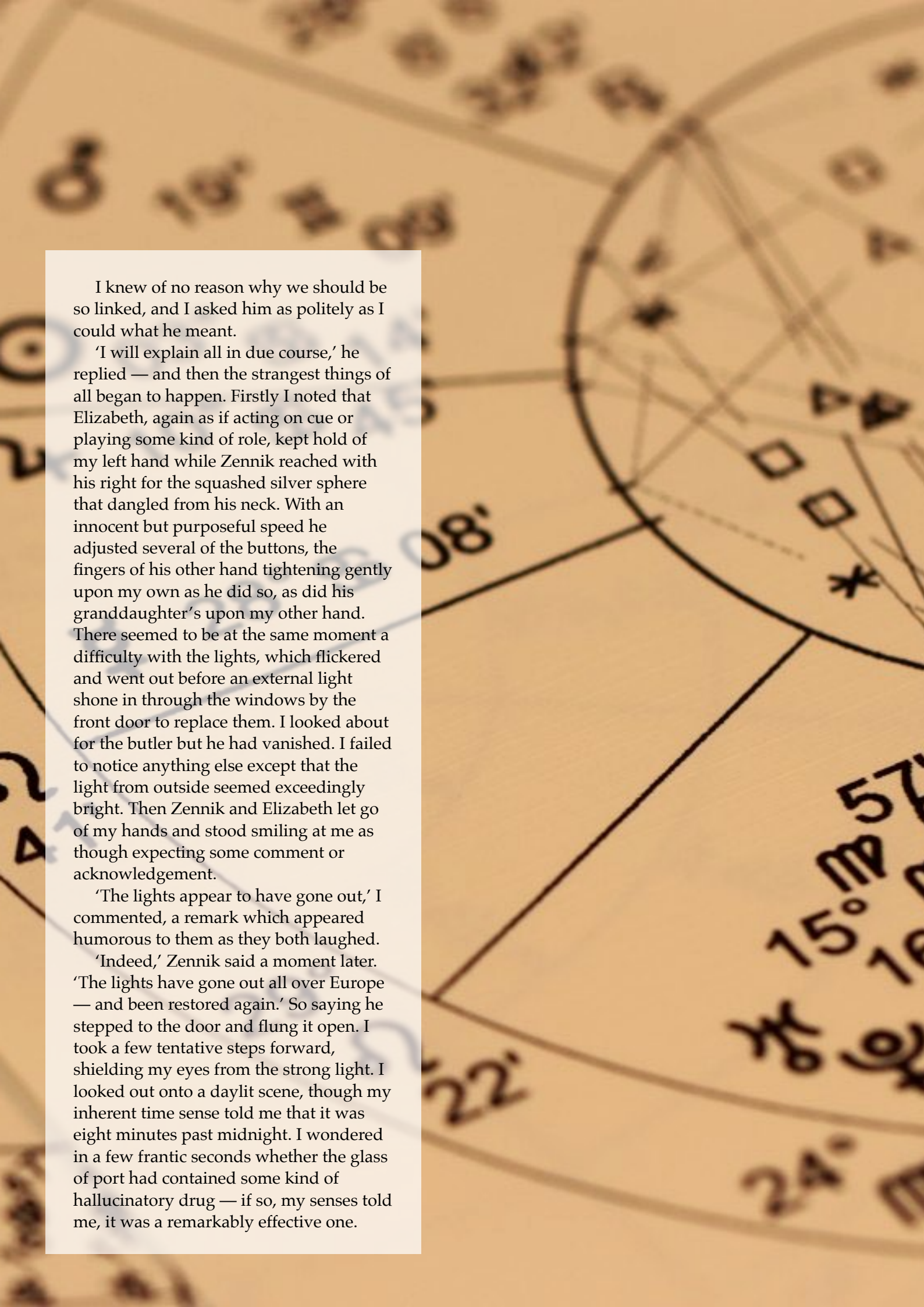
'I think Mr. Hillman is growing incredulous, Grandfather,' chimed in the sweet voice of Elizabeth, rescuing me from the good doctor's mounting manic monologue. I judged that it had to be close to midnight — seven minutes and thirty-five seconds to twelve, I fancied — and I felt an urge to leave now. But I was aware of the awkwardness which I had created by perhaps not being thoroughly attentive. I made some apology as I stood up, finding it easier to pretend that Zennik had said nothing at all about any adventure, temporal or otherwise, and that he had in fact never removed the device he was holding from its place behind the books. This habit of suppressing or mentally blanketing items, phenomena or incidents which the human mind finds too incredible to be rationally realised I believe has a pathological name, but that name escaped me for the moment. It was common enough, but I believe that evening I demonstrated a textbook case of it.

I half expected that Zennik, in his passion, would put some physical obstacle in the way of my leaving, but on my motion towards the door the butler was summoned, I was presented with my hat and coat and many kind words, and I was soon in the hall, with invitations to return at my earliest convenience.

That part of me that was interested in time in an analytical and scientific way was to some degree fascinated by the evening's events, but also revolted and deeply suspicious of the doctor's methodology; that part of me which was neither scientific nor logical felt an imaginative pull towards the adventures that had been described to me, but also a natural horror of the unusual which urged me to flee. As I stood there in the hall, therefore, making a hasty and ungainly getaway, I thought, I was a curious mixture of energies, a mass of contradictions. Zennik and Elizabeth, hands clasped, took one of my hands each and smiled welcomingly at me, as clearly I presented to them the visage of a disturbed and uneasy young man.

'I must apologise for this evening,' Zennik was saying. 'Clearly I have, in my eagerness, embarrassed you and made you ill at ease. It's just that I long for companionship of the intellect and there is a special bond between us.'






I knew of no reason why we should be so linked, and I asked him as politely as I could what he meant.

‘I will explain all in due course,’ he replied — and then the strangest things of all began to happen. Firstly I noted that Elizabeth, again as if acting on cue or playing some kind of role, kept hold of my left hand while Zennik reached with his right for the squashed silver sphere that dangled from his neck. With an innocent but purposeful speed he adjusted several of the buttons, the fingers of his other hand tightening gently upon my own as he did so, as did his granddaughter’s upon my other hand. There seemed to be at the same moment a difficulty with the lights, which flickered and went out before an external light shone in through the windows by the front door to replace them. I looked about for the butler but he had vanished. I failed to notice anything else except that the light from outside seemed exceedingly bright. Then Zennik and Elizabeth let go of my hands and stood smiling at me as though expecting some comment or acknowledgement.

‘The lights appear to have gone out,’ I commented, a remark which appeared humorous to them as they both laughed.

‘Indeed,’ Zennik said a moment later. ‘The lights have gone out all over Europe — and been restored again.’ So saying he stepped to the door and flung it open. I took a few tentative steps forward, shielding my eyes from the strong light. I looked out onto a daylight scene, though my inherent time sense told me that it was eight minutes past midnight. I wondered in a few frantic seconds whether the glass of port had contained some kind of hallucinatory drug — if so, my senses told me, it was a remarkably effective one.



The street down which I had travelled two hours and ten minutes ago had gone, or rather was so different as to be unrecognisable. Tall, plain walls rose sheerly to a height of several hundred feet directly opposite. Objects which I could not at first make out sped from left to right and from right to left on the thoroughfare before me. They appeared to be rounded metal casings of some kind. I caught a glimpse of someone sitting in one, and, as my eyes became accustomed to their shape and speed I saw that in each there sat what I assumed to be the coachman of these incredible vehicles, and in some there were passengers also. But they moved with no apparent cause for their motion — there was no horse to be seen. And they moved exceedingly swiftly, much more quickly than any sane man would have considered safe. Perhaps they somehow drew power from the sound which I now noticed emanating as a general low thunder from the road. Each possessed a distinctive roar but each roar was swallowed up in the broader cacophony of traffic. I put my hands to my ears involuntarily. I spun around to see Zennik and Elizabeth smiling down upon me like some kind of self-satisfied, twisted pair of heavenly emissaries come to collect my soul, or worse, like two demented phantasms from an asylum within my mind, for my only rational conclusion to all this was that I was going mad.

‘Be calm,’ Zennik stressed, reaching for my shoulder, but I shrank from him. ‘We mean you no harm, Hillman. But my estimation of your character was such that I felt you deserved to experience the subjective truth of what I have been saying for yourself, and that you were of a constitution sufficiently robust as to be able to cope with that experience. I trust that you will not disappoint my judgement of you? Do you see now the effectiveness of the Cerebrachrone?’

I stammered something unintelligible, and made to proceed down the steps, but drew back from this violent and manic traffic which as far as I could see was a menace to bodily existence with its noise and speed. Elizabeth collected me by the hand, and with the air of a nurse attending the sick, drew me back up the steps and inside the house. Zennik followed and closed the door, shutting out the spectacle of the street.



'How?' I began — and then ended with that lone word which seemed to distill into itself my full meaning.

'Your disorientation will pass, my friend,' he said. 'Come — there are one or two other wonders I want to show you, if you can manage it.'

Whether I could manage it or not, I was led upstairs — a staircase that looked decidedly different to the one I knew I'd seen when I first entered this house — and into a large room with immense windows which looked out from the back of the house. I found that, to my shame, I needed to be supported — my knees had deserted me in terms of solidity and I wavered on my feet like a drunkard.

As I sank into a chair from which I could look out of the broad and high windows through which the undeniable daylight poured, Elizabeth walked over to a box in the middle of the room and tapped it. It flared into colours and sound like a fireplace, but instead of flames, in this box there burned dancing shapes of men and women and images of rooms and movement. The thing was hypnotic. I had read of various experiments in cinematography, but this was far in advance of anything of which I had heard — these figures were like living and speaking dagguerrotypes. It was the box more than the daylight or traffic that finally prompted my, I suppose inevitable, question:

'What year have we arrived in?'

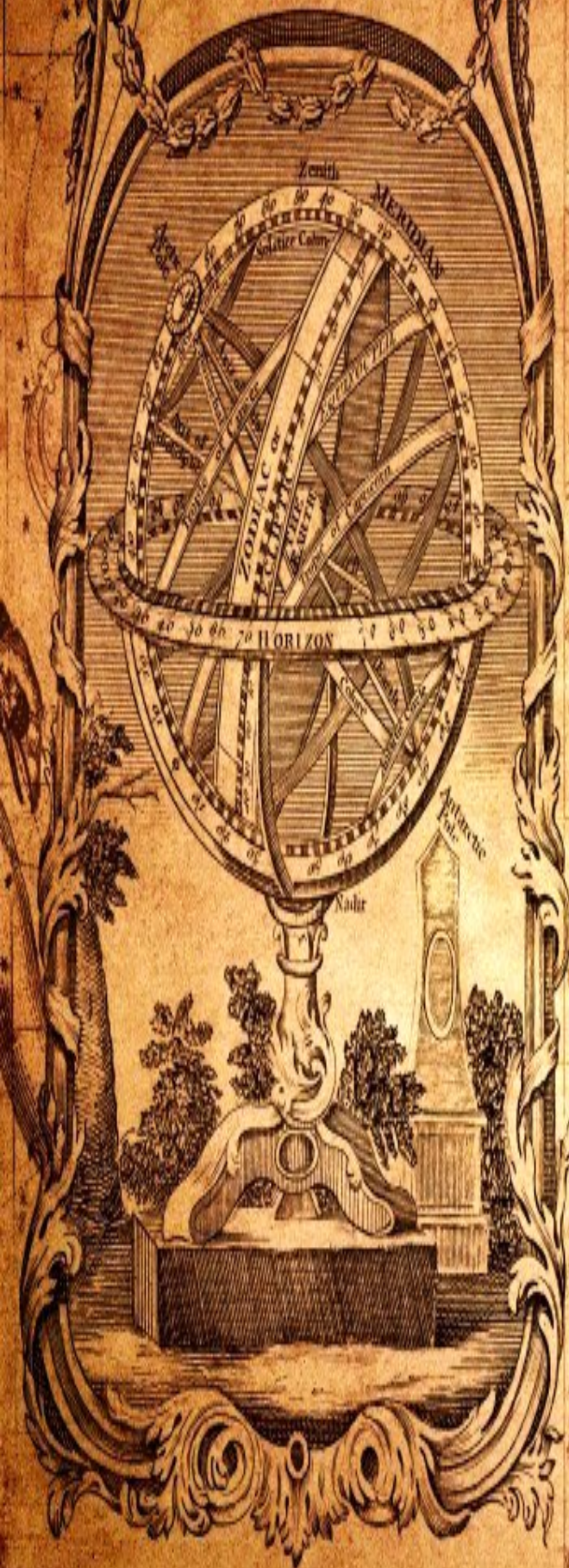
'This is 1960,' said Elizabeth, 'and we are both sorry to do this to you but we felt you would best appreciate the wonder of it all this way. Is it not wonderful? That Time itself surrenders to our will? That we can journey wherever we will at the mere twist of a dial?'

I had to admit to a certain amount of wonder; I also felt a degree of nausea and disorientation, the effects of a prolonged shock reaction which began to make me tremble quite severely. I thought perhaps I was on the edge of some kind of sensory breakdown, but I endeavoured not to let it show.

'This device,' said Elizabeth, indicating the picture box, 'is called a tele-vision — it receives invisible signals from the ether and translates them into pictures. It serves as a medium of entertainment in this era.' She reached down and tapped the box again and the pictures vanished.



The Artificial Sphere.



'In this time,' the doctor continued, as fascinated and excited as his granddaughter, 'men have developed not only vehicles that operate without horses, but carriages that fly through the air. In under a decade from where we now sit, men will use these carriages to go to the Moon. Already they cross the Atlantic in them.'

'And in a matter of hours, we could be in New York, Mr. Hillman! In hours!' Elizabeth cried, clapping her hands together.

In their enthusiasm I believe they had failed to notice their guest's failing consciousness. The room had begun to spin, and I felt decidedly unwell. Within a matter of seconds, blackness rose up before me and took me away from this strange duo and the stranger world into which they had brought me.



When I opened my eyes, I was afloat in a sea of colours, a swirling pool of varying hues that held me mesmerised and on the edge of sleep for what seemed like a very long time, scarcely able to recall how I'd come there. I was lying down on a kind of bed or table. As I slowly recovered a fuller consciousness, I recalled vaguely how I had been at the home of Doctor Zennik, but my immediate memory was a mere blur. There was no sign of the doctor or his granddaughter.

Music of an almost inaudible but very beautiful kind hovered in the coloured air. I listened to it and in it there were voices whispering. I couldn't make out at all what they were saying. I slid off the bed onto my feet — my nausea and disorientation had faded completely and I felt very calm, as though I had been injected with some kind of narcotic drug, but it was a more soothing and natural sensation than that. I wanted to see Elizabeth's face again. As the thought coalesced in my mind, so was it projected at some incalculable distance from me onto a wall which seemed to waver in the air. My mind was very relaxed, and in a condition most unusual for me. I pondered Elizabeth more, and the face grew larger and became her whole body. As I continued to think of her, the image I had mentally conjured began to dance before me like a phantom — and then it began to undress, as I felt the stirrings of darker and more bestial impulses in my heart. I at once stamped my foot and cried out 'Enough!'

The music ceased and the room went dark then a pale white. It was a small chamber, devoid of any adornment but for the bed in its centre. A portal opened in the white wall, and Zennik stepped through.

'Please forgive me, Mr. Hillman,' he said, reaching and taking my hand. 'Elizabeth and I intended you no harm or inconvenience. Perhaps we were wrong to let you in on our little secret in quite such a forthright manner...'

'I don't know about that, sir,' I replied rather crustily, 'but I would be grateful if you could explain to me where on earth I am and how can I return to whence I came?'

In truth I was much relieved to see the doctor and my heart ventured that he was quite sincere in his apology and most remorseful about any discomfort I had endured — but I also felt agitated and put-upon, and it was this impulse which determined to be gratified. Zennik seemed most anxious to please.



'You are approximately twenty thousand years into the future from where you last recall being. But returning to your home time is a matter of a moment's adjustment of the Cerebrachrone. Come!' He helped me step forward, and we crossed the threshold of the small room and emerged through a glass foyer into a beautiful park under a gentle spring sunlight. 'We brought you here because of these healing chambers which are dotted across the landscape and freely available and easy to operate. It was the quickest and surest way of reviving you.'

I looked about me, seeing forest and, in the distance, low hills. The air seemed inexpressibly fresh and cool upon my face, and the absence of any kind of noise other than a gentle breeze in the trees was most invigorating in itself.

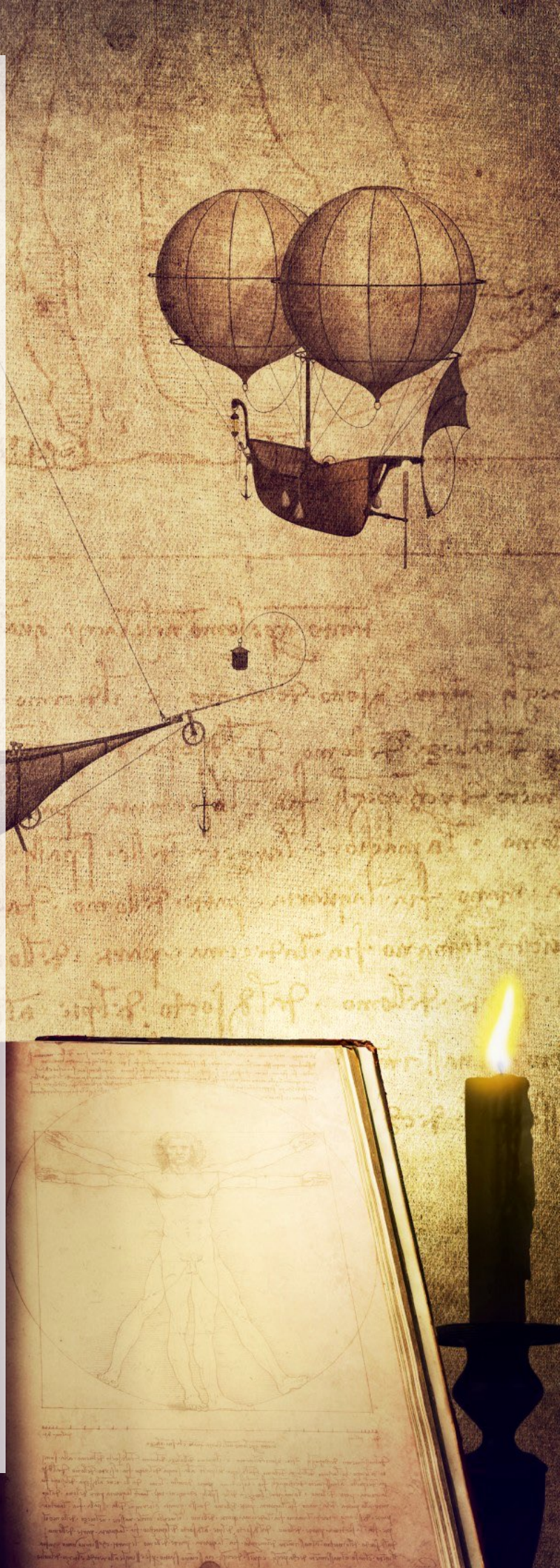
'This is the same locale,' Zennik said, in answer to my unspoken question. 'This is the Thames Valley, AD 22,000. The whole of what was once known as London has become this most majestic parkland. Every few miles, were you to travel in this era, you would come across one of these small domes.' He gestured back at the building from which we had emerged — it was a smooth, semi-spherical shape with a round open portal which served as an entrance. 'As far as we have been able to make out they are simply healing chambers, somehow deriving their energy and purpose from their incumbent, delving I expect into the subject's etheric field to produce a swift and effective mental and physical health — certainly they seem to invigorate both the body and the soul in a remarkable way.'


'And the people?' I asked.

'Elizabeth and I have not yet completed our research into this period. It seems that at this point in history, however, the earth is completely deserted. Humanity has abandoned it, leaving only these structures in its wake. It appears to have left the world in good order.'

I breathed in deeply of the cool, clear air — quite the opposite of the choked street of 1960, or the fog-bound atmosphere of my own time. The healing chamber had not only removed my nausea but left me feeling stable and healthy. I began to see the possibilities of Zennik's device. My mind raced with them, in fact.

'What of the various puzzles and paradoxes?' I began, becoming quite animated. 'Have you never encountered phenomena such as meeting yourselves? Or changing the pattern of recorded history?'





Zennik smiled broadly as he saw in my countenance the effect I believe he had been hoping for.

‘Sir, you begin to see it! As for the puzzles, ponder a moment the position in which you find yourself — with a moment’s flick or turn of this instrument,’ and here he produced the bulging Cerebrachrone again from inside his jacket, ‘we can escape the confines of Time, of linear progression, of Cause and Effect in their classical sense — we are no longer bound by any concept or rule or axiom with which we are familiar: we walk in Eternity, Mr. Hillman, Eternity! Do you not see it? What does it matter whether we encounter ourselves or disrupt some apparently sacred pattern of recorded time? We have ascended above mortal trials and tribulations, we are free and immortal!’

He waved his arms about in a manner I found both fascinating and discomfiting, but I saw his point. There was a deep exhilaration mounting in me too, like a wave or a volcanic eruption which threatened to collapse my lungs and strain my heart with excitement. It was true — with the Cerebrachrone we were truly free of the constraints that made us subject to mortality. Perhaps we could even use it to find a way of defeating bodily death — certainly we need never again fall prey to need. Resources were now infinite, at our fingertips literally. I began to perceive the slavish state into which humanity was daily thrown by the pressures of Time, the stress of scarcity. Free from such bonds we swam in abundance, skipping through the universe in defiance of cosmic order.

But a little voice was telling me it was not right, that one could not expect all this without a price, that such an existence, though full of freedom, would somehow lack purpose, could somehow become dangerous to the soul. I was about to put these half-formed thoughts into words when the doctor’s granddaughter appeared from the edge of the woodland laden with flowers and radiating a smile which put the sunlight to shame and made me question whether there was any danger at all in what we were doing. I let the exhilaration sweep aside the doubts.

'Mr. Hillman!' she cried, handing me a bunch of the brightest wildflowers I had ever seen. 'Are you feeling better?' Zennik answered for me.

'He is, my dear, he is —and he begins to enjoy our own excitement!'

She looked at me with an innocence of shared joy that made me smile — not a shadow in that countenance of the bestial urges I had felt within the healing chamber when pondering her image. I felt ashamed, but also uplifted by her naiveté.

'Where — or rather, when — would you like to go, Mr. Hillman? Grandfather can simply adjust the clock and we can be any period in history!'

'This is not merely a toy, though, Zennik. Its applications are limitless; its ramifications huge,' I said, becoming suddenly stern and severe, but with an effort, as I was at the same time conscious of a desire not to deflate Elizabeth's enthusiasm.

'Indeed so, Hillman,' the doctor replied, mirroring my mood. 'In the short time in which the Cerebrachrone has been functioning, I have witnessed both wonders and horrors too great for me to describe. As a tool of science and enlightenment the Cerebrachrone is unmatched; as a weapon it is devastating. I daresay it would be possible to obliterate existence itself if the device were wrongly used. The responsibility is now ours, and it is one I take most to heart, believe me. Though I can become quite animated about what we are in the process of experiencing, I can also be most reflective about its consequences.'

His words and his manner did much to put me at ease, and I began to appreciate that he was perhaps more complex than I had at first thought — neither a lunatic, as I had initially concluded, nor a potential despot, but an old man whose experience of life was suddenly thrown into a lawless void by unexpected possibilities and perils.



We walked through lush grass along a river meadow where once had been the great houses of my generation. It was difficult to conceive that it was longer ago that they had stood on that spot than it was to the era of the Ice Ages from my own time, and in thinking that thought I had a sudden glimpse of what Zennik meant by eternity — for this green and empty land for us was the Present, and all of civilisation and the Empire was a distant and forgotten past. Similarly, had we travelled back to the beginnings of the world, all that was to come was the Future, and as yet unwritten. One could conceive of what a god must feel, looking down into an immense span of Time through a keyhole, as it were, or through a telescope which focused only on that segment called by its inhabitants the 'present', while all of Time stretched out from it, before and after, prepared either in some mythic pre- time moment or perhaps better conceived of as originating outside mortal planes altogether. The idea was staggering both intellectually and emotionally. To be that free of linear progression was to cast off the chains of the universe indeed, and to walk with the gods.

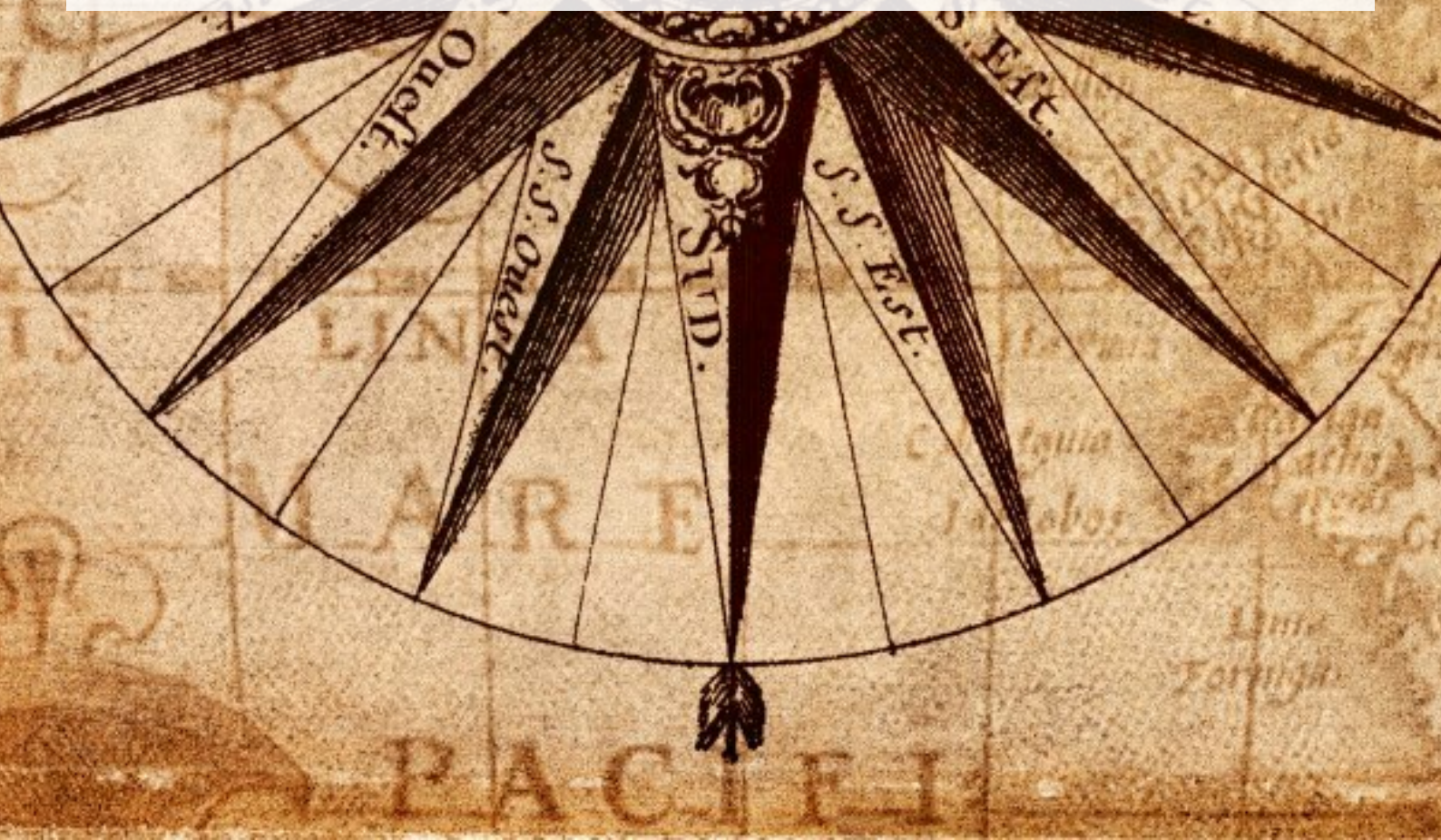
We continued to wander along the pathless valley under a cloud- dotted sky, all of us silent as the full dawning of realisation broke upon me, and the other two, sensing this, withheld any comment. It was a segment of my life like no other, a period I could not measure — a

transcendent experience against which all the rest of life needed to be related. It was Zennik who at last broke the spell.

'There is one last journey to make before we return to our own time, a few years that will never again be the same for any of us. One more destination and one more task,' he said, adjusting the Cerebrachrone.

'I have many questions,' I began, 'some technical, others spiritual...'

Even as the words left my mouth, Elisabeth and her grandfather had clasped my hands and the meadow had vanished. It was night, and we were walking along a street which glittered with lights stronger than gaslamps, like coloured gems sparkling on an ebony cloth. It was a place full of noise and movement, and I had scarcely made out any details when the doctor drew me aside and I found myself passing along a corridor plated with panes of glass. There were people everywhere, confusion, motion, but Zennik seemed to know what he was doing and kept on in a direction towards a coloured booth that glowed with lights. We waited in a queue of strangely garbed individuals — I averted my eyes as some of the ladies seemed only partially clothed — and then soon we were proceeding along a narrow passage and into a long room full of close-ranked padded chairs into which we all climbed. All this had taken only nine minutes and thirty-two seconds and I found it most disorientating.



'Where are we?' I began. The doctor leaned conspiratorially forward and whispered:

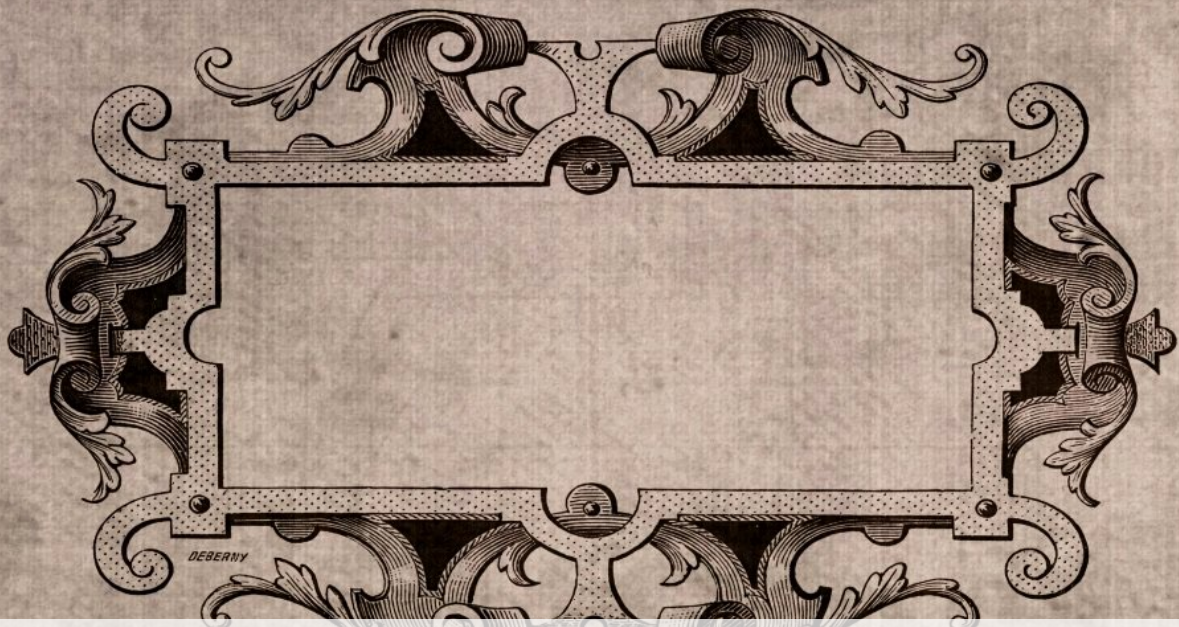
'Back in the Twentieth Century, Hillman. Aboard one of their astonishing air vehicles. We must travel to India, and this is the swiftest way there that is easily accessible. Direct transmission of matter wasn't developed until the twenty-third century, and its use was so restricted that I think it unlikely that we would have been able to gain access to a station, so I have opted for this — besides, this is an experience in itself!'

As he spoke, a charming but semi-clad woman assisted me in fastening a metal clip over my lap. I felt a wave of anxiety at this constraint, but saw that all the people — there were, I now noticed, over a hundred men and women in the long, low-ceilinged room — had similar belts and also that neither the doctor nor Elizabeth seemed particularly perturbed, so I made myself as comfortable as I could under the glare of the harsh lights, and waited. I judged that it was dawn — before we had entered the room I had seen through a large window the sky beginning to turn pale. But times of day now meant nothing to me.

The room was strangely like a theatre, I thought, as the young woman who had fastened the belt now proceeded, with her male companion in another aisle, to give some kind of demonstration to the accompaniment of a disembodied voice, a sequence of movements the purpose of which eluded me — but it was a theatre without a stage, for the room was quite enclosed and measured not twenty feet across with broad pillars blocking any view. I was momentarily entranced by the lighting, which seemed much like the gaslights with which I was familiar, but which burned steadily and without flame.

Then I sensed a lurching motion, as though the room itself were moving, and thought for a brief moment that I was having a physical after-reaction to my recent experiences, until Zennik and Elizabeth indicated to me a small porthole through which I glimpsed some large but nondescript shapes moving by, and I realised that the entire room was in fact rolling along, perhaps on gigantic wheels. I wondered what the airship in which we were to travel looked like and how long it would take to arrive at it — looking out of the window, it seemed that we were in a large field in which I could conceive a large balloon perhaps being moored.






Abruptly, I felt pressed back into my seat by a jolt and surmised that we had collided with some object. I expected, as no one was particularly concerned, that this was a common occurrence with such large vehicles, and that we would soon be released from our belts and permitted to proceed on foot to the balloon, but I turned back to the window as Elizabeth smiled and pointed.

The glass was quite thick and there were shreds of fog racing along outside. Through the mist I caught a glimpse of a model city which someone had cleverly and rather painstakingly built in the middle of the field. I looked back at Elizabeth and smiled — the thing was really most impressive and somehow the creator of this extravaganza had contrived to have little model vehicles of the same kind that I had encountered in 1960 speed along the model streets without any apparent motive force. Magnets under the ground, I concluded idly. I noticed at that point an odd pressure in my middle ear, perhaps another after-effect of these strange and wonderful experiences I was having. The mist grew thick outside and the model grew smaller, perhaps as the vehicle, clearly in motion again and labouring with its

thunderous engines pulling us up an incline, strived to reach the balloon. I was suddenly overcome with fatigue and leaned my head back into the soft pillow of the seat, and without a thought for my fellow passengers, as one does on a locomotive on occasion, I fell into a slumber.

'Welcome to Calcutta!' were the first words I recalled on being wakened by the doctor an indeterminate period later. It seemed to me that we were still in the same strange room, but, as people around me unbuckled themselves and filed out through a narrow door, I emerged into plainly different surroundings — the sun was blazing, the ground glaring, the air dusty and hot. We shuffled like a herd of sheep through into a large auditorium of some kind, not dissimilar to the one we had left in London, and then Zennik hustled us into a smaller horseless carriage, and my whole attention was absorbed in observing its driver controlling some unseen and incomprehensible motive force through the use of a large wheel in front of him. The image of a ship's bridge came to my mind, but the seat in which he sat seemed far too cramped, nor was there any visible means whereby he might control the speed of the machine.





I pulled out my pocketwatch, but instantly realised that its multiple time-keeping facility was useless as I had no idea anymore of any particular time with which to begin. I stared at the thing bemusedly for a moment or two, in a blankness of incomprehension.


I sensed Elizabeth's amusement at my distractedness, but became determined not to betray myself to her.

'It was most exhilarating, was it not, Mr. Hillman?' she asked as we sped at alarming velocities through streets crowded with colour and life. I indicated that I was not sure of her meaning.

'The journey through the air — the speed of it, the glory!' she said, and reclined in her seat in a fashion, I felt, designed to subvert my better impulses. 'Did you know, Mr. Hillman,' she went on when my lack of reply revealed my complete ignorance of the experience to which she was alluding, 'that in this century, society's morals have broken down to such a degree that love outside marriage is commonplace? And yet society continues to function in an almost godless state. Perhaps even those things upon which our world bases its entire strength can be questioned, changed. Time's chains, having been broken, may have unfettered us from more than we might at first believe...'

She placed her hand lightly upon mine and I felt a surge of heat rise to my face like a wave of some tropical sea. I drew my hand away, half-reluctantly, remembering the image of her that I had conjured in the chamber in what was now the distant future, and smiled politely at her as I attempted to concentrate my attention on something other than her enticing beauty.

'Zennik, please,' I said, turning to the doctor and unleashing my suppressed frustrations upon him, 'you have brought me on this voyage in a manner nothing short of an abduction — I have been subjected to sudden and alarming phenomena which may well have unhinged my senses — I have been transported, as far as I can understand without any grasp of the mechanics by which it has been achieved, halfway across the world to the Indian sub-continent, and you have made various hints as to some connection between all of this and our own relationship, but I must now insist that you reveal to me your full purposes and plan as my patience is drawing to its end and, despite the fascination I have shared with you on occasion in this last what to me appears as a few hours, I am growing considerably concerned by the continuing state of affairs.'



Zennik merely smiled calmly as we swerved on through the city beyond the vehicle's windows.

'Very well,' he said, folding his long fingers together delicately, 'you are quite correct to demand explanations from me, Mr. Hillman. Let me first say this — that at no point has my intention towards you been malicious. When I first struck upon the principle by which the Cerebrachrone accomplishes its small miracles, I determined then that its use must at all times be guided by a philanthropic morality of the highest kind. But what brings us on this voyage, and what connects us, Hillman, is the fact that we are bound in common to the co-creator of my device, Professor Stafford Hillman.'

He paused for me to absorb the information. Stafford Hillman was my uncle, the man whose fascination with Time had inspired my whole life and career. Zennik was nodding at me. He went on.

'Professor Hillman in his youth made a study of the ancient manuscripts of the Eastern religion of the Hindu. He brought to them his Western methodology and mathematics, and found that he had solved riddles of science that baffled his colleagues in the West. It was not long before he had glimpsed the mystical path to higher planes of which the Indian gurus speak, but with a certainty only to be achieved by the application of modern science.'

'Yes,' I interrupted him, somewhat stunned into a pensive curiosity by his revelation, 'he told me that he had once met a mystic who had assured him that travel in Time was possible.'

'Indeed. And before he died he left a legacy of breakthroughs the like of which no scientist in our civilisation is likely to equal,' Zennik went on. 'How did I become aware of this? I was his pupil, Mr. Hillman. When he knew that he was dying, he sent to me his notes and diaries, and I have made the fulfilment of his work my own life's ambition. The fruition of it all is the Cerebrachrone, and the triumph of that fruition is the fact that we are here now, doing what we have been given the power to do.'

He brought out the device again and it flashed and glimmered in the racing sunshine in an inanimate unawareness of its own fascination. I absorbed all this as quickly as my overworked mind was able, and quietly slipped my poorer cousin of a pocket watch back into my waistcoat.

'So why are we here? What is the precise purpose of this particular journey, other than to introduce me, his nephew, to the triumphs of his research?' I ventured, after a moment.

At that point the vehicle came to a sudden halt and we emerged from its hot and humid confines into some kind of Calcutta township. We quickly made for the shade of a large awning in front of an even larger and elaborately carved building that looked somewhat like a temple. I was anxious to continue our conversation, but Zennik insisted on first walking some way into the entrance of the temple and finding a cool seat on a stone bench from where he could observe an inner courtyard where coloured cloth basked in the sun.

'This temple,' he went on at last, but apparently commencing with another subject, 'has remained unchanged for centuries. Like most things of any substance in this great land, it has that numinescent quality of already being somewhat outside Time as we normally know it.'

With these words he took the Cerebrachrone and once again adjusted its complex dials and switches. The impression conveyed by the consequent transformation of the environment was that Zennik's fingers controlled the sun, moon and movements of the heavens themselves as the heat and light vanished and we sat in a moonlit courtyard, on the same stone bench, surrounded by identical walls, except that we were, he explained, approximately one hundred years earlier in time.

'The subjectivity of Time,' he further explained, 'means that we do not shift from our seats, even though, as you must have surmised, the entire planet rolls through space and if we were to manifest ourselves in precisely the location we had left we would no doubt appear in the void of darkness and be swallowed up. But by a magic and a mystery, and no doubt also through the complex interrelationships between our etheric fields and the environment, the Cerebrachrone enables us to orientate to the spot we left and experience no more than the flux of Time.'





He sounded remarkably like an Indian mystic himself with that pronouncement, and it was several moments before the wonder of our most recent transportation dissipated, enabling me to configure my thoughts. A bright and full moon swelled over us, its expression easily imaginable as one of wry amusement at our adventures below, and the notion occurred to me that I was looking up at a younger moon in a younger sky than that which had floated above us a few moments ago.

This notion brought on a sensation similar to that which a bird must feel in flight — there were no longer any stable rules, no longer any part of the world inaccessible — the gravity of Time and Space that had formerly clutched us so tightly to its bosom had relinquished us and we floated freely, drifting wherever we wished. With a twist of the dial, lights had changed, shadows had shifted, surrounding sounds had gone, but astonishingly we had remained much the same. The Cerebrachrone was more than a device for travelling in time, it was the bridge to the world of the gods.

Just at that instant, into our corner of the quiet, cooler, moon-filled square strode a man in his mid-thirties with a thick black moustache and wearing a white suit and helmet of the kind familiar to the Indian Civil Service. He wore an expression not unlike Zennik's — like that of a bird of prey, but in his case with an echo of a resemblance to someone. The man came nearer, browsing somewhat aimlessly through the stones and carvings. I noted how he seemed distracted, as though waiting for someone, or perhaps pondering something so deeply that he had lost all concern for his physical whereabouts. It was, I confirmed as he drew closer, my uncle Stafford, but as a younger man than I had known him. Zennik signed to us to wait, and then, as Uncle Stafford approached a well near the middle of the courtyard, we all stood and stepped forward into clear moonlight.

The effect on the newcomer, alone in a silent courtyard where ancient spirits haunted forgotten corners, and which seemed abandoned by all but the four of us as though a stage and its players had been long prepared and then left for destiny to direct, was not one which my imagination would have painted. Uncle Stafford neither flinched nor cried out, but simply stood still and removed his hat in the presence of Elizabeth, almost as though he was meeting us on Piccadilly for lunch in St. James, but with a certain awe or wonder in his face and eyes that was indescribable. We all stood quietly for some three minutes, neither greeting the other, until he bowed his head and said:


‘So, you come again, and I am relieved to find that you are much the same. If I am going insane, then at least my madness has consistency,’ he smiled wryly. I felt an impulse to rush forward and take his hand but Zennik, foreseeing this, turned to me and said in a low voice:

‘Let us avoid physical contact — we cannot risk too much in this most fragile of circumstances,’ and I concurred and held back. Stafford did not recognise me, but then I surmised that this meeting was taking place effectively some years before I had first met him as a young man, so that he would not be able to make any comparisons. Zennik now addressed him directly.

‘Indeed, Professor, we return as we said we would, this final time, to let you see that which your work has enabled me to build, and therefore that which has empowered us to journey here.’

The doctor then held up the Cerebrachrone, its silver band still encircling his neck, and its almost globular shape glittered like a tiny moon in the pale light. Uncle Stafford fixed his eyes upon it and squinted in its reflection as though it were both the key and the keyhole to the gates of Paradise, as indeed one might well argue was in fact the case — it slowly spun round in the still night air, unaware of the awe and amazement with which it was beheld. A few timeless moments went by — it was the eye of the spell, in which Stafford looked upon that which his dream had made possible, and which, I realised, his seeing at this time actually was in the same moment engendering that dream. His glimpse of this device now would fire him to spend his life putting down the foundations upon which it could be created — it was a bizarre yet eternally serene moment, and in the same instant I saw destiny naked and unravelled before me, and looked upon the uncle whose fascination with Time would spill over into my life, urging me through the years until, as a member of the Chronophile Club, I would visit Zennik’s rooms in Belgravia and wind up here, at the point which was the genesis of my own life-long passion.





This first transcendent moment passed. Stafford gave a little laugh, making no attempt to step closer as Zennik spoke, explaining to him in terms of a science I could barely begin to comprehend, the inner workings of the Cerebrachrone. The doctor's voice was like the intoning of a priest in these holy surroundings, invoking a convoluted wizardry. Shifting my attention, it was in that instant that my own thunderbolt struck — I looked at Elizabeth and found that she was looking at me with a curious expression of neither youthful desire, as she had done when we were in transit to the temple, nor childlike curiosity, but rather with some nameless and almost overpowering maturity that I could only later call wisdom. I suddenly saw that what little experience she had had of these time-transcending adventures had transformed her into a living embodiment of a mystical and profoundly senior nature, a cosmic force given living properties in the form of this naive and unspoiled girl, whose face now shone with a light like that of the stars above me. To say that at that instant I fell in love with her would be to compare the idle trickling of a scullery tap with the thunder of the Victoria Falls — her being swelled to encompass me, and I swooned before her gaze as Hindus may have swooned before the intricately carved, ancient and holy images of the temple in which we stood.

How long this scenario persisted I had no means of telling — my normally precise time-keeping habit had drowned in a subterranean sea of strange and labyrinthine wonder. It was, shall we say, a considerable period later that I turned my attention back to my uncle, whom I saw had been laughing hysterically and who held now in his hands his own pocket watch, which he glared upon with an intense and almost maniacal passion.

'Time, thou traitor, thou tyrant!' he ranted, growing increasingly heated and loud as he went on. 'No longer shall I be thy subject, thy helpless pawn!' And with that last outburst, a cry which echoed about the walls of that empty courtyard like the pronouncement of one of the millions of Hindu gods chiselled there, he tore his watch from his waistcoat where the chain had been clipped, and threw it violently into the dark maw of the nearby well where I heard it scrape against stone and then vanish into silence and the oblivion of the black waters far below.

Uncle Stafford then paused, having steadied himself against the well's crumbling wall, and tossed his disturbed hair back and into some semblance of order with his fingers, recovering himself and bowing to Elizabeth as he regained his breath.

'I do apologise,' he said to her. 'It is not normally my habit to permit such savage displays of emotion within myself, to say nothing of in such esteemed and admirable company,' he said. Elizabeth acknowledged him gracefully and he looked up at the doctor again. Zennik let the Cerebrachrone fall from where he had maintained it aloft during this exhibition.

'It is done,' he pronounced, and turned to me. 'You see now why I was so intent to bring you here, my dear Hillman. On my first visit here, I established our identity and arranged this encounter. The opportunity to bring you along clearly presented itself when I realised who you were at the Chronophile Club. I hope that you will forgive any impertinence on my part.' He laid a hand gently on my shoulder, but I was still watching my uncle in some vain hope that he would recognise me. He glanced at me, but was at the same time feeling through his waistcoat pockets for something.

'I am terribly sorry,' he said, smiling at us, 'but I wonder if I could trouble you for the correct time of night? In my folly I appear to have dispensed with a rather valuable and useful watch.'

I stepped away from the doctor's hand and closer to my uncle, and, guided by I scarcely know what impulse, I offered him my own device, the one he himself had given me.

'Here,' I said, 'please take this. Keep it. Perhaps you will in time find someone who would greatly appreciate it as a gift.' With these nervous words I handed it to him, our fingers touching briefly as he took it and a glance passing between us of something above recognition which words would struggle to capture or convey. He accepted the gift, sensing somehow that it was part of that night's magic, and I stepped back from him.

'Go forward, Professor,' said Zennik, raising his hand in farewell, 'forward to meet us again in your future, in the channel that is called Time, but in different incarnations, as pupil and nephew, and let this moment be consigned to your past. We have performed our midwifery to your destiny as you must now perform yours to ours. May God watch over you!'



His long fingers worked the dials in his hand, and the spectral night, the silence and Uncle Stafford were swallowed up in the sudden sunlight and noise of a much later day.

My mind was neither fully cognisant of, nor particularly inclined to take in the details of our return journey. We had shifted in time again to the twentieth century, where we made our way back to the flying vessel, a glimpse of one of which I this time caught as ours left the ground — but the human mentality has within it a mental muscle, upon which too much incredulity bears down like a weight, straining it beyond further use, and I was in such a state of exhaustion at that point that I could no more conceive of our return flight or the huge vessels in which we were carried as a miracle of human scientific achievement than I could lift a hundredweight boulder with one hand. I fell into a deep sleep while we were in the air, and recall little of our arrival in London or of our time-shift back to what I had once regarded as my own time.

Indeed, it was as I stood once more in the hall of Zennik's rooms in Belgravia that an awareness struck me of my own dispossession — I felt homeless in the universe, cast out from my own nest, flung from on high into a void of possibilities in which I had no wings and no direction. I felt for my watch as a habit, and it occurred to me as part of this realisation what a mystery I had by my own action created — for, if my uncle had in fact received that very device from my own hands, years before he met me, only to later pass it on to me as his heirloom, by whose hand had it originally been made? My watch was trapped in a circle of Time without beginning or end, in which it was neither made nor destroyed but travelled round and round eternally, like a leaf caught in the eddy of a stream.

My tired brain could not cope with the paradox or its ramifications. I shook Zennik's hand, and returned mere pleasantries for his enthusiastic leavetakings. I hardly knew what to say to Elizabeth, whose penetrating glance in the Hindu temple had pinned part of my soul to that moonlit courtyard for eternity. I could barely look her in the eye as I took her hand, but when I did so I saw only the same playfulness and charm I had earlier perceived, the goddess within her having withdrawn for another day, another plane of existence.

As I stumbled, spiritually inebriated by all that I had been through, down the steps outside Zennik's door, I looked up and saw my own self looking out of the library windows at me, and I realised that I had been brought back a short while before I had left. I clambered aboard a cab, not looking back, hungering for sleep in my own bed, and pondering, as I heard the comforting sound of the horse's hooves on the cobbled streets and felt the slow rocking of the coach, the elusive idea that this was perhaps only the beginning of my adventures with Doctor Zennik and the Cerebrachrone.

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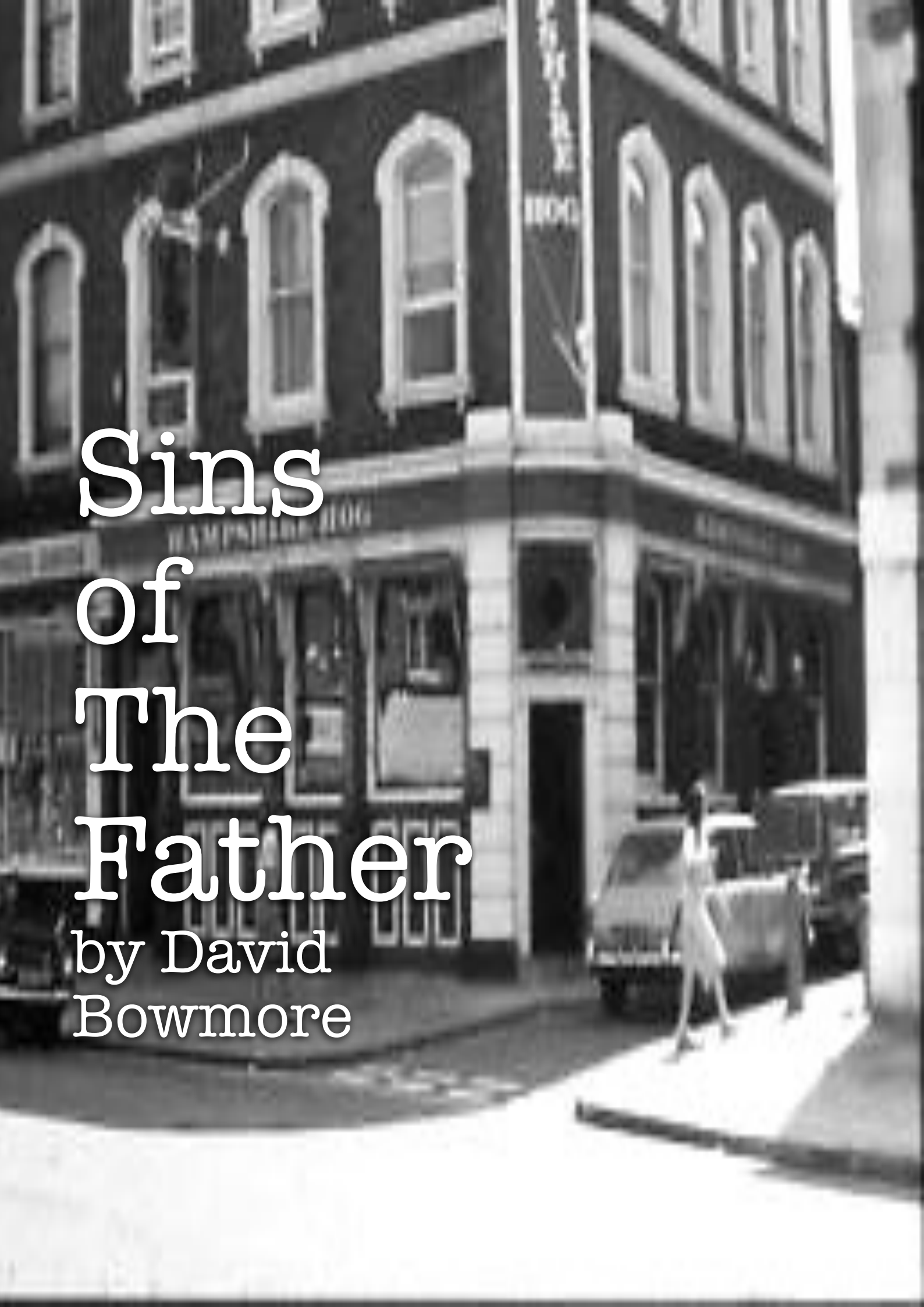
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Sins of The Father

by David
Bowmore

I will tell you everything, but please let me tell it my own way. I won't leave anything out.

I met her in a public house in Hammersmith. The Eagle, I think, a little pub with a big music scene. Every London pub had a music scene in 1977. I'd gone to see one of those bands that spawned so many other great singers and groups, but have, in the fullness of time, faded from memory. Only true music devotees would be able to recall their energy and inspiration. Punks said pub rock bands were dead, but I still liked their sound.

Not many will remember the pub either; it's probably part of a chain now with plastic menus and wheelchair access. Back then, with its stained glass windows and faded golden filigree plasterwork, carpet that stuck to your feet, atmosphere thick with smoke, and the ceiling stained with nicotine, it was a home from home. The old woman sitting at the other end of the bar, drinking port and lemon, saw everything, and said nothing—a landlady never to get on the wrong side of. The girls behind the bar called her Mother, although she couldn't possibly have been Mother to them all. The tiny stage in one corner of the pub had just enough room for the four-piece band to stand on. I sat on a red leather stool at a small wooden table. If I reached out, I could touch the guitarist.

That night, I was there with a housemate who went by the name of Scud. You had to call him Scud, he got agitated when you called him Martin. Overweight, with a round face already scarred from the abuse he'd given his many whiteheads and spots as a teenager, Scud complained incessantly about the music.

'This is so fuckin' shit. I knew we should've gone to see The Slits.'

'We're here now, try to enjoy yourself.'

As I watch my one-time friend harrumph back towards the bar, a sulk clearly imminent, I see the ridiculous figure of a fat, spotty eighteen year old in tight tartan and leather, with a blue mohawk going limp at the end of its seven-inch spikes.

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We looked very different; he was embracing the emerging punk scene, while I was clinging to the glam of a few years earlier. I had given up on

glitter, but mascara, thick and black, was essential to my look back then. My hair was shoulder length and shaggy like a west coast Eagle, and my complexion, although not perfect, was not ruined in the same way as Scud's. I was also stick-thin, my student grant not enough to get the beers in and eat regular meals.

The room was crowded and smoky, and I knew Mother was watching us; mainly my friend, but me too because I was with him.

A girl flopped down beside me in the seat Scud had vacated moments earlier. A very pretty girl with green eyes, a touch of punk about her, red lipstick, and a deliciously pale face with a cigarette in a holder.

'Music's shit, init?'

'I've already had that conversation.'

We were shouting over the noise, leaning in to hear each other. She smelled of Charlie, that ubiquitous and leathery scent that so many women chose to wear.

'Who's your friend?'

'Martin, I mean Scud.'

'Think he'll go for me?'



'He wanted to see The Slits, so probably, yeah.'
I was trying to be cool without much success.

'Ha. Funny. What about you?'

I took a long look at her. She was attractive, like a reject from a Hammer film. There was a chance she might have been a prostitute, but she wasn't trashy enough and, although young, I knew the working girls around there would usually start a conversation with the price. She crossed her shapely legs, revealing more thigh. Ripped fishnets were the thing that year.

'We only just met, perhaps we should get to know each other.'

'Fine, I'll be at The Hope and Anchor tomorrow night.'

Then she was off, intercepting Scud on his way back to our table. She plucked a drink from his hand, took a large sip, and winked at him. He changed course, and I was left on my own to watch her flirt with him. Ten minutes later, they were leaving. She was leading him by the hand.

I was bubbling with jealousy, and I didn't even know her name. How often does it happen? An attractive girl more or less offers herself to you—idiot, Mike, you're an idiot—and she's gone off with *him*, the ugly one. Yes, I really was conceited enough to think that. Please bear in mind I was only seventeen. Mind you, she had given me first refusal.

But all was not lost.

The Hope and Anchor. Tomorrow night.

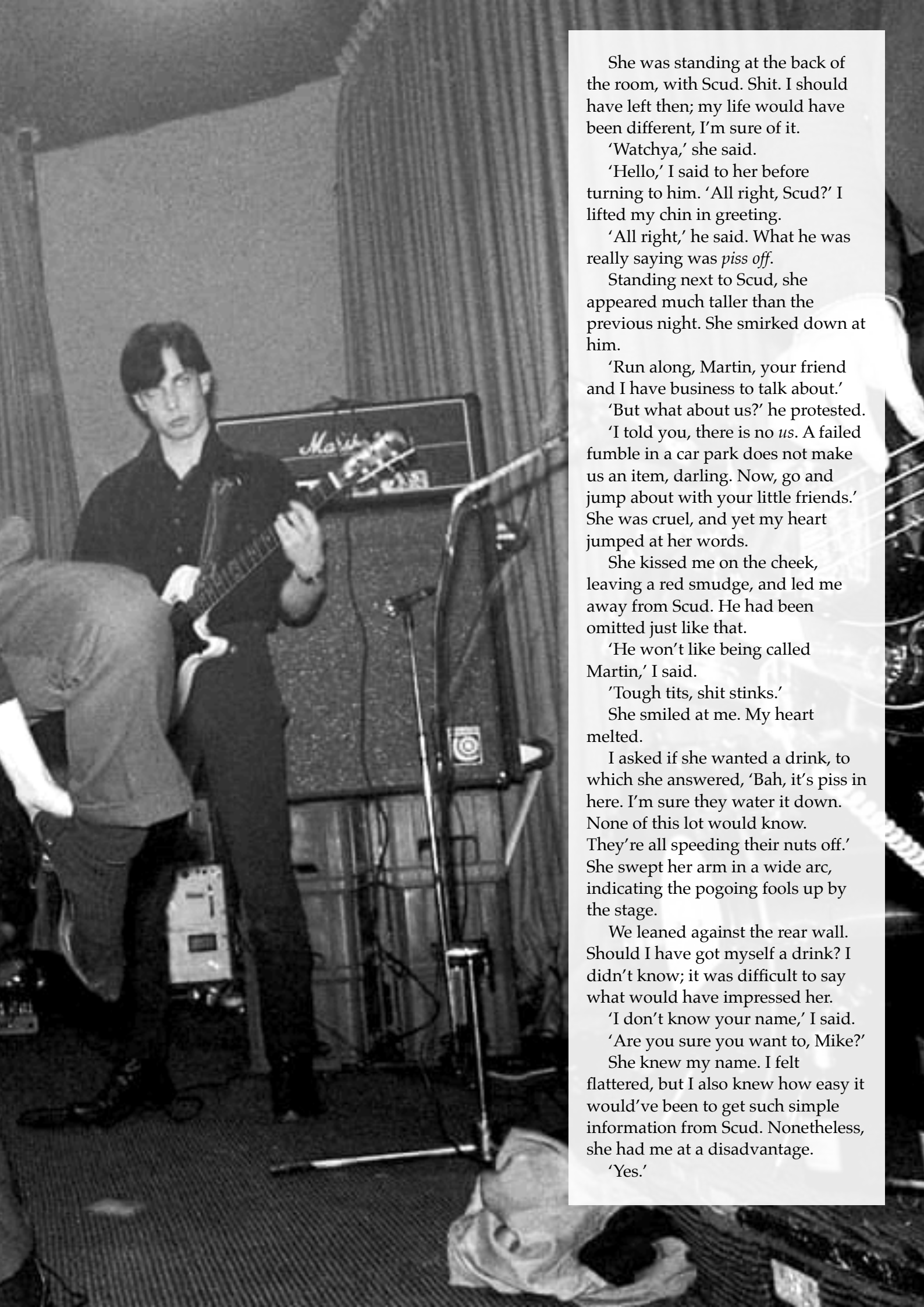
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Bands played in the basement at the Hope and Anchor. A confined, claustrophobic place that made for an intimidating first visit. The band was loud, a punk outfit, and not my sort of thing. But I had a date, of sorts. The room was crowded, and there was nowhere to sit as every last piece of furniture had been removed. It was a mad, jostling, bouncing mass of crazed, sweaty flesh. The singer was spitting into the crowd, the crowd were spitting back. My stomach churned; I was glad to be at the back of the room away from the main action.

I tried not to make eye contact with anyone. The increasing feeling of danger and knot in my stomach warned me I was out of my comfort zone. I also began to suspect I shouldn't have worn bell bottoms and a Snoopy t-shirt. Going to meet a pretty girl who was a bit avant-garde while dressed like a twelve-year-old boy; I felt like such a fool.





She was standing at the back of the room, with Scud. Shit. I should have left then; my life would have been different, I'm sure of it.

'Watchya,' she said.

'Hello,' I said to her before turning to him. 'All right, Scud?' I lifted my chin in greeting.

'All right,' he said. What he was really saying was *piss off*.

Standing next to Scud, she appeared much taller than the previous night. She smirked down at him.

'Run along, Martin, your friend and I have business to talk about.'

'But what about us?' he protested.

'I told you, there is no *us*. A failed fumble in a car park does not make us an item, darling. Now, go and jump about with your little friends.' She was cruel, and yet my heart jumped at her words.

She kissed me on the cheek, leaving a red smudge, and led me away from Scud. He had been omitted just like that.

'He won't like being called Martin,' I said.

'Tough tits, shit stinks.'

She smiled at me. My heart melted.

I asked if she wanted a drink, to which she answered, 'Bah, it's piss in here. I'm sure they water it down. None of this lot would know. They're all speeding their nuts off.' She swept her arm in a wide arc, indicating the pogoing fools up by the stage.

We leaned against the rear wall. Should I have got myself a drink? I didn't know; it was difficult to say what would have impressed her.

'I don't know your name,' I said.

'Are you sure you want to, Mike?'

She knew my name. I felt flattered, but I also knew how easy it would've been to get such simple information from Scud. Nonetheless, she had me at a disadvantage.

'Yes.'

'Tell you what...help me out with a little something, and I'll tell you my name and anything else you want to know about me.'

'Okay. You're on. What do you want?'

At that moment, I would have happily crawled over burning coals just to hear her speak.

'You sure? It'll be different, but fun...maybe a bit embarrassing. Still want to help?'

'Yeah.'

'See him over there, the little man on his own who looks about as out of place here as you do.'

'Yeah.'

'He's the manager of the band. Nice man with a wife and child at home.'

I looked sideways at her, where was this going?

'How do you know?'

'I like to know things about people. Now, listen. He's a nice man who likes nice young boys, understand?'

'So...'

'So, make friends with him and ask if he can find somewhere quiet for you to talk where you won't be interrupted.'

'Hang on a minute,' I said, 'you've got the wrong idea about me. I thought you and me could —'

'Don't worry, I'll rescue you.'

'Why?'

'You'll see. Trust me.'

I was worried. Despite what my father would always say about men who wear makeup being poofers and pansies, I was not that way inclined. Just an inexperienced boy trying to find a place in the big city.

'Get me a drink then.' I was annoyed with her. For what, I wasn't quite sure. She was playing a game with me, that much I knew, and although I didn't know the rules, I was excited. Why? I didn't have the answer for that either.

She came back with a lager and a whisky, both for me.

'Pint o' piss and some Dutch courage,' she said.

I necked the scotch and went forward to my destiny.





It was ridiculously easy. In a matter of minutes, he was showing me into the manager's office on the pretext of an impromptu audition.

He stroked my hair and said kind words about my youth and beauty. He promised a proper audition with a band if I only relaxed and took my t-shirt off. I did, but I was sweating—where was she? Was the joke to be on me? Just how cruel could she be?

He ran his fingers over my chest, chasing goose pimples as I shivered. He put his arms around me and slid his fingers under my belt at the top of my buttocks. To my amazement, I found myself becoming aroused. This shouldn't be happening. I was straight, I knew I was. It might have been raging hormones in combination with the closeness of another human being.

He was looking into my eyes, waiting for my kiss. Just as I was thinking I might have to either go through with it or storm out of the room, the door burst open. A camera flash illuminated the doorway, stinging my eyes, leaving a lightning strike afterimage.

The little man began to rant, 'How dare you? This is private,' then he started to call for help. I started to dress.

'Be quiet,' Polly shouted from the doorway. 'No one can hear you over that poor excuse for a band. Now, I'd hate for this to get in the papers, ducky. Twenty quid and I can keep it out of the news.' She was shaking the Polaroid the way people used to.

'I'm not paying you a penny, sweetheart. Blackmail is illegal. I shall get my lawyers.'

'Not blackmail. I'm looking after your best interests, for a fee.'

'We live in enlightened times, you stupid cow. No one will care. In fact, it might even be good for the band.'

'Now you are bluffing. I'm sure the wife will care very much. Twenty quid *now*, or the papers find out about your fifteen-year-old friend here.'

I was stunned; it had all happened so fast. But Fifteen? He'd lost and he knew it. He threw the notes at me, calling me a whore and her a blackmailing bitch.

We ran out holding hands, her laughing and me oh so relieved to be with her. She was dangerous and amazing, beautiful and smart, and I was smitten. I had tricked the little man. I was enjoying being with her and I wanted more.

We went to China Town and feasted. I hadn't eaten so well in months. As promised, she told me about herself. Polly, as I found out, was a couple of years older than me, and her parents were relieved when she moved out. She had always been a great disappointment to them ever since the nuns refused to have her back.

Polly had a room in Notting Hill. Today, one associates Notting Hill with the carnival, the stylish, and Hugh Grant. But, back then, house after dilapidated house still bore the marks of war, each in need of serious repair or to be torn down entirely—they were all owned by Rackman-type landlords. Feral cats and children roamed aimlessly around the streets, and over-flowing metal bins lined the litter-strewn slum area.

Bob Marley was stirring it up through the floorboards from the room above while we made love until the early hours.

In the morning, she thanked me for being brave, for trusting her with her plan, and asked me if I wanted to do it again. I told her I loved her and that I would do anything.

Two months later, we were married at a Catholic church in the suburbs. Some might say a quick wedding, but she had something on the priest.

Polly liked to know things about people, I asked how she found things out. In response, she tapped her nose and said she kept her ear to the ground and her eyes wide open. I'm sure people might ask why she decided to partner with me in her small scams. The simple truth is that I don't know. She was clever enough and brave enough to get everything she needed on her own, and I wasn't exactly Giant Haystacks, so I couldn't offer much in the way of protection. I think she needed someone to know her secret. She needed someone to show off to, someone to impress. I supported her wholeheartedly in the beginning, although I only played the role of a fifteen-year-old boy once more after the band manager incident.





We went to gigs most nights, everything from big venues to small pubs. She barely drank, but Polly—like old Mother—watched everything; a husband slipping a wedding band into a pocket before he went to chat to a girl, money exchanged for plastic baggies. And she wasn't afraid to ask for money to keeping her mouth shut. She was cocky in her approach to business, but it didn't always work. She took a severe slapping one night. When I stepped in to protect her, I had my fingers broken and couldn't eat solid food for a month. Things had to change.

She turned her talents to band management, focusing on one band in particular. Gathering her evidence beforehand and approaching the band during a break in one of their sets, she asked if they wanted fresh representation; someone who would really look after their interests without trying to get into any of their knickers.

'I wouldn't mind you tryin', love,' said the lead singer, reaching a hand around her waist.

'If you're not going to take the offer seriously, then you can stick with the perv. He's tried it on with each of you, hasn't he?' she said as she moved his hand away.

The singer looked like she had slapped his face. He stood taller and shared an embarrassed, knowing look with his fellow bandmates. Trying to recover the situation he asked, 'Who else you manage? I don't wanna sign up with a bint who knows nothin' 'bout nothin'.'

'Billy and the Bad Girls,' she replied. Of course, this was a lie.

'They any good?' asked the singer. The drummer was nodding, twiddling his sticks.

'Could be, but you could be better. But only if you take me seriously. Call me *love* again or think of me as just a pair of tits and your dumped. Call me Polly, act like a gentleman and not an adolescent twat, and you'll do well. Promise.'

His bandmates nodded their agreement. He held out a hand to Polly. They shook.

'But you'll have trouble getting Old Roy to let us go. Want us to have a word?' asked the singer.

'Leave the business side of things to me. Don't worry your pretty little head.'

Soon after she coerced the manager into releasing them, she had her evidence.

We rented a small office, where I answered the phone. She changed the band's name and image. Out were the wannabe punks, and in were the groomed and suited. Very romantic. A keyboard player joined, all previous songs were either softened or dropped. Gigs were arranged all over the capital. She worked them hard. If they went further afield, I went with them, but it was rare; London was where it was at.

She knew of a journalist with the NME and invited him to see the band now they were a tighter unit.

'They're okay, but nothing special, Polly. They look a bit too clean. Know what I mean?'

'They're the next big thing...and shall I tell you why?'

'Go on, enlighten me.'

'No one minds if you're a coke head, in fact, it's to be expected you being a hack in a music rag,' she said, 'but sucking it off the cocks of rent boys for six pence a time might give you a bad name.' The journalist looked around, checking to see if anyone had heard. 'I want a fabulous write up for my band. I want you to suggest they're better than the Beatles and The Stones served up together on sliced bread. The lead singer is a bastard love child of Jim Morrison and Tom Jones. Know what I mean?'

It was indeed a good write up, and it wasn't the last piece of praise her pet correspondent produced. Bigger and better gigs came in. An album was released, which sold well thanks to a favour owed to her by someone at the BBC. More bands came to her as the 'best choice' in music management. We got a bigger office with shiny glass desks and plush, cream coloured Axminster on the floor. We employed a secretary. We acquired even more bands, all of whom went on to do even more gigs and release even more albums—some sold well, others not so well. All the while, Polly collected her secrets. For her, secrets were priceless, her most precious commodity.





Rock and pop stars were renowned for being naughty boys and girls and people expected as much, so their secrets didn't hold much bargaining power for Polly. But the real headache came from all the solicitors involved in the many layers of the complex music industry. Talented liars—all of them—and far too many for Polly's liking.

A year or two later, public relations merged with and eventually replaced music management. We opened our doors to radio DJs and TV presenters, comedians, and newsreaders. We acted as their agents, managers, and representatives.

It had all moved so fast, thanks to Maggie Thatcher's Britain, and we were operating completely above board; secrets weren't a necessity anymore, but Polly still valued the information. People paid for information, but more importantly, they paid to keep it out of the papers.

A few weeks into a new signing, the conversation would go something like this...

'We are here for you, to get your name out and about, get you the right work, create the right image. Agreed?' Polly would begin.

'Yes, absolutely,' the talent would say.

'Would you agree that keeping negative aspects of your life out of the news would benefit your image?'

'Yes, but I'm clean as a whistle, Polly darling.'

'If we're going to work together, we need honesty. For instance, it is well known you like a little visit to a certain massage parlour down Soho way.'

'Nonsense.'

'No point trying to hide it. My job is to know everything about you so I can present your best image while hiding your, shall we say, less favourable qualities. If you must use these places, try to be more discreet. If anyone gives you trouble, send them my way. Better still, tell me everything about them and the problem. I can, in most cases, stop the news getting out, but it can be very expensive keeping bad news out of the papers.'



We soon had a small team to help run the public lives of our celebrities: we organised public appearances and the opening of supermarkets and hospitals; newspaper articles and magazine interviews had to be scheduled; parties had to be organised and attended. Our lifestyle was hectic.

We were flying high, but every now and then, a secret revealed itself. Usually because the talent refused to pay, or because they actually wanted the news to come out. Someone's poison or vice then had to be protected. We hired private investigators to dig up the darkest secrets on all our clients. Polly would even use nuggets of information to entice existing clients to dish the dirt on friends and colleagues. And, of course, it was all in the name of protecting their interests. It was all very seedy, and I was losing interest in it.

I had grown weary of our business, and if I'm completely honest, it wasn't really mine. It was her baby and it almost ran itself, so I had less and less to do with it as time moved on. I had a growing cocaine habit, which very quickly became my main source of comfort.

Early one evening, it all came to a head when we had a meeting with a client. We greeted each other and made ourselves comfortable on big white sofas. Polly and I on one, a united front, and he, the client, sprawled on another. Polly, immaculate as ever in a black trouser suit, he in white tracksuit.

'The grapevine tells me you're considering other representation,' said Polly.

'Well, Poll, you know how it is. This other lot say they can get me more TV exposure.'

'Yes, I do know how it is. More than you think. You remember a little conversation we had all those years ago when you first came to us? The one about openness and trust?'

'I've a vague memory but I've nothing to hide. Why do you ask?' he said. He pulled on a chunky cigar.

'My job, our job, is more about what the public don't know about our clients than what they do know. We work very hard to keep it that way.'



'What are you on about? I've nothing to hide...I said already.' Impatient anger quickly replaced avuncular joviality.

'Fourteen-year-old girls. Eleven-year-old boys. Rent boys. Children. The star-struck teenyboppers. The sick and infirm. You don't care, do you? You abuse your position and you attack the kids.'

'Now look here, darling, I don't know where you heard this sordid filth, but say another word and you'll be hearing from my solicitor.' Pointing the cigar at Polly, he stood to leave, his face glowing red.

She slid an envelope forward.

'Take a look at these before you leave.'

With a trembling hand, he slid half a dozen black and white photographs off the coffee table.

'Like I said, we have to keep some information out of the press. If you leave, which you are perfectly entitled to do, I can't guarantee that will happen.'

'You're a bitch.'

'Maybe so, plenty have described me as such, but unlike some, I'm certainly not a molester of children.'

'What do you want?' He sat again.

'Nothing, but I have had a new contract drawn up. Sign here and here.'

He signed it, as she knew he would, and then stamped his cigar into the carpet before storming out of the office.

I was aghast. I had no idea we were covering up such grotesque behaviour. Drugs and married women, yes, but children? Good God Almighty.

It was the most viscous row we'd ever had. We had, in the course of both our professional and private lives, had the occasional spat or dispute over minor things, but hardly ever with raised voices. Now, I raged at her; how could we be mixed up with anything like that? She accused me of being a self-obsessed addict and of spending all our cash on filth. As the argument progressed and our slurs and accusations became more and more personal, it became apparent my feelings of love for her were no longer existent. I only loved the life, the glamour, the drugs, and the money.

In a sudden revelation, it became clear I hadn't earned any of it. With her cunning and brazen attitude, she had built a successful enterprise. I was just the partner. One she didn't need. A deadweight.

'I'm out. We'll divorce, then you can run the company any way you want. I want nothing to do with *it* or *you* ever again.'

She replied with a hard slap across my face; violence for the first time. I slumped down on a chair, holding my stinging face. It hurt more deeply when she said, 'I'd divorce you in a flash, but we made a vow in front of God. I can't go against the Almighty. This marriage is for life.'

'What? You never even go to church!'

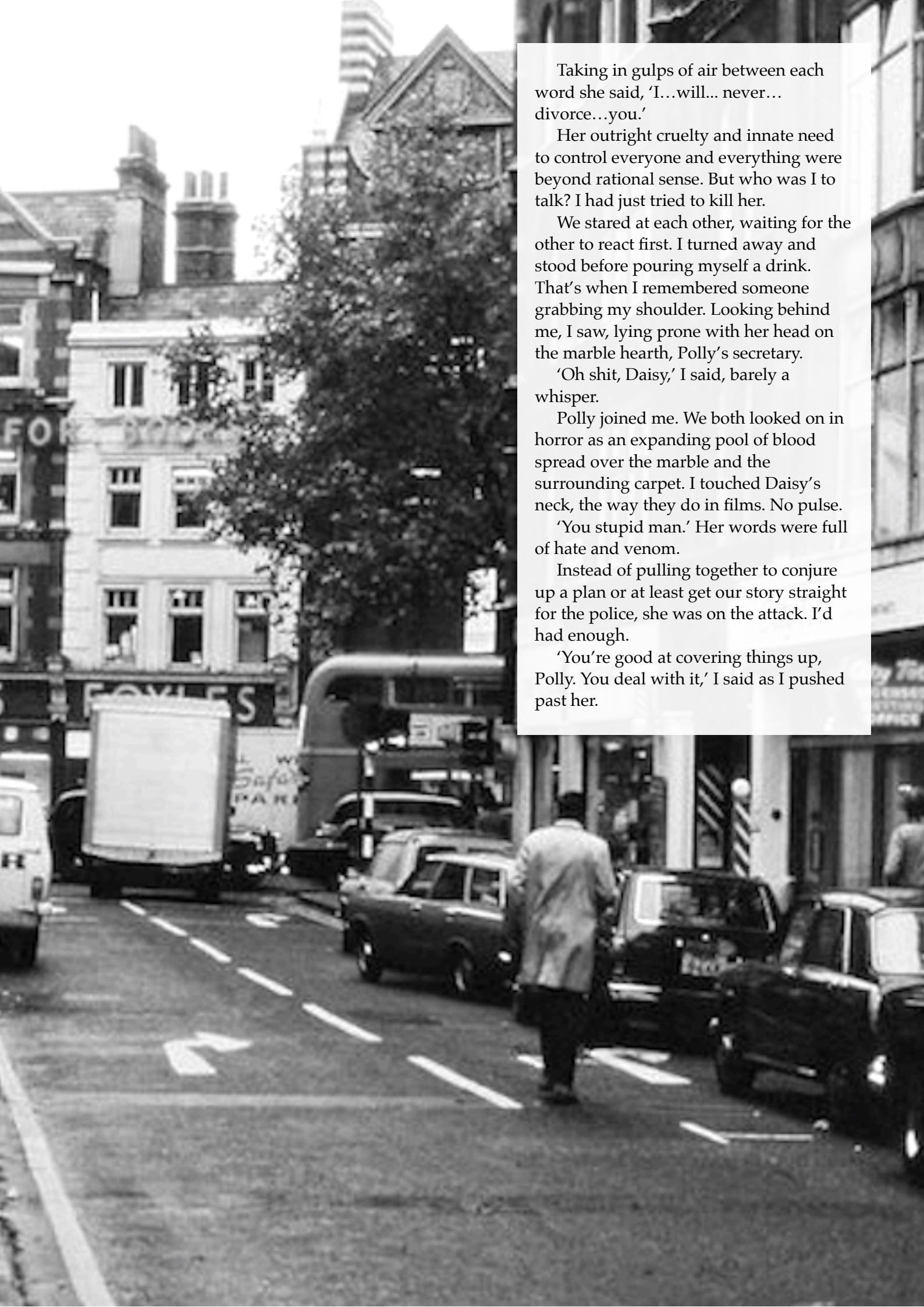
'Beside the point. Leave if you want, but you won't get a thing from me, least of all a divorce.'

I was stunned. No attempt at appeasement or reconciliation? Just a 'no', based on a flimsy excuse. It was 1985, people got divorced all the time.

The corners of her lips twisted in that cruel, signature smirk of hers. I was being treated the way Scud had been all those years before. I was her pet, to be dismissed only when she was ready.

The chair tumbled backwards as I lunged at her. She lashed out, her fingernails drawing blood—I still have a faint scar along my left jaw, under my beard. We rolled on the floor. I was bearing down with my weight, hands around her throat. She slapped at my chest, my face, and my arms. Someone grabbed me by the shoulder, I lashed backwards and heard them stumble and fall. It was enough to bring me back to my senses and I sat back, breathless. Polly was pulling away from underneath me, gasping, clutching at her neck.





Taking in gulps of air between each word she said, 'I...will... never... divorce...you.'

Her outright cruelty and innate need to control everyone and everything were beyond rational sense. But who was I to talk? I had just tried to kill her.

We stared at each other, waiting for the other to react first. I turned away and stood before pouring myself a drink. That's when I remembered someone grabbing my shoulder. Looking behind me, I saw, lying prone with her head on the marble hearth, Polly's secretary.

'Oh shit, Daisy,' I said, barely a whisper.

Polly joined me. We both looked on in horror as an expanding pool of blood spread over the marble and the surrounding carpet. I touched Daisy's neck, the way they do in films. No pulse.

'You stupid man.' Her words were full of hate and venom.

Instead of pulling together to conjure up a plan or at least get our story straight for the police, she was on the attack. I'd had enough.

'You're good at covering things up, Polly. You deal with it,' I said as I pushed past her.



Could I have a drink of water, please? There's more to tell, I haven't finished yet. Thank you.

I went to our apartment on Half Moon Street, retrieved my passport, and picked up a thousand pounds in cash before travelling by tube to Gatwick. Early the next morning, I was in Northern Ireland. I had family in the south I'd never met; only vague memories of blurred photographs my mother had displayed on the mantelpiece.

Crossing the border was simpler than I imagined, given the troubles of the time. A truck driver in a cafe agreed to carry me through the checkpoint, for a small fee. My stomach flip-

flopped as we approached the armed guards. I was sure I was going to puke; I must have been as white as a sheet by then. My driver assured me not to worry, saying he was always crossing over and that they only looked for bombs, guns, and terrorists. 'Sure we're fine, please God,' he said. He took me to Dublin, his final destination, where I stayed the night in a B&B overlooking the Liffy.

Lying in the bed that night, I tried to rationalise the sudden turn of events in my life. In my sensible head, I knew I shouldn't have run, but I justified my actions by blaming Polly.

More than anything, it was her I was running from. If she had agreed to a divorce, we wouldn't have been brawling and Daisy wouldn't have tried to intervene. It was her fault; *everything* was her fault.

I considered the possibility that I may have been having a breakdown. I couldn't understand why the police hadn't caught up with me. The question had been spinning around and around in my head, keeping me from any meaningful sleep.

Buying the plane ticket had been the most nerve-racking experience. I had expected to be pounced on as soon as I showed my passport or seized as I got off the plane in Belfast. I had to wonder what scheme Polly would employ to explain her dead secretary.

Half a day on a bus to Cork, and then a taxi to the small town of Brandine where my mother had been born. I found, within a day, cousins and

extended family that remembered her. Some still wrote to her, and she wrote back, sometimes with news of her son and how proud she was of him. My shame surfaced with tears as I appealed to their better nature and our family connection for help.

I must have looked a fright in unwashed clothes, with a couple of days of beard growth, and tired red eyes sunken into the shadows of my pale face. I couldn't let my mother see me like this, not until I was better. The life I was leading, I told them, was tearing me apart and I dealt with the stress by overindulging in drink and drugs. My wife, I also told them, coped much better, but I needed time away from her too. I threw myself on their mercy and asked that I be the one to tell my mother where I was when I was ready.



These complete strangers accepted me and my deception into their lives with unquestioning friendliness.

An Uncle Pat and Aunt Mary put me up in a small box room. I didn't venture from that room for two days, except to take care of nature's necessities. I slept, and when I wasn't sleeping, I wept. I cried for my stupidity, my anger, and my lies. I wept for Polly, not the woman of today, but the girl I had once loved. She had always been dangerous, it was part of her appeal, but her avaricious collecting of secrets had destroyed the joy she used to have and accentuated the dark, cruel side of her nature. And I wept for Daisy. Poor, blameless, not quite the brightest Daisy, who suffered the misfortune of working late on the

night her employers tried to kill each other. Twenty years old and engaged to be married to a football player with Tottenham Hotspur.

Uncle Pat took me on as a kind of apprentice gardener. It felt good to get my hands dirty and do some honest graft. We worked in many gardens, large and small, doing everything from basic garden tidying to a bit of tree surgery. After two months of clean living and hard work, my face and arms had taken on a natural tan, and the stubble I'd arrived with had grown to bushy proportions. I barely recognised the man in the mirror anymore.

One day, while we were packing up our tools, Uncle Pat asked what I was really running from.





'I can't tell you, Pat. But I can't go back... not to her or the world I once knew.'

'Ye should go to the confessional. You know what they say 'confession is good for the soul.''

I remained silent, horrified that tears were once again brimming. Pat was one of those men who never showed emotion. Everything could be laughed at, but he surprised me.

'Do ye need help, son?'

'What do you mean?'

'Help...ye know... maybe a new whatchya-ma-call-it.'

'Identity?'

'The very word, a passport.'

'It would help, but they will catch up with me sooner or later.'

'The Garda?'

I nodded my reply and wiped my eyes with my t-shirt.

'Leave it to me, son. Sure, it can't be that difficult.'

Pat made arrangements through some people who knew other people, who knew 'those kinds' of people. The price was arranged and I supplied him with a passport photo. Several weeks later, Pat took me to a pub way up in the hills. An old white building, which may once have been a farmhouse. It would be a drive for anyone to visit on a night out, so I doubt they were ever busy because I didn't see a single house within walking distance. Inside, the fire roared and, as I expected, it was empty of customers. Pat sat at one end of the bar, which was situated in the middle of a long, thin room, and picked up a Gaelic paper before telling me to sit as far away as possible at one of several small tables so he wouldn't be able to overhear.

Two men came in, and the barmaid made herself scarce. They sat opposite me, I wondered if I should offer them a drink.

'Ye the one?' asked the taller of the two. He was the only one who spoke. It seemed the other's sole purpose was to look menacing, although he really wasn't needed; the talker was clearly a man with whom not to tangle.

'The one what?'

'Five hundred pounds, have ye got it?'

'How do I know I can trust—'

'Stop right there, son, before someone is insulted. Do ye want this here passport or don't ye?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Five hundred pounds.'

We exchanged envelopes, then the leader dropped his bombshell.

'That's only part payment, of course. What ye have in yer package there is a complete identity. A birth certificate, British passport and a National Insurance number, all of them the genuine article. A passport and birth certificate are easy enough to get hold of, but a National Insurance number takes a little more cunning, ye hear me?'

'Now hang on—'

'Yer to deliver something, and if ye don't, we'll find ye and put a bullet in yer thick English head.'

'I want nothing to do with it,' I tried to protest, but my throat was quickly drying up.



'Fine then. Give back the papers, we keep the money and yer man over there delivers for us instead. And ye still get the bullet. Certain individuals have taken risks to get us to this here point tonight. Now it's time to return the favour.'

'What? This is crazy.'

'Just who do ye think we are? The Sally Army? Now what's it to be?'

Failing to see any other options, I nodded my acquiescence.

The quiet one remained inside while the leader took me to the car they had pulled up in. He handed me a backpack from the boot. Inside was a small package about the size and shape of hardback book, wrapped in brown paper.

'I want this package delivered to an address in Belfast by ten o'clock tomorrow night. Everything ye need to know is in here,' he said, tapping the bag.

'What is it?'

'Now that is a stupid question, son.'


'I can't...I didn't expect all this.'

'Fine.' He pulled a handgun—from where I don't know, it was too dark to see properly—and rested the muzzle against my forehead.

'I'm sorry. I'll do it... I'll do it!' My quivering legs lost all ability to hold me up, and I fell to my knees in a puddle of mud behind a pub I didn't know the name of. With the gun still pointed between my eyes, I had no time to think. He pulled the trigger. I lost all control as the dull sound of metal on metal reverberated through my head. Seconds passed. I was still alive.

'Tis that easy, son. Now deliver the damn package.'





I heard the doors of a car click open and slam closed before the same car drove away at a sedate speed, leaving me to be helped to my feet by Uncle Pat.

'Did you know? Do you know what they want me to do?' I asked, panting.

'No. And I don't want know to either.'

'Fucking hell, I've been so fucking stupid. What can I do?'

'Ye have to do what they want, Mike. I'm sorry, I really am.'

'The police...I'll go to the police.'

He shook his head.

'It won't change anything. Just make things worse. Yer'll be a police informer, yer'll drop me in it, yer'll reveal whatever it is yer running from and they'll still get ye. Even in prison.'

I was leaning against Pat's truck, wiping vomit from my chin with a tissue. I tried to straighten up and face my future like a man, but my legs wouldn't let me. Instead, I tumbled into the passenger seat and cried like a baby. Pat started the car, and we slowly trundled away.

'Can you give me a lift, Pat, to somewhere near the border? A quiet place where I can cross without fear of patrols.'

'Sure.'

We exchanged few words during the journey. Five hours later, he stopped at the edge of a small town, I forget the name now, and we both stepped out of the car.

'Yer a mile or so from the border here. Tis hilly, boggy, and still dark, but a clear night. Head north, that's away from yer moon tonight. Ye'll be in the UK by the time the sun comes up.'

'I won't see you again, Pat. Probably best, don't you think?'

'Aye, son.'

He thrust a ten pound note into my hand and hugged me.

'Don't be silly,' I said, trying to return the money. He quickly turned away, dropped back into the car, and drove away before I could say goodbye.



By daybreak, I was cold, filthy, and terrified. At midday, I stopped at a pub and ordered a scotch, drained it, and made use of the gents. I was surprised they served me. I washed my face and hands as best I could, but my clothes were filthy and I stank to high heaven.

My fears were numerous, and all centred around the package. What would happen if it got wet? Would it detonate? Or would it fail to detonate? What would happen to me if that happened? I was more terrified I'd end up giving it a quick shake and it would explode, taking me with it.

Shit, how did I get into this situation? Was I really contemplating this? A bomb, for Christ's sake. The instructions were to post it through the letterbox of a private house. I knew nothing about the recipient; he might have a family, or worse, children might die. Oh fuck.

I chose to do the only brave thing I ever did in my whole miserable life. I chose to warn Mr Sinclair—whoever he may have been—but I didn't want to write on the package directly for fear of detonating it, so I stuck a yellow note to it instead.

DO NOT OPEN CALL THE POLICE



A man with a van gave me lift into the city and dropped me near a large market, which was coming to the end of its trading day. With my remaining money, I bought cheap jeans and a new t-shirt, changed in a public toilet, and threw the ripped, filthy clothes away. I decided to keep my donkey jacket.

I clutched the bag to me in an attempted effort to protect it. Why was I trying to protect this evil device? My morals felt twisted beyond reason. I wished for Polly then; she would know what to do. I also wished I'd not been so soft-headed, as my dad might have said.

Having been a part of it, a facilitator, I knew the kind of things the rich and famous got up to. With our help, they made money, and with the money they made, they indulged their vices. Why had I been so stupid? Not all vices are equal, a small voice in my head argued.

I gripped the bag tighter as I tried to hang on to my sanity. It would be over soon.

By five in the afternoon, I was there, dog-tired and scared witless, my feet sore and blistered. The target house was in a row of mansion-like houses, in what I can only assume was one of the more affluent areas. It was too early and still light; I didn't want to be seen delivering the package. In a nearby park, I rested on a bench and sleep eventually overcame me.

An hour or so later, with my head still on the backpack, I was awoken by two police officers.

'On yer way, son, no dossing down here.'

'Sorry.'

I stood and started to walk away, rubbing my eyes.

'Don't forget this now.' One of them was holding the backpack out to me.

'Yeah, thanks. Sorry.'

I walked the streets, my legs like jelly, my stomach churning, my thoughts in a whirl. Don't do it, just walk away. Throw it in the river. You can't be part of this, Mike.

Walking by the river, I contemplated chucking it all in, myself included. Why not just open the package? I asked myself. I can't, I'm a coward, I replied.

At just before ten o'clock, I returned to the house, which was now in darkness. Twenty-four hours ago, I had been safe, but now, I had a deadly package in my shaking hands and I was climbing the short flight of steps to the door of a house I had no business being outside of. I took the yellow sticky off and crumpled it into a pocket, my cowardice finally getting the better of me. What would happen to me if they found out I'd warned him?

It took me several attempts to line up the package with the slot. I didn't let it fall on the other side because I was worried it might detonate. The spring-loaded letter box, thankfully, held the package in place.

Then, I ran on stumbling feet as far and as fast as I could, stopping only to retch as my body tried to eliminate the evil I had done. Exhaustion finally took hold, and I collapsed down by the docks into a restless sleep.

Woken by the sun a few hours later, I proceeded to wander through the day, watching news on TVs in shop windows and picking up

papers from park benches or bins, all the while avoiding patrols.

Later, I found a shelter for the homeless, which offered soup, a bread roll, and a camp bed for the night. Luxury. My anxiety levels rose as I waited for news of my terrible deed.

The next morning, I walked back to Mr Sinclair's house. All seemed normal; the house still stood, no piles of rubble or debris from a recent blast, and no cordoned off areas or sirens wailing. Perhaps Mr Sinclair was cautious and had called for the police anyway?

I hadn't eaten since the soup and bread of last night's supper, and I had no money to buy anything. Although I knew I would have to start getting back on my feet again, I resigned myself to the fact that I was destined for another night in the homeless shelter.

As I walked in through the front door, I took in its name: Safe Haven. I recognised some of the volunteers from the night before, but this time a visiting priest was moving around the room, sitting and chatting with the lost and forlorn of the town. He came over to my bed.





'Hello, my name's Father Kelly. What's yours?'

I turned my back on him without answering. I didn't know who I was. I hadn't even looked at the ID I'd gone through Hell to get.

I stayed in Belfast for three more days, sleeping rough and begging. I needed to be somewhere safe but had no idea where to find it. I also wanted out of Belfast with its tales of destruction, and its war that was more secret than the evidence of patrols, barriers, and checkpoints led you to believe. Leaving early, I

headed west. I had barely eaten in a week so lifting my feet was difficult, let alone my thumb to cadge a lift with. A car eventually stopped, a small, rusty Ford Cortina.

'Hello again. I'm going up near Coleraine. Give you a lift?' said Father Kelly.

'Thank you.'

We travelled in silence, apart from my rumbling stomach. Rooting around in the door compartment, Father Kelly then handed something to me and said, 'It's a bit melted, but



you're more than welcome to it.' He was holding a Marathon in his left hand.

'Sure?'

'Sure, I'm sure.'

'Thanks,' I said, snatching it from his kind hands and almost finishing the bar in one mouthful. 'Sorry,' I mumbled through a mouthful of chocolate and peanut.

'Never mind, that stuff is no good for me anyways. Where ye going?' he asked.

'Anywhere, I don't care.'

'Fine, I could do with the company.'

But I'd fallen asleep again and wasn't much company for the priest.

When I woke, I was in a single bed and looking at a small crucifix on the wall opposite. Father Kelly was just coming into the room.

'Hello, Thomas, how are you? I couldn't wake you when we got back to my parish, so we let you sleep here. Are you ready to eat?'

I was famished and accepted with a smile and a nod.

'Good. See you downstairs in ten. Your clothes are on the chair there.' He pointed across to the chair by the window.

Following the smell, I found the small kitchen. A bowl of stew was steaming, and Father Kelly was pouring tea from a large brown pot. Sliced white bread with a thin layer of butter on it lay piled high on a plate.

'Thank you,' I said as I sat opposite the kindest man in the world. I studied him as I ate. He was older than me by at least thirty years, and he was totally grey, even his eyes. We ate in silence after he gave a short thanks to God for the meal. I joined in with the 'Amen' and meant it with all my heart. When we'd finished, he leaned back and lit a cigarette.

'I won't pry, but I had to look in your bag to find out your name.' He placed my documents next to a mug of tea.

'S'okay.'

'How long have you been sleeping rough?'

I thought he'd said he wouldn't pry

'Couple of days. I had to come north and found myself bereft of funds.'

'Well, we could try to help you get home again?'

'NO...um...no, thank you. I must try to get along on my own.'

'Well, if you're sure.'

'Tell me something, Father. I don't know why I'm asking... you're not going to say anything negative.'

'Ask it anyway, I might surprise you.'

'Is confession really good for the soul?'

He paused; his silence full of peace. 'It depends on the person. Some don't ever want to confess, others want to be seen to confess without seeking redemption, while the person who seeks true forgiveness through confession can be happier in the knowledge that a better life awaits their soul.'

'It sounds too simple.'

'I have to be somewhere soon, but we can talk about it later if you like?'





'Yes, I'd like that very much.'

Father Kelly left me alone for more than an hour, trusting a stranger with his meagre possessions. I contemplated recent events; had the documents for Thomas Williams, my new identity, really been worth all I had gone through to get them? I even reasoned with myself that the package might not have been a bomb, only a package that had to be hand delivered. Surely a bomb could be sent through the post? This item, whatever it was, needed the personal touch. I'd had no option at the time but to follow through; after all, my life was in danger. The Father returned to find me still sitting at his kitchen table.

'Now, what shall we talk about?' he asked.

That was when Father Kelly and Thomas Williams became friends. I helped around the garden and the house. He arranged work for me in the surrounding area, gardening and doing other odd jobs that, if I'm honest, I wasn't very good at. He vouched for me and I moved into a small flat. I started to help during mass, becoming more involved in church activities and the wider community in general. We spent many hours discussing the nature of God and goodness, theology and philosophy, faith and doubt.

It dawned on me that I'd met Father Kelly at this time in my life for a specific reason. My need to serve the community was a growing itch I couldn't ignore, and I felt the pull of the church more with every passing day. This was my calling.

Father Kelly and I went to see the bishop. Only when the bishop was certain of my genuine intention did I enter the seminary, where I spent the next five years studying and praying, leaving with a degree in theology.

I was first a deacon for six months with my old friend, Father Kelly. Once ordained, I was sent to Africa as a curate, where I spent three years in a small town with a whitewashed church and a bell tower. Despite the people's intense love of God, one didn't have to travel far to see the remnants of ancient witchdoctor rituals. I can't criticise these practises; my own faith is rooted in superstition. Didn't the Christians highjack pagan feast days and festivals? I'm enough of a realist to accept the truth.

I returned to Ireland to perform the funeral service when my friend and first mentor died, and ended up staying for seven years.

Life was better than ever, and with faith and God by my side, I felt courage that I'd never had in my previous life. I requested a placement in England, the land of my birth, and was sent to Birmingham where I had some of the greatest challenges of my ecclesiastic career.

Religious tension in the city was on the rise, myself and fellow spiritual leaders strove hard to bring the communities together out of a basic desire for love, respect, and acceptance. I am of the view that it is our differences that make us all so interesting.

Everywhere I had the pleasure to preach and pray, I encouraged love and acceptance, to be a better human being, not just for the glory of God and a better life beyond this, but more importantly, for the benefit of our friends, neighbours, and brothers here and now in this realm. Bitterness, cruelty, hate, spite, secrets, and lies only lead to unhappiness in our own souls and lives.

I moved here three years ago and now have the custodianship of a small Norman church with lots of character. The town is packed with lords and ladies, artists and posers. A council estate sits on one side of my church, with a private estate sold for development on the other. A melting pot for the lost, the temperamental, the rich, the poor, and seasonal visitors.

I have always done my best for all my congregations, their souls especially, and I'd all but forgotten the person I used to be. My world was turned around by one good man and his belief in the human spirit and God Almighty. I tried to emulate Father Kelly in every action; I wanted to make him proud.

It was while I was in the confessional one Saturday evening, hearing the secrets of my parishioners—the peeping toms, the petty thieves, and the potty mouths—when I heard her voice again. A touch of cut glass, now scratched with a lifetime of smoking. But I recognised it all the same.





'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been thirty years since my last confession.'

'The Lord forgives all.' I tried to remain neutral, but I'm sure my voice cracked. The mesh between confessor and priest limits what is seen each way, but I recognised her silhouette.

'Really? Are you able to forgive me in the Lord's name... considering I'm still your wife?'

'You're not here to confess, Polly. Return in an hour when I'll be finished here. We can talk openly.'

'No, we'll talk now, you hypocritical bastard.' Her voice raised, no longer reverential as is expected in the confessional.

'Control yourself. For now, these people need me. An hour, Polly.'

The confessional door was almost ripped from its frame as she stormed away. For the rest of the hour, I listened patiently as the good people of my congregation unburdened their souls. But I didn't hear much.

An hour later, kneeling before the alter and asking the Lord for strength, I heard her approaching steps in unison with the tap of a cane. She knelt beside me.

'I should apologise. Let's try to be civil,' I said.

Then, I looked at her, aged now with fine lines and carrying more weight, which gave her an extra chin. Her eyes still beautiful, but now with heavy dark circles.

'How have you been?' she asked. I thought I heard a sarcastic tone. She continued. 'I never expected to see you as part of the cassock brigade...you were always so sceptical.'

'I have found happiness. What about you? Happy?' I knew the answer before I asked it.

'No. I always hated you.'

'Oh, Polly, we were happy once.'

'You left me to deal with Daisy. I did, too. A little pig farm, not far from here actually.'

I crossed myself and said a silent prayer for Daisy's soul, and mine.

'I missed you, you selfish bastard. You were my only friend.'

'I was the only one you could trust. Everyone else was wary of you.'

We were quiet for a minute. She sat back on a pew and I joined her.

'The police?' I asked.

'As far as they're concerned, she went missing and never returned home. Coincidentally, it was the same night you disappeared, so the police put two and two together and got two lovers. They didn't try very hard, you were just two people who'd done a runner. Everyone was laughing at me. "Poor Polly, her husband left her for the bimbo secretary."'

'I'm sorry, but—'

'You ran and left me to cover it up.'

In the silence that followed, she struck a match and lit a cigarette.

'And then there was Yewtree.' The famous investigation of children who claimed to have been molested by famous personalities. 'They were rigorous in their investigation. I was lucky not to receive a custodial sentence, but the business was ruined.'

'I'm sorry.'

'So you should be. I might have changed if you'd stayed around, Mike.' That name sounded so foreign to my failing ears. 'I might've listened to you.'

'I think I remember one or two conversations about that. You'd never have changed Polly. You're a one-woman wonder, doing everything your own way.'

More silence. I looked up at Christ on the cross, seeing in detail the chipped and flaked paint around the wound to his chest. My whole world seemed to focus on the detail.

'What are you doing here, Polly? Let's leave the past where it belongs and part as friends.'

'Bollocks to the past. Do your parishioners know you're married? Do they know what you did? Do they know who you really are?'

'Of course not.'

'You're a fraud, a lying, cowardly fraud.' She stood, pointing down at me, her hand shaking as she raged. Spittle landed on my face.





'Polly, please be calm.'

'Do you know, when I found where you were, *what* you were, I thought I might try a bit of the old blackmail. See what I could get from you.'

'Polly...' I began to plead, for calm if nothing else.

'But then I thought fuck it, just kill the cunt.'

I was still seated when she lunged at me, unsheathing a thin stiletto from the cane. I barely managed to grab the wrist of the knife-wielding hand before the blade plunged towards my chest. I was sliding sideways on the polished wooden pew as she continued to bear down on me. A few seconds later, we toppled to the floor. She on top, the thin blade ripping my robes.

We began to roll, each of us trying to get the upper hand. I swear I only wanted to disarm her, but that's when I felt the gush of warm blood over my hands.

I knelt back, the thin blade still embedded in her chest, staring at my hands and then back at her as she went through her death throws. Blood spurted from the fatal wound in her chest and spread over the ancient stone floor; I was soon kneeling in it. So much blood.

I held her head on my knees and tried to comfort her. Blood bubbled from her mouth and her legs started to shudder, the final vestiges of life draining away. Complete stillness soon followed. I'd like to say there was understanding or peace in her eyes at the end, but all I saw was malice.

I took my stole from my pocket and placed it around my neck, bloodying it in the process. I forgave her in the name of God. Who would forgive me?

I don't know how long I knelt there. The silence of the empty, holy place echoed in my head, intruding on my grief. Long moments passed as I looked down at the only woman I'd ever loved. My tears fell like rivers and mingled with her black blood. I kissed her lips and closed her eyes.

The End

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR



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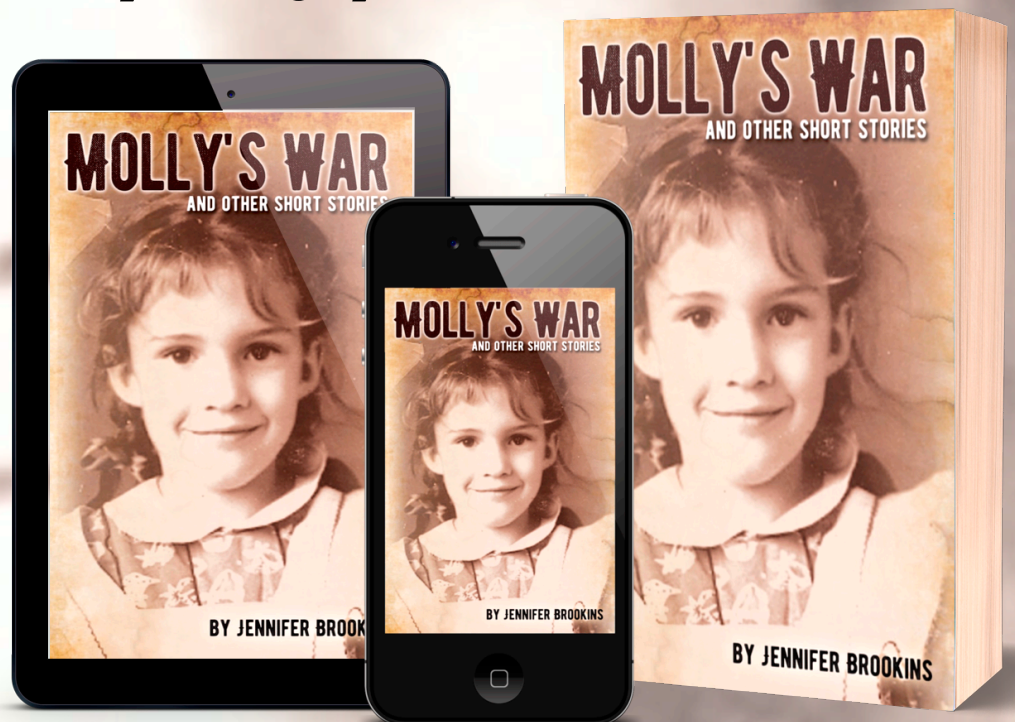
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THE LITTLE GIRL
WHO STOLE THE
WIND
BY ELIZABETH
MONTAGUE

Tap, tap, tap.

Every windy night Laura was kept awake by the branches brushing against her window. She lay in her bed wondering why the wind made the trees move. What made the wind? Where did it start? Where did it end?

She asked her mum one morning and she said the wind was just part of the weather, sometimes there, sometimes not and maybe she could learn more about it when she went to big school. Laura hated when adults told her she would learn more about it at big school. She was eight and already at a school that was big enough for her. There was one adult that didn't tell her to wait until big school though - her teacher, Mrs Rose.

Mrs Rose was the best teacher Laura had ever had, she was clever and funny and never told them off for asking too many questions. If

she was teaching them about the Egyptians and somehow talk turned to other ancient civilisations she let them learn about them too. So when they began talking about how rain was formed in their science lesson, Laura asked about the wind and how that was made. Mrs Rose did her best to explain how warm air rose and cold air sank therefore creating the phenomena of wind but it was still not enough for Laura. She stayed in that lunchtime and looked through every book they had on weather but her question still remained.

The internet and the grown-up science books in the library didn't satisfy her either, though the latter research was cut short when her little brother tried to up end one of the book cases in the children's section and their mum decided they would be safer heading home.



That night, Laura sat by her window after her parents had gone to bed. The wind was making the branches tap, tap, tap again and she wanted to know why. She found the key that her mum thought she kept so well hidden and opened the window. The wind blew the drizzle into her face and she spluttered before glaring at the night.

'Why do you make the trees tap on my window at night Wind?' she asked.

A loud whoosh answered her, carrying with it words that sounded like a hundred voices speaking at once. 'I must blow. I must fly. I am Wind.'

Laura frowned. 'But you keep me awake Wind. Where do you come from and why don't you go back there?'

'I come from the sky and from the ground. I come from the hole beneath the door and the crack in the window. My home is the whole world, I cannot go back.'

Again the drizzle blew into her face as the branches tapped against the window. 'What are you for Wind? What do you do?'

'I blow. I shake. I spread. I bring joy,' whistled Wind as it raced around the trees.

Laura closed the window and she heard Wind whistle away, making the gate bang against the post. She sat down on her bed and folded her arms. Her teacher had not answered her questions. Books had not answered her questions. Even Wind itself had not answered her questions but she still wanted to know. There was only one thing left to do. She would have to find out the answers by herself. She would have to study. She would have to capture Wind.

She loved inventing things. When she was small she had made a platform out of building blocks and attached it to her radio-controlled car so she could send it to the kitchen to get her sandwiches from mum without having to leave her game. When she went to school she made a bank of lights that helped her remember when to move from her times tables to her spellings. Her room was littered with inventions, some that worked, some that didn't. She knew she would make something great one day.



The morning after she spoke to Wind she sat down and made a plan on how best to capture it. She couldn't use a cage, Wind would escape too easily through the bars. It would need to be something large to hold its vastness and it would have to be strong - she knew Wind had the power to knock over trees when it wanted to. It would need room to move inside. Something to brush against to make its sing-song words.

For several weeks she worked on her design and every so often Wind would come to her room and tap, tap, tap the branches on her window. She did not speak to it. She ignored it and continued to work with her curtains closed, she couldn't let Wind know what she was planning or it would fly away.

Finally, she built a container to capture Wind. The box was large and see-through, with a small pot plant inside to help Wind speak to her with its rustles and whistles. She had cut a hole in the lid and put a funnel inside, the large end on the outside to make it easier for Wind to get inside.

She waited for a blustery day and took her box up onto the top of a hill where Wind liked to dance.

She sat down beneath the large oak tree, leaning against the vast trunk and looking up at the leaves that moved in whichever direction Wind chose for them. She wondered if the leaves ever got angry at being pushed around, or if they got annoyed when people were grumpy with them for tapping on their window at night even though they couldn't help it. She would find that out when she studied Wind.

When she had been there long enough she stood up, turning until she felt Wind blowing against her face, bringing with it the smell of the flowers in the meadow below.

'Hello Wind,' she called. 'I have another question for you. Do you shake the leaves on every tree in the world?'

'Wind knows every plant on the Earth.' The whistled reply echoed through the leaves above her head.



Laura picked up her box and held it out towards Wind. 'This little plant has never met you,' she said. 'It has always been indoors.'

Wind wrapped itself around the large oak tree and then around Laura's legs like a wary cat. It swept around the box with the little plant inside, testing the edges and ridges. The air grew still for a moment and Laura thought that Wind had worked out her plan and blown itself away but then she felt a great whoosh of air as it rushed into the box. The leaves of the little plant shook and Laura knew she had to be quick. She grabbed the lid and covered the funnel, trapping Wind inside the box. She had to hang on tight as Wind tried to escape but she held fast, taping the lid down to make doubly sure that it could not escape.

The world around her was still. Nothing moved. Nothing breathed and she realised it was the first time that Wind had not been there to stir things. She looked over the countryside from the hill. The trees stayed in one place. The grass and flowers stood upright. The train wires in the distance only sang when the trains whizzed by.

She carried the box home, Wind wriggling like a caged bird inside it, shaking the leaves of the little plant to make its wispy sounds.

'Let me out,' it pleaded. 'I am needed, let me out.'

'I will do, soon,' promised Laura. 'But I need to know what you are and what you are for.'

'I am Wind and I need to be free.'

'Soon,' said Laura again.

Wind did not like the word soon. Wind sulked like a child forbidden to have sweets. Wind did not answer Laura's questions. The box sat in the corner of Laura's room, next to the doll house she didn't play with, and Wind sat quietly inside. Sometimes it ruffled the leaves on the little plant but it was only to moan.





That night Laura went to bed without any answers but she got to sleep quickly without Wind making the tree tap on her window. Wind whistled softly through the tiny plant and Laura sometimes woke up just to listen to it.

It was six in the morning when she woke to a sound she didn't recognise. She looked over at the box but Wind was quiet, the leaves of the plant only fluttering back and forth. She strained her ears, trying to find the source of the sound that had woken her. It was a creak and a groan, a sound that was old and hard but warm. She listened until the noises formed a pattern.

'Laura. Laura.'

She went to her door, peering across the landing to her parents' room in case they were calling for her but she could see her mum's foot sticking out from underneath the quilt and she could hear her dad's snoring. Neither of them were calling for her but she could still hear her name. She looked back at Wind but it was quiet, the sound too low to be the whistle that it spoke with.

The sound drew her towards the window and she opened it; the sound was louder beyond the glass.

'Laura. Laura,' it called.

'Who's there?' she asked, the ancient sound frightening in the half light of the early dawn.

'We are Trees,' rumbled the response. 'We are the roots and the trunks and the leaves.'

'Why are you talking to me?'

'You have taken Wind. We need Wind. We need it to shake the leaves off our branches in the Autumn. We need it to blow the clouds away from the Sun to let us bathe in its light. We need it to bring the rain that nourishes us. We need you to let Wind go.'

'But Wind has not told me why it is here and what it does,' said Laura.

'Surely it doesn't just blow the trees and make you tap on my window at night.'

'We do not know what Wind does for others but we know that we need Wind.'

Laura looked at the trees, their branches dark and still against the pale light. She wondered how something as fleeting as Wind could be so important to something as steady as Trees. She looked over at the box and saw the small leaves fluttering.

'Wind. Why are you so important to Trees?'

The leaves fluttered and sighed in the plastic cage as Wind's wispy voice returned.

'Trees cannot move alone so I must move Trees.'

'But why can't the trees learn to move themselves?'

'Because they are busy growing roots and leaves. I must move Trees.'

Laura picked up her notebook beside her bed and wrote down what she had learned. The answer was still not enough to satisfy her, though. She closed the window and returned to bed, the trees falling silent outside and Wind only rustling the leaves of the little plant in the corner.

When she got up for school, Wind was quiet in its box and she wondered if she had dreamed about the trees speaking to her. She did not have long to think about it as mum called her for breakfast. She left Wind in her room when she went to school; the little plant almost ripped out of its pot as Wind raged at being contained still. Laura still had questions though, and she would keep Wind until they were answered.

Walking to school was strange. Everything was silent. Even the birds did not seem to want to sing. Sadness covered the world like a blanket and it felt heavy on her shoulders. When she stopped to tie her lace her mum kept walking through the park, leaving her by a small patch of dandelions.

'Pardon us Miss Laura,' they whispered to her. 'We are only humble weeds but can we speak to you?'





Laura looked up, surprised no one else had heard the soft words as people continued to walk past her. 'You can speak to me?' she said at last. 'How can I help you?'

'Trees told us that you captured Wind,' sighed the dandelions. 'Trees need Wind to shake down their leaves and blow the clouds but Flowers need Wind too. We are only humble weeds but we would like to speak for Flowers.'

'Why do Flowers need Wind?' asked Laura.

'Flowers need Wind to carry their seeds away so that they can grow elsewhere. Flowers need Wind to help the bees along so they can mix the pollen so we grow healthy seeds. Flowers need Wind to bring the clouds with the rain and the sun to keep us warm.'

'But can't the birds carry your seeds and the bees find you on their own?'

'They can but Wind helps them. We need Wind. It connects us all even when we are rooted in the ground.'

'Laura! Come along.'

Her mum's voice caught her attention and she looked over to where she waited along the path. When she turned back to the dandelions they were silent once more, sat in the small patch of sunlight. She shook her head and got to her feet. She would normally skip to catch up with her mum but instead she walked, thinking on the words that both the trees and the dandelions said to her.

She continued to think about them when she was at school, all through her morning lessons, her lunch break and her afternoon PE lesson. The sun was hot and she missed the breeze that would have come along to cool her down.

Mum bought her an ice cream on the way home from school and they walked slowly through the park. All around her children played, on the swings, in the skate park, on the basketball court and football pitch. The hill was empty though. Children would normally go up there to fly their kites but there was nothing to carry the colourful toys into the sky.

Mum walked on ahead with Mrs Kelsey from number twenty-five; that's when Laura noticed the little boy sitting on the bench. The other children ran passed him, ignoring him as he cried into his small, pale hands. The cold ice cream dripped onto her fingers as it melted but she ignored it and walked over to him, sitting beside him.

'Are you OK?' she asked. She kept her voice soft because he was smaller than her and she didn't want to scare him. 'Where's your mum?'

'I don't have a mum or a dad,' said the little boy. 'I am not a real boy. I am the Spirit of Childhood and I have come to speak to you on behalf of Children about Wind.'

Laura smiled. 'You want to tell me that Wind is important to Children,' she said. 'You want me to know that Wind helps bring the cool breeze so we can run around without getting too hot. You want me to know that Wind carries the sweet smell of candy and ice cream from the van when we are hungry from our play. You want me to know that Wind makes the kites fly up on the hill.'

The boy wiped his tears and nodded. 'We need Wind.'

'Then I will set it free,' said Laura, handing him her ice cream. 'Because even though I do not know everything I want to know about Wind, I know it is important and that we all need it.'

She didn't see the little boy disappear as she ran off down the path. She rushed passed her mum and Mrs Kelsey, hearing them both call to her to be careful but she needed to get home quickly so she kept on running. Her dad opened the front door and she quickly answered questions about school before she rushed to her room.

The box was still in the corner, only the rustling of the little plant letting her know that Wind was still there. She knelt down before it and picked the box up in her hands.

'I am sorry,' she said. 'I only wanted to know more about you but now I know it was wrong to put you in a box. I should have looked at the world around me, not tried to bring you into mine.'

She tore the tape around the lid and carried the box over to the open window. She opened the box and Wind rushed out, making the leaves on the tree outside dance as it hurried past. She sighed; so many questions unanswered still, but she knew she had done the right thing.

That night as she lay in bed, the familiar tap, tap, tap echoed from her window. She got up and pulled aside the curtain, surprised to see the trees and telephone wires were still. Only the one branch moved, the leaves rustling as it tapped on her window once again. She quickly found the key and opened it.





'Laura,' sighed the rustle through the trees. 'Thank you for letting me go.'

Laura smiled. 'You're welcome,' she said before she frowned. 'But there's still so much I don't know.'

Wind laughed, tinkling through the telephone wires. 'You have many years yet to learn everything and I will always be here.'

'Can you do me one favour though?' Laura asked as she watched the leaves rustle once more. 'Please don't make the tree tap on my window unless it's really important, it keeps me awake.'

'Deal,' said Wind. 'So long as you promise never to put me in a box again.'

'I promise,' said Laura.

Wind laughed as it flew away from the window but Laura left it open all the same. Picking up the little plant that had been in the box from her dresser, she left it on the window ledge. She climbed back into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin, falling asleep to the gentle rustle of the leaves of the little plant as Wind gently moved them.

The End

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FOLLOWING GITA

by Peter Astle



British train stations were draughty places, even in the summer months. Colin Fisher had never quite worked out why, but maybe it was something to do with the design.

Or maybe it was because his sweat was cooling and he was wearing Lycra cycling shorts.

What he did know was that it was August, and he was shivering on Platform 3A at Derby station, Kangol holdall in one hand, Brompton bike in the other, waiting for the 11:50 night-train to Plymouth.

The refreshment service outlets had pulled down their shutters over an hour ago and there was just one other person waiting on the platform. A young guy, wearing baggy cargo trousers and a baseball hat, thumbing his phone furiously, presumably playing some sort of game.

Fisher heard the distinctive sound of high heels descending the broad stairwell to Platform 3A. They echoed across all eight platforms.

He allowed himself a smile. He'd been right after all. And he was there before her. Perfect.

Gita Wisocki stepped onto the platform and stood away from the overhead lights next to a shuttered coffee shop, her distinctive Slavic features caught in the reflective glow of her phone display screen.

Even in the shadows she was one hell of a looker. Tall, slim, catlike.

She was thirty-five and until today Gita had worked in the accounts department of her husband's mini-market grocery empire, Leszec's FoodMart. Until today she had been the dutiful wife, working the late shift on Normanton Road and tending to Leszec's every need. Until today she had shown no sign she was about to flee.

The heavy-looking bag hanging over her shoulder was top-end Gucci and the shoes were Jimmy Choo.





When the Plymouth-bound Cross Country pulled in, Gita ended a call and slipped her phone into the designer handbag. The two-carriage train was well-lit and practically deserted, just as he'd expected. Combat Guy sat in the bicycle booth, in the front carriage, even though he didn't have a bicycle.

Fisher didn't bother folding the Brompton. He parked it fully assembled in the first carriage. Sure enough, Combat Guy was playing some sort of war game on his phone. Fisher glimpsed crouching soldiers in camouflage on the tiny screen before carrying his light Kangol holdall down the aisle. He decided on a table seat, facing Gita, in the second carriage, a respectable three tables away.

Gita chose an aisle seat closest to the door at the back of the train. She placed her Gucci on her lap rather than the luggage rack.

He unzipped the front pocket of his holdall and pulled out a crumpled copy of *The Metro*, placed it on the table in front of him, open at the crossword page. Then he plucked a silver Paper Mate from the breast pocket of his FDX jersey.

The pen actually worked, but it wasn't its primary function.

It was fortunate Gita had seated herself close to the rear door because directly above her seat, slightly to the left, was the information screen. Colin clicked the pen as though readying himself to start a crossword puzzle. The camera, hidden in the shaft of the pen, captured Gita's image, along with the timestamp of 11:52 pm. Perfect.

Details like timestamps counted as reliable evidence in the divorce courts.

Gita checked her phone again when the train pulled into Burton-on-Trent at six minutes past midnight, just as three passengers alighted the train: a weary-looking couple in their late twenties wheeled his-and-her suitcases and hand-luggage—no doubt bound for Birmingham Airport—and a big man in his fifties carrying a heavy bag and a can of lager.

Gita opened the Gucci and appeared to be searching its inner pockets. Fisher was about to capture another image with the pen when the big man stumbled down the aisle and sat down right opposite him, completely blocking his view.

The guy was early fifties, paunchy, unkempt, slightly out of breath. The bridge of his nose was seriously cut and there was a fresh-looking purple bruise just below his left eye.

He placed a green army-style canvas bag on the table between them, ignoring the overhead storage rail. He clutched a can of strong lager and was already spilling some of it on the table when he squeezed his bulk into the seat opposite Fisher.

"Sorry about that," he said. "Been one hell of a night." A powerful stench of alcohol came across the table in a wave.

Fisher glanced over the drunk's shoulder and saw Gita was now talking on the phone. One moment she was smiling, the next frowning. Her lover? Anticipating their Birmingham rendezvous? Fisher was sure now she was heading for Birmingham Airport. She could have driven there of course—she had the BMW—but she didn't. Gita Wisocki had chosen the train. It was a clever move, but Fisher was one step ahead of her. It was why Leszec Wisocki was paying him so handsomely.

For the last seven days, Fisher had been tailing Gita. He was certain he'd not been seen.

Today, Fisher had followed her white BMW for most of the afternoon in his nondescript Ford, then on foot and bike, gathering photographic evidence as she browsed Nottingham boutiques and bookstores. When she returned to Derby, she parked up in a long stay car park on the edge of the city and made her way to the NatWest bank on foot.

This was a significant change to her weekly routine. Normally she parked her BMW in the private bays on Angel Street at the back of Normanton Road before her shift at Leszec's FoodMart, but today it was the multi-storey. Fisher had parked his Ford on the floor beneath and took the tools of his trade from the boot of his car. He texted Leszec, who was in Rugby on business, to let him know there'd been developments.

Gita was in the bank for some time. Business that couldn't be done at the counter. Fisher captured her entering at five minutes to three and exiting at almost quarter to four.

The Gucci bag looked considerably heavier when she came out.

The drunk finished the can and then crushed it as though it was the most natural thing in the world to do.

"There's a bin two seats down the aisle," Fisher said, scrolling through the gallery on his Smart phone. There were two-hundred and forty-three photographs of Gita so far, tracking her weekly travels. Leszec would be pleased.

The drunk leaned forward in his seat. The cut above his nose looked recent. "I need to use your phone."





Fisher closed the photo gallery and slid the Nokia into the side pocket of his FDX jersey. "I'm sorry?"

The drunk scowled, then picked up the crushed can of lager and deposited into the litter bin two seats behind. When he came back to the table, Fisher noticed how filthy his clothes were, dirt-crusted jeans, splatters of what looked like blood on his collar, a torn button on the shirt. His hands were huge and caked in dirt.

"I'm in serious trouble," he scowled. "I need to use your phone."

*

When Gita left NatWest at quarter to four with her heavy Gucci bag, she did not return to the multi-storey car park.

She walked in high heels right across town to Normanton Road, home to the largest of the three Leszec's FoodMarts in Derby. It was her one six-hour evening shift. Gita playing the good dutiful wife.

Fisher followed, not on foot, but at a safe distance on his Brompton bike.

On surveillance operations, when the mark was on foot, a bike was best. Following a pedestrian on foot could be problematic,

particularly over distance. Cyclists blended in far better with the landscape of the city than pedestrians could.

Cyclists could hold back, keep a safe distance, speed ahead and catch up when the mark turned a corner. Cyclists wore generic clothes, natural disguises. Helmets were far better than hairpieces when it came to camouflage.

Today, Fisher wore city bicycle gear: black and grey Souke cycling shorts and matching FDX long-sleeved jersey, every inch the urban commuter heading home.

On Normanton Road, almost directly opposite to Leszec's FoodMart, he slipped into the Sherwin Arms, one of the last surviving British pubs on the busy multi-ethnic thoroughfare.

It took a moment or two for the landlord to recognise him in his cycling gear but when he did, he fixed Fisher's regular order.

Fisher had been using the Sherwin as a stakeout point for the last week. Normally he wore casuals, having parked his Ford on a side street close by. The landlord didn't mind Fisher leaning the Brompton against the wall near the entrance, the place was practically deserted.

Fisher found his usual spot in the window seat. He took out his newspaper and silver Paper Mate pen and sipped his sickly pint of Britvic orange and lemonade. The same order he'd suffered the last seven nights.

Six hours was a long stint, but Fisher had no choice. He knew there was little chance that Gita Leszec would leave before eleven o'clock.

The vantage point was perfect. Leszec's FoodMart was a huge well-lit shop with broad windows. The bay window seat was an ideal spot to keep watch.

With the silver Paper Mate pen Fisher photographed Gita talking with a young male staff member before disappearing into a back room. Customers came and went. Gita reappeared twenty minutes later having changed into dowdy overalls.

The male employee grabbed his coat and left, leaving Gita alone in the shop. Fisher photographed him leaving at twenty-five minutes past five, smoking a cigarette. More customers came and went. Fisher photographed them all.

Full chronology.

Gita spent much of the long evening shift on her phone, even when she was serving customers.

This was another development. On previous evenings she had only used her phone a couple of times. Tonight, she was using it almost constantly.

He wondered what kind of battery she had in the thing.

*

"I need to use your phone," The drunk insisted. "My life is in danger."

Fisher couldn't care less about the man's life. Right now, all he cared about was remaining anonymous. Just another city cyclist on a train journey home.

Gita was settling in her seat, phone tucked in her hand. Fisher lifted the newspaper. There were just the six of them on the train: Combat Guy

in the front bicycle booth, the young sleepy-eyed couple with the suitcases, heads nestled against one another, Gita at the back, Fisher and the drunk three seats in front. Not enough people for anonymity,

And tonight, of all nights, after all that had happened, Fisher needed to be anonymous all the way to wherever it was Gita was going. The job wasn't done until he found out who she was meeting and precisely where she was heading. That was the deal.





Leszec Wisocki wanted full chronology. Blow by blow. All recorded and time-stamped. There was a lot at stake here. More money than Fisher had earned in any surveillance operation in the last five years.

Play it cool. Stay invisible. Fisher kept the newspaper high and pretended to read.

The drunk refused to give in. "Your phone. I won't be long."

Fisher kept his voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry. My battery is low."

"You don't understand. I've done something. I managed to escape, but they're coming after me."

For a moment, Fisher considered giving the idiot the damned phone, just to shut him up. But the moment passed and Fisher turned another page.

Gita closed her eyes. The train made its lulling, rocking, soporific sounds.

Then, without warning, the drunk grabbed the newspaper and pulled it onto the table. Before he could protest the guy grabbed Fisher's wrist. His grip was tight, his fingernails caked in grime. "You haven't been listening to me. I said I need to use your mobile."

Fisher held on to the pen. He kept his voice low and steady. "Let go of me, please."

Gita reclined her seat and appeared to be dozing.

"I've done something. Something very bad."

From the corner of his eye Fisher saw the young couple stir in their seats behind him. Not good. He glanced at the display screen.

"Look, I'm sure it can wait until the next stop. We'll be in Tamworth in ten minutes. Can you kindly let go of my arm?"

The drunk let go of Fisher's wrist.

Then, with a force Fisher did not expect, he slammed his wrist back down on the table so hard Fisher felt the strap of his watch dig into his skin.

This time, Fisher didn't manage to hold onto the pen.

The silver Paper Mate tumbled from Fisher's hand onto the carpet in the aisle and as the train rocked forwards. The pen rolled backwards to the rear of the train towards Gita.

When it struck the pointed toe of her Jimmy Choo, Gita's eyes sprang open.

*

The shops on Normanton Road generally batted down their hatches around eleven o'clock.

Leszec's FoodMart was no exception.

At five to eleven, Fisher captured Gita closing down the shop. As the steel shutters crawled towards the pavement, Fisher sat forward in his seat in the Sherwin Arms, preparing his next move. Gita had hidden the BMW in the long stay car park. She'd been to the bank. There was only a large stockroom above Leszec's FoodMart. She wasn't planning on staying there tonight.

Tonight, she was planning to run.

It made sense someone was picking her up. Her lover perhaps?

Fisher drained his fourth Britvic and lemonade, thanked the landlord and headed for the door. He wheeled the Brompton across Normanton Road and headed straight for the narrow alleyway between Laszec's FoodMart and a Betfred bookmakers.

Over the last week Gita had parked the white BMW behind the shop on Angel Street. The narrow alleyway was a shortcut from the private parking area at the back to the shop fronts on Normanton road.

This afternoon, she had not parked her car on Angel Street. Fisher slipped into the shadows of the alleyway confident Gita would not be using the alleyway tonight.

But Fisher most certainly was.

If Gita was being picked up tonight, this was now the perfect opportunity to get a name, or a number plate.

On previous nights, Fisher had tailed Gita in his Ford. He'd parked in the same side street, observed from the window seat of the Sherwin, and then followed her home when she locked up at eleven.

Tonight, was different. Tonight, Gita was on foot. And tonight, Fisher was a city cyclist.

City cyclists were crazy. They jumped traffic lights, weaved through pedestrians on pavements, shot around blind corners. It was no stretch to imagine a city cyclist wouldn't shoot out from a dark alleyway straight into a parked car.

Fisher secured his cycling helmet, fastened the straps of his Kangol holdall, swung his leg over the crossbar.

And waited.



It was ten-past eleven. Getting cosy on the Brompton's narrow saddle was not easy. He leaned against the brick wall of the bookmakers to make himself more comfortable. By quarter-past eleven Gita had still not left the shop.

Normally, by this time, she would be driving home. He risked a peek around the corner of the alleyway.

Then Fisher heard the door to the shop open, the sound of a key being turned.

Gita was suddenly there, standing in the shadows of the doorway, the Gucci bag weighing her right shoulder down.

Less than a minute later, a black cab pulled up to the curb.

*

Gita blinked before pushing herself up in her seat. She shook herself as though snapped from a dream.

The Paper Mate lay inches from her right foot.

The drunk maintained pressure on Fisher's wrist, the newspaper sandwiched between his arm and the table, chipped and grubby fingernails bit into his flesh. He had a surprisingly strong grip.

"Phone," the drunk demanded.

Gita had not noticed the pen.

Fisher managed to keep his voice steady. "If you let go of my arm, I might be able to reach it."

The drunk squeezed his wrist even tighter. "I think I can reach it for myself."

Fisher stole a glance at the information screen. "We'll be in Tamworth in three minutes. If you don't let go of my arm, I'll report you to the guard."

The laugh was low and guttural. "There are no guards on this train. Just the driver. And they'll be no one at the platform at Tamworth station either."

Fisher knew this to be true. Small town train stations were unmanned at this time of night. Automated announcements provided only an illusion of a human being.

Gita glanced behind her at the information screen and picked up the heavy Gucci bag. They were minutes away from Tamworth station, several stops from Birmingham Airport.

Gita started down the aisle and crushed the Paper Mate under her Jimmy Choo.

*

Fisher wasn't expecting a taxi.

Everything pointed to Gita being picked up by someone from the shop, but he wasn't expecting a City Cab.

Some flash car, perhaps, a motorbike even, but not a City Cab

Over his third pint of Britvic orange and lemonade in the window seat of the Sherwin Arms the plan was simple. Fisher would hide in the shadows of the alleyway, wait for the lover to arrive, then hurtle from the shadows and crash headlong into whatever vehicle he arrived in.

Perfect.





City cyclists were not just crazy, they were crazy and blind.

It was a hasty plan, but the opportunity was there for the taking. Fisher's helmet would protect him, but he had no intention of suffering injury. Nor did he intend to damage the Brompton.

The plan was to brake hard the moment he exited the alleyway and just graze against whatever vehicle pulled up, tumble onto the pavement, swear a little, and maybe clutch an ankle.

In the time it took for the confusion to die down, Fisher would have recorded the number plate of whatever vehicle the lover arrived in, and would have potentially captured a picture of his face on this pen.

But he wasn't expecting a taxi.

Fisher held back in the shadows and watched as Gita opened the back door of the cab. There was no lover there to greet her. When she slammed the door, Fisher pushed himself away from the alley wall and prepared to follow.

Normanton Road was still busy at a quarter-past eleven. The taxi driver had to wait for a break in the traffic before he pulled away. Even so, Fisher held back a good thirty seconds before nudging onto the pavement.

He had no idea where Gita was heading, but he knew he could easily keep up with the cab in the busy evening traffic. If the cab took off on the A52 or A38 then he'd lose her, but right now he had no choice other than to follow.

A right down St Albert Street, a left down Mayflower Way, another left onto Station Road.

It didn't take a genius to work out she was heading for the Derby train station. Fisher didn't need to use the main roads. City cyclists were crazy and blind and a law unto themselves. He mounted the pavement and shot down a narrow side street that would cut out two mini islands and the heavy congestion on Traffic Street. City cyclists liked to fly.

By the time the black City Cab pulled in front of the train station, Fisher was already on Platform 3A, catching his breath, sweat cooling.

The 11:50 night-train to Plymouth was the last departure on the huge overhead display heading for Birmingham Airport. He took a gamble, bought a ticket at the machine and carried the Brompton down the stairs.

Derby station was open plan with clear views across all eight platforms. If Gita planned on boarding another train, north or southbound, he'd spot her across the railway tracks.

Fact was, he was there first. Minutes later, the steady click of high heels coming down the stairs brought a smile to his face.

If Gita did suspect she was being tailed, she would not expect a guy in cycling gear – who was already on the platform – to be the one following her. It was actually kind of neat.

*

The drunk clamped down on Fisher's wrist and gave a twist. Something like the Chinese burns his older brother used to give him when he was a kid. "I killed a man tonight. Just so as you know. That's why they're after me."

The train slowed with the soft whisper of hydraulics, rocked slightly and then settled to a stop.

Fisher watched Gita stop, look down, and pick up the Paper Mate. The automated voice announced their arrival at Tamworth station. The silver camera pen was expensive, and the camera on the shaft visible, even under light scrutiny. Gita inspected it for a second, frowned, then slipped it into the side pocket of her light summer jacket, heading for the exit between the two carriages.

The drunk squeezed again as the electronic doors hissed open behind him.

Fisher grabbed the man's arm with his left hand, tried to pull it away. The muscles in the drunk's forearm bulged as he applied more pressure to Fisher's wrist and Fisher let out a soft involuntary yelp.

"Don't even try it."





"I need to get off here. It's my stop."

"And I need your phone."

Fisher reached into his side pocket with his left hand, snatched the Nokia and tossed it across the table. It landed next to the can of lager. "Have it. Just let me go."

The drunk hesitated, eyed the phone, then still holding tight to Fisher's wrist, plucked it from the table with his left hand and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

Tamworth station was deserted. There was no one boarding the train at this hour, but there were two passengers exiting.

The doors hissed shut and the train pulled away.

Fisher could only watch in horror as he saw Gita and Combat Guy walk across the brightly lit platform. The young man was no longer playing games on his Smartphone. One arm was wrapped

around Gita's waist, the other wheeled Fisher's Brompton towards the exit doors.

When the train began to pick up speed, the drunk finally let go of Fisher's wrist.

Fisher was momentarily stunned.

Then the drunk carefully peeled something like sticking tape from the bridge of his nose and the bloody scab disappeared. He plucked a tissue from his army bag and smiled.

"Leszec is paying you well," he said, his voice far from slurred. With the tissue he wiped away the purple paint from beneath his left eye. "But Gita Wisocki is paying me more."

The End

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*Her
Sister's
Keeper*

*by L. A.
O'Neil*



The year was 1907, King Edward had been on the throne for four years, and London was celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the introduction of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's character, Sherlock Holmes, the 'world's first consulting detective'.

I fondly remember, as a youth, play-acting Holmes' stories with my brother and cousin. Many a summer afternoon was spent looking for clues to imaginary crimes. I admit, the thought of becoming a doctor first entered my mind during that time. My brother Andrew, if induced with a pint or two, would admit the thought of joining Scotland Yard first blossomed while playing the police inspector.

But our cousin David, Davy as we call him, took it a step further, actually becoming a private investigator; one styled after Holmes himself. His mannerisms, when dealing with those he considered of lesser intelligence, were borderline rude. Because of this, his presence at the constabulary was not always welcome, even when he solved the crimes they couldn't. But, he was good enough to make a sufficient living at his craft.

I was a junior physician working long, hard hours trying to establish a practice, which included making house calls on my patients. It was on one of these visits I became aware of the disappearance of Miss Karen Billings from her flat across the hall, from my long-time patient Mrs Gillespie.

Mrs Gillespie was native Irish — her family immigrated when digging for the tunnels of the Underground began. Mr Gillespie was an engineer with a salary that allowed for them to reside on the third floor of a modest brownstone structure.

'T'ank you, Dr Potts, for comin' by to see me Allison. I know with the medicine ye gave us, she'll be all right now.'

'Make sure she keeps up with the tonic until the bottle is empty, even if she feels better.' Mrs Gillespie had opened the hallway door for me to leave, but as I spoke there was an awful wailing in the background. 'Alison will be able to go back to school in a day or two when the coughing subsides.' The vacant hallway seemed to be haunted with a moaning and wailing throughout the walls. I could hold my aggravation no longer. 'What is that noise? It sounds as if someone is injured? Where is it coming from?'

'Oh, dat's the lady across the hall, Miss Billings,' she confided. 'She's been hollerin' for three days now, carrying on day and night.'

'Well, has someone tried to make her stop? Hasn't the building superintendent addressed the noise? Surely there must have been complaints.'

'Well, usually her sister calms her down, but I ain't seen her come home in several days. The superintendent doesn't reside in this building, so I guess no one has been to see her.' She shook her head in disapproval as another round of wailing flared in the background.

'Her sister lives here as well?'

'Aye, they're twins, Miss Karen and Miss Sharon. Miss Karen works as a typist and her sister stays home.' Then she leaned in like a conspirator, her voice hushed, 'I haven't seen her too often, but I think she ain't too right in the head, if you know what I mean?'

'Well, I will see if I can get someone to check on the poor woman. Thank you, Madam, you have been of great service.' I doffed my hat, nodded, then headed down the building's

central staircase to the street. I left the brownstone building on Grove Park Road and made for Scotland Yard to see my brother, Inspector Andrew Potts, to ask for his assistance with a welfare visit to the Billings' flat.

'Welfare visits are usually not in my purview, John. My cases revolve around major crimes like murder and robbery.' My brother sat behind an old wooden desk, too large for his office, the top cluttered with files and reports. He had recently been promoted to inspector and would later reveal his disdain for the paperwork.

'I know, Andrew, but I thought with your resources you could help me convince the building superintendent to open the door for me to check on this poor woman... along with one of your constables of course.' I leaned forward in one of the two chairs on the other side of his desk and explained how pitiful the woman had sounded. Secretly, I hoped I wouldn't have to remind him about all the times he had come to me to patch him up when he'd been involved in other than gentlemanly activities, but that is another story.



'Of course, John, but I still do not see where a crime has been committed.'

'That's just it - if Sharon Billings is of diminished capacity, it could be a case of abandonment, or worse, a case of missing persons regarding her sister, Karen.'

A knock on the office door interrupted my brother's contemplation. 'Excuse me; come in!'

'Ah, there you are, John; Sergeant Thompson said he saw you come into Andrew's office.'

Through the door came our cousin Davy, hat in hand, great coat draped over his arm.

'And a hello to you, cousin,' Andrew interjected, sarcasm evident in his voice, 'won't you come in as well?'

'Davy, what on Earth are you doing here?' I should have been surprised to see him, but where would it be more appropriate for our paths to cross than a constabulary?

'Oh, I just came by to trade notes with Inspector Tulane about the Michaels' murder and I thought I would see what you were up to at the Yard; I hope nothing is amiss?' Totally ignoring my brother, he sat down in the other chair without waiting for an invitation.

'Michaels' murder, Davy? I didn't know you were actively working on a case.'

'I'm not, but new evidence has arisen, and the good Inspector wanted to make sure he had all pertinent information; but it still does not explain why I find you here in your brother's office?'

'I came to ask for his assistance with a welfare check and a possible abandonment case.'

'Good day to you too, Davy. Are you aware of my brother's concerns?' Andrew asked, the words bitter in his mouth.

'No, sir, this is the first I have heard of it. Now tell me, cousin, what makes you think the police need to be brought into this matter?' Davy failed to acknowledge Andrew's tone as he waited for my reply. He sat back into the chair, nodding occasionally, as I recalled for him what I had shared earlier about how it appeared a woman with diminished mental capacity had been abandoned by her sister and could be heard wailing at the top of her lungs, probably for assistance.



'My, my, cousin, it does seem like someone should look in on her. Did you try to contact her yourself?'

'Well ... no; I thought if Andrew could lend me a constable we could get the building superintendent to unlock the door. If the woman was indeed in need of medical assistance we could either render it on site or collect her to a hospital.'

'Well, Inspector Potts, seems like a reasonable request of a public servant, don't you think?' Davy challenged.

Andrew sighed and agreed. 'I suppose I can assign a patrol officer to accompany you for the afternoon,' as he rose from his chair and walked to the door. Davy flashed me a wink and a tight-lipped smile as we heard him bellow, 'PC Marcum, come here!'

Momentarily, a blue-uniformed constable entered through the door he held open. 'Yes, Inspector.'

'Marcum, I want for you to accompany Dr Potts here to perform a welfare check on a woman. Be sure to find out who the building superintendent is first and have him with you when the door is opened.'

'Yes, sir. Dr Potts, if you are ready to leave.'

'That is, accompany Dr Potts and me, if my cousin has no objections?'

'No, of course not. I would be pleased. Thank you, Andrew, I owe you one.' I picked up my medical bag as I stood, offering him my free hand. 'Well, you can take your gratitude and your associate out of my office; I have work to do. Oh, Marcum, stay back a moment.'

'Yes, sir?'

Davy and I walked out of the office, but through the partially open door we heard, 'Let's hope it is nothing, but my brother is not known for being an alarmist, so if there is anything to this abandonment case I want you to report it to me right away; understood?'

'Yes, sir.'





Before we left Scotland Yard, PC Marcum discovered from official records the building was owned by a holding company known as Gillum and Stead Mortgage Investors and Trust, so it was there we headed first. We had traveled to London's central business district by hansom to the address of a stately sandstone building and asked the driver to wait. We entered a central foyer, with a lone young woman sitting behind long counter. From all directions, the sound of unseen typewriting machines filled the air. Since this had been my concern, Davy stood back and allowed me to ask all the questions.

'Yes, sirs, we own that building. How may we be of assistance to you?' Greeting us with an innocent smile.

'Yes, Miss, we'd like to speak to the building superintendent and arrange for him to accompany us on a welfare check for one of your tenants.'

She looked confused, but offered before she disappeared behind a side door,

'One moment, sir, while I get Mr Westbrook to assist you.'

It was not long before a pleasant-looking gentleman in his mid-thirties approached from an outer office. He was dressed in a smart-looking three-piece suit and had the smile of a salesman looking for his next customer. He extended his hand but never came from behind his side of the counter.

'Gentlemen, I'm Martin Westbrook; how can Gillum and Stead be of assistance?'

'My name is Dr John Potts, and these sirs are PC Marcum and Mr David Carr. We would like to perform a welfare check on one your tenants and are here to request your building superintendent accompany us to open the door if necessary.'

'I see, well, we own several buildings. If you could tell me the location, I will see which one of our superintendents to assign. You know, it is a shame to think one of our tenants would need police and medical assistance.'

'It is a brownstone on Grove Park Road, the tenant resides on the third floor facing the street, the Billings' residence.'



11215 LONDON, HYDE PARK CORNER

Westbrook's face, in fact his total demeanor, changed with the mention of the name Billings, but, just as fast, he pulled himself together and put forth a business-like front. It was only a moment, but if it was enough for me to recognize it, surely it was enough for my cousin to see as well.

Until now, Davy's attention had been on the map of London on the wall which indicated properties owned by Gillum and Stead Mortgage Investors and Trust. When the conversation skipped a beat with Westbrook, his interest in this investigation began. 'Mr Westbrook, you hesitated at the mention of the name Billings. Is there someone at the residence we should be concerned about?'

'No, no, it is just I am familiar with the names of many of our tenants. I will have our man Ogden meet you there, if that is sufficient?'

We all nodded, but PC Marcum added, 'Tell your man he is not to enter the flat without us.'

'Understood, Constable; will there be anything else?'

Westbrook looked from face to face, but I was the one to answer, 'No, you have been most cooperative, Mr Westbrook. Good day.'

'Good day to you as well, gentlemen.'

We returned to the hansom cab and, it was here Davy mentioned his observation of Westbrook's change in demeanor. 'John, did you notice how he reacted when you mentioned the tenants were named Billings?'

'Yes, I did indeed; what do you think it means?'

'Could be nothing at all, just merely as he said, name recognition, but if it means more ... I think, Constable, your Inspector Potts might be more interested in this investigation than he originally thought.'

'Yes, Mr Carr, but how did you know the inspector had asked to be kept informed of what we find?'

Davy returned a soft smile, gave a back-handed wave, and turned to look at the passing streets outside of the cab for the remainder of the drive, not once participating in any further conversation with fellow passengers.

We arrived at the now-familiar brownstone and waited on the street for a Mr Ogden, the building superintendent sent by Mr Westbrook. He arrived shortly and together we climbed the stairs to the third floor flat where the Billings sisters lived. I asked the man what he knew of the tenants. 'Have you had reports before of Miss Sharon Billings moaning and crying so loud it could be heard in the hallways?'

The slight-built man seemed to measure his words before he answered with a Norwegian accent, 'Well, dere have been some over da years, but I just usually talk to Miss Karen and she manages to quiet her down.'

I was impressed when PC Marcum intervened, which indicated he wasn't just there as my brother's prop. 'Have you talked to Karen Billings recently about her sister?'

'No, Constable, I've not seen Miss Karen fer several days now.'

As we reached the third-floor landing, the sound of moaning and crying became loud enough to notice. 'Listen, you can hear what I heard this morning; and no one, Mr Ogden, has

complained about this woman's loud outbursts before now?'

Ogden took a worn handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his brow, 'Well, I ain't been here for a few days, so ... no.' Again, with a cautious answer. He stopped before the door across from the Gillespie flat and flipped through a set of keys but stopped when my patient's door suddenly opened.

'Oh, Doctor Potts, ye did come back,' commented Mrs Gillespie as she stepped into the hallway. I couldn't tell if she was genuinely concerned or just curious, but I knew we didn't need her underfoot as we made our investigation.

'Yes, yes, Mrs Gillespie, we are here to investigate; now if you would just return to your flat, please.'

Then Davy broke his silence as he moved from the back of our group to speak with the newcomers. 'One moment if you please, Mr Ogden, before we enter; Mrs Gillespie, is it? Have either you or Mr Ogden seen Miss Sharon Billings in person?'



Mr Ogden held a key which looked the same as all the others on his ring. His response was quick like an eager student to his teacher, 'Well, I've glimpsed her through da window facing the street occasionally, but no, I've never actually met her face to face.'

'And I have only ever heard her, ye know, crying and moaning like she is now. Oh, sometimes ye can hear her singing too.'

'Singing?'

'Yes, ye know, like lullabies to a baby,' she clarified.

Satisfied with her remarks, with a professional and assuring tone, he tilted his head towards Mrs Gillespie, 'Thank you, Madam, you may return to your flat now.'

I placed my body between my patient and the rest, 'Yes, thank you, Mrs Gillespie, I will check in on you and Allison later; now there's a good woman.' She caught on that her presence was not required, and crossed herself before closing the door, all the while muttering about how she hoped the 'poor woman' was all right.





I turned to find the building superintendent with the key poised for entry into the lock. Curious as to what my friend was thinking, I quietly leaned in.

'What is it, Davy; do you suspect something sinister?'

'No, John; again, it may be nothing. You may proceed now, Constable.' The constable stepped up and rapped at the door to the Billings' flat.

We waited in a silence which seemed great compared to the sound of the moaning which had now ceased. He tried again, only this time with greater force. 'Miss Billings ... Miss Billings, this is Police Constable Marcum; I've come here to check on you ... to see if you are all right.' There was the sound of movement on the other side of the door. 'Now that is peculiar. Miss Billings, did you hear me? It's Police Constable Marcum and I have come here with a doctor to see if you are all right.'

'There is definitely somebody in there; open the door, Ogden, but stay out here in the hallway, please,' Davy commanded, because now it had truly become his investigation.

Mr Ogden turned the key in the lock and then the handle but stepped back to allow the constable to enter first. 'Miss Billings... are you here?' Marcum's voice was cautious as he entered - and then nothing. The rest of us waited in the hall for his observation and instructions, then with alarm in his voice, 'Blimey, Doctor Potts, you had better get in here quick.'

I followed the constable's instructions and entered the front room of the flat with Davy close on my heels. What I saw there, well - I was not at all prepared for.

What had once been a modest sitting room with common, yet tasteful décor was now a room which had been ransacked, books all over the floor, chairs tipped over, curtain ripped off the window; and there in the far corner, hiding behind a toppled settee, was a blonde woman of indeterminate age.

She bobbed and weaved, as if being a moving target would make her harder to see. Dressed in a cotton nightgown, and nothing more, her feet were bare and hair in such disarray, you would have sworn it had not been combed in a week.

I stopped in my tracks, so my brain could absorb the chaos of the room when Davy came up behind me; he too was stopped by the vision. His voice is what brought me to my senses and allowed my physician's nature to take over.

'Constable, quickly; help me search the flat for the sister.'

I approached the woman as one approached a stray animal, cautious of their desire to flee.

'Sharon, you are Miss Sharon are you not?' She responded with a whimper as she shrunk back, attempting to merge with the wall behind her. 'My name is Doctor Potts and I will not hurt you. My friends and I want to help, if you let us.'

I inched closer and lower to her until I was on my knees, never taking my eyes off hers. I offered my open hand, the other firmly grasped on the

handle of my doctor's bag. I had just about reached the hand she had balanced on the back of the upturned settee when my cousin entered the room and broke the spell.

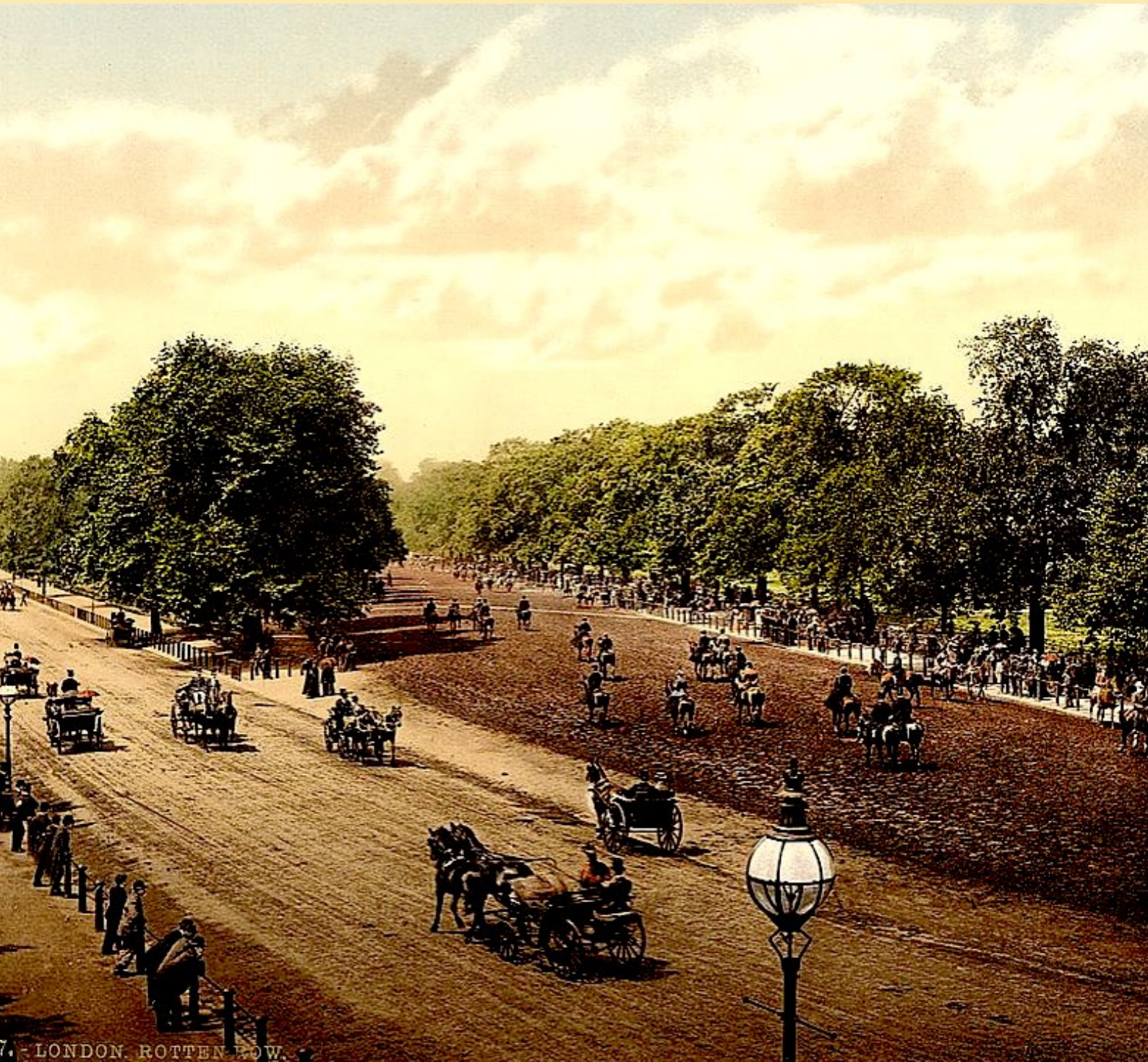
'She is not here, John; ask her if she knows where her sister Karen is.'

'Karen?' with the sound of her sister's name, Sharon Billings stopped whimpering and spoke in a childlike voice.

Using a gentle tone, I hoped to establish a rapport with this poor creature.

'Yes, Sharon; do you know where Karen is?'

'I want Karen.' With those words spoken, it was like the fight had been taken out of her as she let go of her hold on the furniture and collapsed against the wall.



Using this opportunity, I leapt forward to take her by the arm and gently pull her up. 'Gentlemen fix the settee, so I can put her there!'

Davy and Marcum turned it upright and helped me to prop her into the corner. I retrieved my stethoscope from my bag and set about to examine the frightened woman for injuries. By now, Mr Ogden had stepped in and was just standing in the doorway shaking his head in disbelief.

'How is she, John? We must get her to tell us what has happened.'

'She is severely dehydrated and judging by the looks of the place she hasn't eaten for days. Sharon, Sharon ... this is Mr Carr; he is here to help you find your sister, Karen.'

The mention of her sister's name seemed to remind her of the loss.

'Karen? I want Karen!'

'You want I should call for an ambulance, Doctor?'

'Yes, Constable; I need to get this poor woman to hospital as soon as possible.' In my most soothing tone, I tried to give comfort and assurance, 'There, there, my dear, we will find your sister now.'

'Right you are!' The constable turned on his heel to leave but bumped into the building superintendent. 'Oh, excuse me, Mr Ogden; I need to get to the call box on the corner.'

'Oh, yes, yes, pardon me,' his response hollow as if in shock.

Davy leaped on the opportunity to question the superintendent while his defences were down. 'Mr Ogden, think man, when was the last time you actually saw the sister, Karen Billings and what was her demeanor?'

'Wha-what d'you mean?' The building superintendent jumped as if he had been pinched and wanted to run before being pinched again. Davy's question only seemed to frighten him more.



'Her demeanor, man - was she happy or sad? Did all seem in order or was she visibly upset? Try man, it could very well mean the woman's life.'

'Like I says before, I ain't been here for a few days; so, I guess she was fine, you know, we passed in the hallway on her ways to work. She smiled and said good morning like she always does.'

'Her way to work, hmmn; you wouldn't happen to know where she was employed, do you?'

'Well sure, Miss Karen was a typist for the same place I work, Gillum and Stead; in fact, sometimes I'd see her dere during the day and she always would say hello. Nice lady she was.' His voice sounded calmer as if he was sure of his reply.

'Was?'

By this time, his brow was sweating profusely as the rag once more made an appearance. 'Is, I mean, is! Trust me, Mr Carr; I don't know nothin' about Miss Karen being missing.' Any sense of calm had washed away with Davy's one-word question.



'Very well then; John, I'm going to take a detailed look in the other rooms in case I missed something from my cursory examination with the constable.'

He left the room, which started another round of whimpering. I withdrew from my bag a syringe and filled it from a vial I always kept on hand. Taking the opportunity to hold off another fit of anxiety, I injected her; all the while using my calmest voice to reassure things would be all right. 'There, there...you see, my friends are looking for your sister now.'

'Doctor, I've got to be going and report dis to my supervisors back at Gillum and Stead; dey're gonna to want to know all about dis.' His Norwegian had grown thick with his obvious upset, but before I could respond, Ogden scurried out of the flat, his footsteps sounding on the stairs to the street.

Davy walked back in from a bedroom area, both hands full. 'John, where did Ogden go? I have further questions. How is the woman?'

'I have given her a sedative; she is better now but weak. What have you got there?'

'Oh, these are photographs of what I believe are the Billings sisters and one of Karen Billings alone.'

The sedative worked, so I joined him to look at the framed photographs he had brought from the flat's lone bedroom. One was of a family with two little girls of about six or seven, identical in every feature from their pale blonde hair to their matching white dresses; sitting close to each other, hands clasped as if one could not exist without the other. Behind them was a soldier in full dress uniform; a pill-box hat, mutton-chop side whiskers, and a pencil-thin mustache. Next to him, stood a blonde-haired woman also wearing a crisp cotton dress, like the girls', her hair pulled back and one long curl draped over her shoulder. The second photograph was a head and chest pose of an attractive woman in her late twenties. She very much resembled the woman in the previous photograph with her hair piled high, a bright look of intelligence in her eyes, and a sad smile on her face as if something were missing in her life; her sister perhaps?



I gazed up at Davy as he studied the photograph of the solo woman and then together we looked at the pitiful-looking creature slowly fading off to sleep on the settee. The resemblance between the twins was remarkable, the exception being their attitudes. It was like the difference between cats from the same litter with the exception that one was raised in the house and the other feral in the barn. I stood there shaking my head while Davy looked around the room.

'Where is Ogden?'

'He went back to the office to report what we found; why?'

Before Davy could reply, the constable hurried back into the flat, short of breath from the stairs. 'Doctor Potts, I called for an ambulance, they should be here anytime. Is there anything else you want me to do?'

But it was Davy who replied, 'Yes, Constable, I need for you to accompany me back to Gillum and Stead to talk further with Mr Westbrook.'

That gentleman obviously knows more about this affair than he originally led us to believe. John, you stay with the woman, get her safely ensconced at the hospital and then meet us back at Andrew's office. Here - take this photograph of her sister so the police can make copies.'

I did as I was instructed, and sure to the constable's estimate, had not long to wait for an ambulance to arrive. The sedative had taken full effect and it was easy to transport Sharon Billings to St. Bartholomew's where I instructed she be given a full evaluation of everything from her physical to her mental well-being. I wedged the framed photograph of who we believed was Karen Billings in my medical bag to accompany her to the hospital and still had it in my possession when I returned to Scotland Yard.





I was not privy to the following, so it was relayed to me afterwards that Davy and PC Marcum arrived shortly after Mr Ogden had at Gillum and Stead. They managed to catch Mr Westbrook, not only in his office but also with his hat and outer coat on. Westbrook evidently kept saying he was coming to see the police to talk about the disappearance of Karen Billings.

I found Davy with Marcum in my brother's office explaining to him the details of the case as they were known so far.

'Ah, there you are, John, how is your patient?'

'She is resting under sedation while the doctors determine the best course of action for her. Andrew, I'm sure Davy and the constable, have told you the particulars of this case?'

'Yes, they have, and it seems like you might have been on to something with this one.'

'Small consolation; tell me, how did you make out with Westbrook?'

Davy smiled a sardonic smile. 'Mr Westbrook is currently a guest of the good Inspector's in one of his interrogation rooms.'

'Really now; has he confessed to being involved with this woman's disappearance?'

PC Marcum responded with a touch of pride, 'Mr Carr and I arrived just in time to prevent him making his escape. He claimed he was coming to see us, he did.'

'And you believe him, Davy?'

'I believe he is a relevant part of this case. In fact, I am sure he knows more than he had indicated before; but what that is we have yet to find out.'

This news was incredible. 'Well, why haven't you questioned him yet?'

'We were waiting for you, John, seeing how this is your case; professional courtesy, you know. Besides, Davy here says you have a photograph of the missing woman and he thought we could use it as a device during the interrogation.' Andrew leaned forward, hand extended; waiting for me to give up the treasure I had been carrying around London.

'Yes, I have it in my bag.'


'I'll just take it out of the frame, so Marcum can take it to be photographed for copies.' He slipped off the back without breaking the glass, but when he released the photograph, something else also fell from the frame's compartment.

Davy shot forward at the sound of this unknown object hitting the desktop. 'Ho, what is this?'

'Oh, probably just something wedged behind to keep it from slipping in the frame,' I offered.

But it was PC Marcum who caught on to Davy's intention. 'Mr Carr is right, it's an envelope and it's addressed to Mr Westbrook.'

Davy was surprisingly quick as he snatched the envelope for inspection before anyone else could. 'Here, let me look. Hmm, yes; gentlemen, this is a new envelope and I would dare say only recently placed behind the photograph.'




Andrew gently plucked the envelope from his hands, 'Let me see that. Hmm, looks like we have material evidence, wouldn't you say, gents?'

'But, Andrew, the envelope is addressed to Mr Westbrook and shouldn't ...' I started to plead with a sense of propriety.

'Quiet, John; Andrew is right. This is, in all aspects, material evidence to the disappearance of Karen Billings; which makes it even more relevant when you consider it is addressed to a man who has already shown some duplicity in this case. What does it say, Andrew?'

My brother slit open the top of the envelope, and quietly read the simple white sheet of paper he had withdrawn. When he was through he just shrugged. 'Why it looks like a love letter from Karen Billings ... no wait, a "Dear John" letter is more like it.'



Davy left the side of the desk and started to pace the small office, his long legs barely able to take three strides in either direction. 'John, you read it aloud, so I can think.'

'Why, because my name is John?'

'Really, old boy, don't be a ninny; I want you to read it because you can probably put the proper inflection into the words as she intended when she wrote it.' Davy stopped his pacing long enough to give me a look of exasperation.

'Alright,' I sighed, 'please hand it to me.'

My brother and Marcum winked at each other, smothering smiles while they waited for my narration. I gave the letter a cursory glance before reading it aloud while Davy paced, head bent nearly to his chest with his arms crossed before his chest.

'My Dearest Martin –

It is with a heavy heart, I pick up my pen to write you these words, but I feel compelled to explain my justification for turning down your proposal of marriage. A promise made to my mother years ago prevents me from ever living a life away from my darling Sharon.

Please know that I love you and always will, but I am torn between this love and my obligation to my sister. Try to understand, I was never happier than when I was in your arms and there will never be another to whom I will ever give this affection.

Please forgive me for breaking two hearts. – Your darling, Karen.'

My brother leaned back into his chair, 'Well, that about sums it up; this Westbrook fellow could not take the rejection of the woman and has done away with her.'

Davy stopped his pacing to face the rest of us. 'Not necessarily, Andrew. Note this - finding this recently written letter tucked behind her framed photograph would indicate Westbrook had never received it, and possibly, never learned of Karen Billings' rejection of his proposal of marriage.'

'So, she decided to give him up for her sister; which still does not explain where she has been for the past few days.'

'Correct, my dear cousin, but it does tell us of her strong obligation to the care of Sister Sharon, and by her admission alone we must conclude the woman has been placed in a situation which prevents her from doing just that. Andrew, I think it would be a good time to have a discussion with Westbrook; but hold off on letting him know of the existence of this letter just yet. I am positive he knows more to this story than we do, and from what he has indicated, is willing to share his information.'

'I was just thinking that myself. Would you gents care to sit in on this ... eh, interview?'

'Thank you, Andrew, I was just going to suggest it myself; please, lead the way. John, bring the photograph and letter, but don't show it to Westbrook yet.'

The four of us walked down several floors to the basement before turning towards an adjacent corridor. We stopped before a closed door, not unlike the other doors there, where my brother turned to Marcum. 'Stand outside the door in case we need you.'

'Yes, sir.'

The room we entered was sparse and without decoration. There was an oblong table surrounded by four chairs. Westbrook sat alone, his clasped hands on the tabletop. Andrew and I pulled out chairs to sit, while Davy leaned against the wall. When Mr Westbrook saw him, he practically leapt up to quiz our cousin; desperation sounding in his voice, 'Oh, Mr Carr, there you are. Tell me, have you found Miss Billings? How is she? May I see her?'

'Mr Westbrook, this is Inspector Potts and he has a few questions for you, so please answer them and I'm sure he will answer yours in turn.'

Andrew took his cue and began right away with his interrogation. 'How do you know Miss Karen Billings?'

Westbrook's tone changed, his words spoken with caution, 'Well, like I told these gentlemen earlier, Miss Billings is a client of Gillum and Stead Mortgage Investors and Trust, the firm for which I work, and when I heard she was missing I naturally became concerned and ...'

'Liar!'

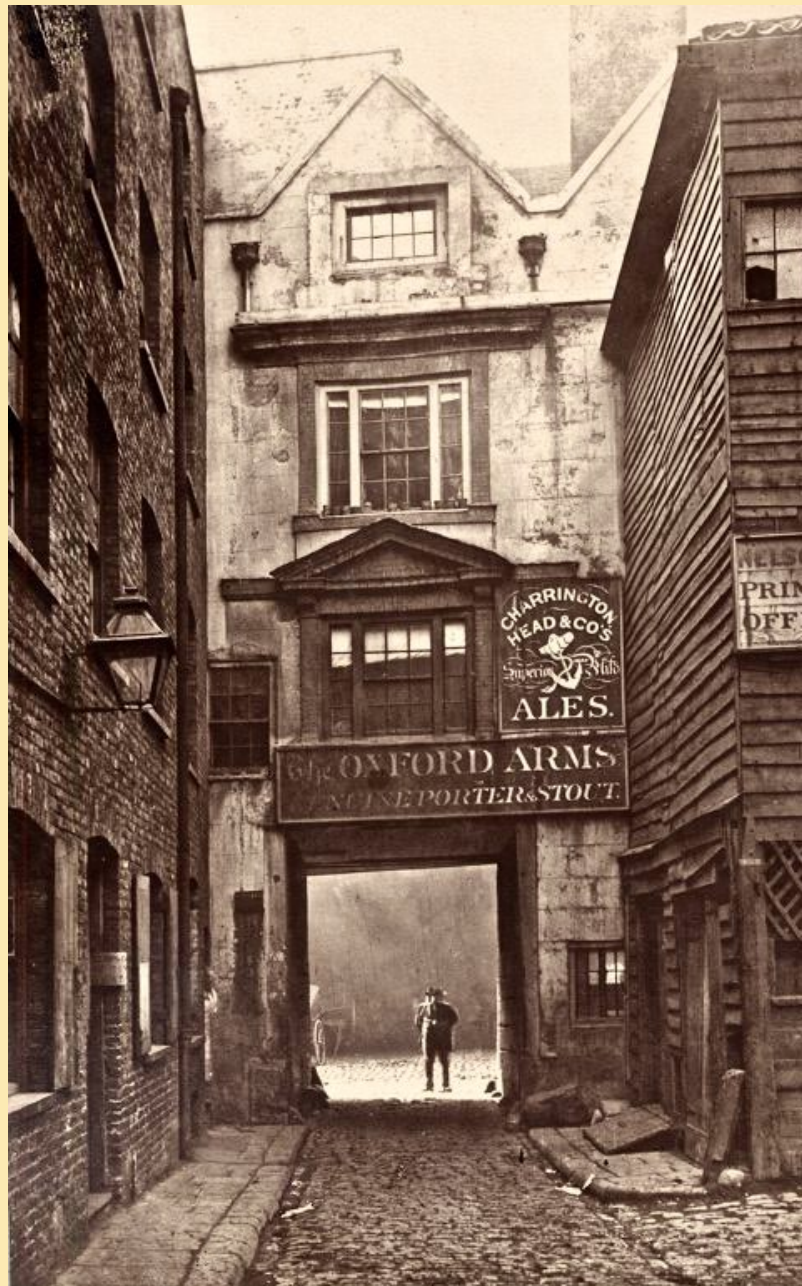
'What?' Westbrook seemed genuinely surprised with my brother's accusation.

'You are lying about the degree of your relationship with Miss Billings and you know what else? I think you are lying about knowing where she is. Now come clean of it; what have you done with her, is she even alive?'

This last was more than the man could bear as his composure broke. 'A- a-alive; dear Lord, I hope she is alive! I could never hurt her; I-I ...'

'You could never hurt her because you were in love with her; is that what you were going to say, Westbrook?' Davy's voice was gentle, his tone in total contrast to the policeman's.

'Yes, yes, I was, ah, I mean I am!' he stammered.





Andrew took this opportunity to pounce. 'Which is it Westbrook; are you now or are you no longer in love with Karen Billings? What have you done with her? Where is her body?'

'H-her body? No, Karen was alive the last time I saw her; I'm just as worried as you are about her disappearance - maybe more!' Westbrook was visibly shaking now.

'Maybe more because you are in love with the woman?' added Davy. 'Why yes, yes, how did you know?'

Davy continued, 'We know because we have, in her own hand mind you, her declaration of love for you and denial of your proposal of marriage.' 'Wha-what? How could you?'

This line of questioning was getting us nowhere; as a physician, I could no longer watch this man emotionally being pulled to pieces. It was here I intervened. 'Gentlemen, if you will let me talk to Mr Westbrook?' There were grunts of agreement from the others, so I proceeded using my best bedside manner. 'Martin, may I call you Martin? Martin, we found this photograph in the Billings sisters' flat; this is Miss Karen Billings is it not?'

Westbrook, tears brimming over his lower eyelids, reached for the photograph I had pulled out from under the table and now handed to him.

'Yes, this is my darling, this is my Karen.'

'You asked her to marry you, didn't you, Martin? But you haven't received an answer yet, have you?'

'No, I asked her the last time I was with her. I had walked her home and we were standing on the sidewalk in front of her building.'

Davy, with calm in his voice, interjected, 'I understand Miss Billings was employed as a typist.'

'Yes, she is a typist at the firm where I work; that is where I met her.'

I shot my cousin a quick glance to silence him, and then I continued, 'Martin, I think you should tell us the story about your relationship with Karen.'

He used the sleeve of his coat jacket to wipe his eyes, too distraught to even bring out his handkerchief. 'Yes; I met Karen when I was hired last year as an accounts manager for the firm. Karen was a typist in the general pool and had worked there for several years. She had been employed there since teenaged.'

'And the firm allowed your relationship with Miss Karen?' asked Andrew as he leaned back into his chair, awaiting a response.

'Oh no, fraternizing was not allowed amongst the staff. No, no, I would make a point to leave before her. I met her at the end of the street to escort her home safely each night.'

'Each night to a building owned by the firm she worked for?'

'Yes, Mr Carr. She once told me it was part of the agreement she had made with Mr Stead. Besides working for Gillum and Stead, she could lease one of their flats as well.'

Like a hound picking up a scent, Davy projected himself off the wall to face Westbrook directly. 'Ho, what's this about Mr Stead? What is his involvement with Karen Billings? Could there have been more to their relationship than just business?'

'Oh, no, there was nothing like that, no! Mrs Stead, she made the arrangements for Karen and her sister to live on Grove Park Road, and to employ Karen at the firm as well.'

'Mrs Stead, what does she have to do with all this?'

'Yes, Inspector, Karen told me Mrs Stead was a school chum of her mother, and when she died, Mrs Stead insisted her husband become involved to find a residence for the Billings sisters to live. Karen had already been employed by the firm for a few years by then, I understand.' Westbrook's demeanor calmed as the line of questioning turned away from him directly; in fact, he seemed eager to share what he knew about the missing woman.

'A very magnanimous gesture, Mr Westbrook, wouldn't you agree?'

'I suppose so, Mr Carr. As I understand it, when her mother died, Gillum and Stead purchased the family home as well. The profits from the sale are currently being held in trust by the firm for the welfare of the sisters. The firm still owns the house and offers it as a rental property.'

'Most unusual,' I mumbled, trying to place all the characters in this macabre production. 'Martin, when we were at the home of the Billings sisters, we found a photograph of a family, father in a uniform, mother, and twin daughters; a photograph of the family, I presume?'





'Yes, Karen told me their father was sent overseas shortly after that photograph was taken and died there. Their mother never truly got over it and evidently wore widow's weeds every day of her life after.'

I continued questioning in a supportive tone. I didn't want him to stop talking because the others had frightened him. 'Tell us about her sister Sharon. Did Karen ever tell you about her sister's disabilities?'

Westbrook sighed and looked down at his clasped hands. 'Karen told me there had been an accident in which Sharon had fallen from a tree in their backyard, hitting her head. The doctor didn't think she would live; but by the sheer will of her mother, as Karen described it, somehow her daughter pulled through - but was never the same afterwards. It was like she was forever to remain a child in a woman's body. Discussing Karen's sister always made her sad.'

Davy stood back, no longer taking an offensive posture. 'Mr Westbrook, have you ever had any interaction with Miss Sharon Billings?'

'Well, no, I have never spoken to her if that is what you mean. Often when I would come to escort Karen to work, or for an evening out, I would look up at their window, the one facing the street, and see her quickly glance out before disappearing all together.'

'Martin, tell us about the last time you saw Karen.'

'We had gone for a walk after taking in the Sunday concert in the park, and when we reached her front steps I told her I no longer wanted to part with her this way. I asked for her hand in marriage, so we might always enter and exit a home together as man and wife.'

'And what did she do?'

Westbrook was a broken man, but it seemed therapeutic for him to talk about his relationship. 'She threw her arms around my neck and declared she loved me as well, and then she gasped.'



'She gasped?' Until then, my brother had been hanging on every word of this drama.

'Yes, she gasped and pulled away. I thought she had become embarrassed from the public display of affection, but she said her sister was watching from the window and she had to go. I-I told her to sleep on it and I would see her in the morning at the office.'

'And you have had no further contact with her since?'

'Yes, Inspector, I mean, no, none. I've told you all I know; now please tell me, how is it you know she declined my proposal?'

'One more thing, Mr Westbrook. Why didn't you acknowledge your involvement or concern for Miss Billings when we first saw you this morning?'

'Like I said earlier, Mr Carr, inter-office relationships are frowned upon; in fact, I told her she would have to no longer work there, if we were married.'

'Yes, yes, thank you for clearing that up. John, give him the letter.'

'Martin, we found this letter to you hidden behind the photograph when we searched Miss Karen's flat earlier today. I'm sorry you have to learn of her intentions this way.'

I gave him the letter and watched him read it over, and then again, as he read it once more.

The tears he had been holding back earlier during the interview were now freely streaming down his cheeks. Andrew was made visibly uncomfortable by Westbrook's display and, I must admit, I, too, felt sympathy for this man; but it was Davy's abrupt questioning which broke the spell.

'Mr Westbrook, the letter mentions her obligation to caring for her sister and the promise she made to her mother; can you shed any light on what that might be from your discussions with her?'

Westbrook finally removed a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his face, but sadness was still in his voice as he responded. 'Yes, Mr Carr, it seems her mother was, not to speak ill of the dead, but a very definite and demanding woman, so much so that she refused to compromise on things once her mind was made up. For example, she stipulated in her will, her daughter Karen always to be personally responsible for her sister Sharon. Karen was to sell the house, and the money placed in trust for the sisters; she even put it in her will, the tree in the back yard not be cut, or the garden in front of it removed. A strong-willed woman as Karen described her.'



'A tree and a garden; that is an unusual request for a will is it not?'

'Yes, sir, but her will specified it was to be a stipulation of the sales agreement.'

Davy's eyes twinkled with this news. 'Thank you, Westbrook; you have been of great help. Come along, John, we need to revisit the Billings' flat.'

Davy had already opened the door and was exiting down the hallway as I got up from my chair. My brother was behind me by a step or two, and seemed confused by our cousin's hasty exit. 'What about Westbrook here?'

Davy had already reached the stairwell when he called back, 'What? Oh, let him go but tell him to remain available!'

Davy and I returned to the brownstone and he used a key from a small case he kept in his breast pocket for just such occasions to get in. We entered with different perspective than before. This time I realized I could smell the odor of rotting food and soiled bed linens. He

led us into the bedroom, which for him was a return visit, but for me was a new experience.

There were two beds, one neat appearing to be newly made, the other torn apart with sheets stained yellow. I walked up and opened the closet door.

There I found two sets of clothing as different apart from each other in appearance as the beds. I turned back into the room just as Davy walked away from the wash basin carrying two toothbrushes.

'John, what can you deduce from these toothbrushes and these items here on the dresser?'

'Well, there is two of everything, but that would be expected of twins, would it not?'

'Yes, you look but you do not observe; look at the condition of these things, look at the bed and the clothes in the closet.'

'The toothbrush in your right hand is a typical toothbrush and so is the one in your left hand. Just like everything else, two items for two people.'

'But this one in my right hand is new and the one in my left is well-used. The beds... one made so tight you could bounce a coin off it, the other looks like an animal slept there. The same with the hair brushes.'

'What are you saying, that they shared all of their things or that only...?'

For me it was like someone had turned on one of those new electrical lights, but for him it was a triumph, albeit a small one, because his thoughts were now shared and understood. We finished the sentence simultaneously, '... one person lives here.'

'Yes, yes, that has to be it!' Davy emptied his hands and departed the bedroom in a flash, talking all the while as if I were tied to his side. 'Come along, I must see Andrew once more, then follow up on an errand. I think a visit tomorrow to the hospital where Sharon Billings is a patient will clear this all up.'

He opened the front door but stopped to survey the mess in the sitting room.

Seeing what he wanted he barked a command and exited, 'Here, pick up that doll over there and take the photograph of the family. I think tomorrow we shall return them to their true owner.'

I did as he instructed and followed him onto the street. It was here he said goodbye for the day with the promise we would meet early tomorrow at the hospital where Sharon Billings was a patient. I asked him what he intended on doing now; his response was to first visit the Assizes and then on to Scotland Yard to see my brother before dark. His last words to me were instructions that Miss Billings was not to be given a sedative in the morning.

When questioned why, his response was a nod of his head before he turned and walked away. I stood there, mouth agape, thinking how I tired of his games and emulation of the 'great detective', but in the end, he always managed to bring a case to a logical conclusion.

I went directly to the hospital to arrange for our morning visit, making sure to leave instructions that the patient not be sedated. I stopped to send telegrams to the others confirming an appointment time for the visit. I felt silly on the trip back to my home, my medical bag stuffed with the framed photograph and a rather roughed-up doll under my arm.



Early the next morning, I met the two men at the nurse's desk on the floor for Miss Billings' room. I had put the doll and photograph in a carry-tote so as not to draw attention from bystanders.

'Ah, John, I see you have brought the items from the flat. Did you manage to prevent the doctors from sedating the patient?' Never one for idle pleasantries was my cousin.

'Hello, gentlemen, yes, I made all of the arrangements last night. I asked how she was this morning and the nurse said she is awake but withdrawn. Well, shall we get this over? I can't imagine this is going to be a pleasant experience.'

I opened the door to the stark hospital room, the only light coming from the double hung window with the rolled-up shade. Sharon Billings sat crosslegged on her bed, wearing only a hospital gown with the blankets covering her lap. Her arms were wrapped around her body as if trying to hold an ailing stomach. She gazed straight ahead at nothing really, just moaning as she gently rocked, not more than a dip of her head and shoulders and back again. It was not as

startling a sight as when I had first seen her, but it was still a sad one.

I emptied my hands and cautiously approached the bed, 'Sharon, do you remember me? I'm Doctor Potts. And Mr Carr, do you remember him too? This other gentleman is Inspector Potts from Scotland Yard. He is here to help us find your sister, Karen.'

Once again, her sister's name set her off. 'Karen, I want Karen; find Karen!'

But it was Davy who responded to her request, his voice firm and commanding, but once he had her attention it softened to a compassionate tone. 'Miss Billings... Miss Billings, look at me! Sharon, I've been to the house with the big tree in the backyard where you fell. I have seen the garden underneath. Sharon, I believe I know what happened, but I need to talk to Karen; will you let Karen come out and talk with me?'

'Here now, what do you mean "let Karen come out"? Is this woman shamming it all?' Andrew seemed more perplexed than annoyed.

'Karen, where's Karen?'



'Oh, Andrew, how I wish that were the case.'
Davy lowered his head to be eye level. 'Karen Billings, I demand you come out and speak with me; if not for the sake of your sister then for the sake of Martin Westbrook.'

At the mention of Westbrook's name, the woman sitting in the bed stopped her rocking and sat with a stillness mimicking death itself. If I had not seen it with my own eyes I would not have believed what happened next as she sat erect with a serenity in her posture, the wrinkles in the forehead disappearing. Her eyes shone when they came into focus as she looked at the man who addressed her. She smoothed her hair with her hands, then placed them in her lap. Her voice was clear and strong, in a totally different pitch from the woman originally in the bed.

'You spoke of Martin Westbrook. I trust he is well?' The woman we must now presume to be the missing sister looked directly at my cousin as she spoke, her actions calm and deliberate.

'Well, I never!'

'Hush, Andrew, let him continue.'

'My name is David Carr. I am addressing Miss Karen Billings, am I not?' 'You are, sir, but you have not answered my question; is Martin Westbrook well?'

'Yes, Miss Billings; Mr Westbrook is well, but he is extremely worried and sad because of your disappearance. I have to tell you, we found your letter written to him where you left it behind the photograph of yourself.'

'I knew, somehow he would end up with the photograph and eventually find the letter explaining my decision not to marry; maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually.' The woman's attitude was cool as she responded to his interrogation.

'And your sister, Sharon; what about her; what message did you leave for her?'

'Her sister?'

'Shush, Andrew! Davy, ask her if she knows where she is, or where Sharon is?'

'Miss Billings, do you know where you are presently?'





'I am with my sister of course, why do you ask?'

'Do you know where she is? Look around and tell me, where do you think she is?'

Karen Billings turned her head slowly as she glanced around, 'This looks like a hospital room. See, I knew Sharon would be taken care of eventually.'

'Miss Billings, I went to your family home and saw the big tree in the backyard with the garden underneath. Is that where Sharon fell; where she landed... where the garden is?'

'My mother planted that garden. She said only good things would grow there.'

'Miss Billings, what happened? What did your mother make you do when your sister died?'

'What? What are you saying?' gasped Andrew.

'My mother said I had to help her show the world my sister was well. She said I had to always care for my sister no matter what happened or wherever we were. She was my responsibility and always would be.'

'And you did take care of her; you spent your life taking care of your sister, Sharon; and you would have kept on taking care of her until you met Martin Westbrook.'

Karen turned away, as she answered in a dream-like voice, 'Martin? Yes, Martin; he said he loved me and wanted to be my husband.'

'Quickly, Davy, before we lose her.'

'But you felt you couldn't be Martin's wife and still take care of Sharon, could you?'

'It wasn't fair; not to Martin, not to Sharon, not to me.'

'You felt you could not saddle a husband with the burden of caring for your sister and at the same time you would not desert her for a husband.'

'Yes, yes, it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to either of them,' her voice pleaded.

'What about fairness to yourself, Karen? Karen, you could not bring yourself to choose between your lover and your sister, so decided to remove yourself from the equation, didn't you?'

Karen's voice grew faint, 'Yes - yes, they both would be better without me.'

I recognized the signs of her drifting off. 'Davy, you haven't much time left.'

'Karen - stay with me, Karen - one more thing before you leave. What about Sharon; what should we do about Sharon?' urged Davy, to gather more of her plan. Before he could finish his questions, Karen Billings ceased to exist and once more sat her sister, Sharon Billings. Her posture lagged, and her eyes grew glassy. She began to rock and once more the whimpering began. He stood and joined us to discuss what we had just witnessed.

'I don't understand, John, what just happened?

'What you have just witnessed, Andrew, only few have been privileged to see firsthand. That woman is living evidence of a *fractured mind*.'

My brother shook his head, 'I'd hardly call it a privilege. Well, Davy, what do we do now?'

'John, give her what's in your bag; hopefully it will bring her some comfort.'

'Sharon, I have some things which belong to you. Look here, I brought your dolly, I'll just put her here in your lap. See, here is the picture of you and Karen with your parents. I'll just put it on the nightstand.' She never glanced at me as I spoke, lost in a world of her own.

The other two had stepped into the hallway. It was there my brother asked, 'Davy, how did you know this woman was acting as her sister?'

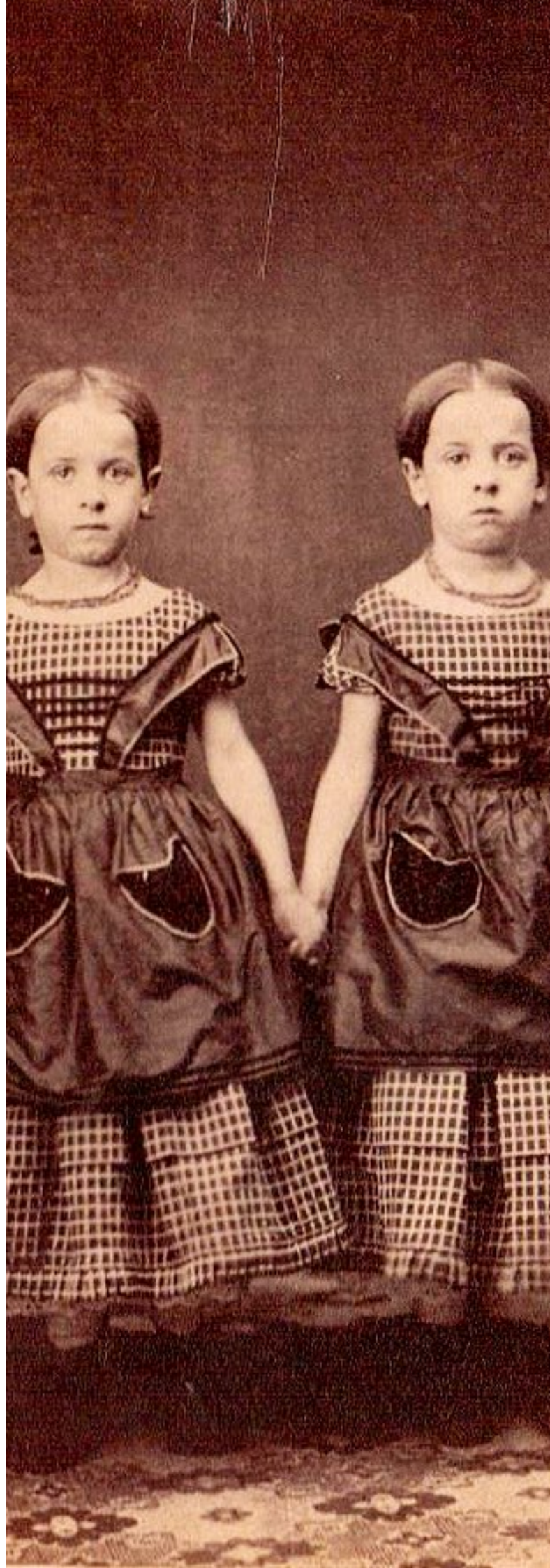
'Not acting, Andrew; this woman *was* her sister.'

'Was her sister; well, this is all beyond me.' I joined the others to explain what had transpired, closing the door behind me. 'The trauma inflicted by her sister's death ...'

Davy interjected, '... along with the subjugation of her mother's insistence that she helped portray to the world her sister was alive and well ...'

But it was I who finished explaining, '...was too much for this woman's

mind to handle any longer. When she met a man and fell in love, the strain was indeed too much for her to continue. Since she felt she could serve neither, she decided they would both be better off without her.'



Yes, but why did she not just give up this charade and marry Westbrook?'

'She could not because it would mean the personality known as Sharon would cease to exist which would be contrary to her entire being.'

'But, Davy, how did you know the sister was already dead?'

'Yesterday, I followed up on Westbrook's comment about the late mother's will and the stipulation about the tree and the garden. Then I went back to Gillum and Stead and got the location of the home from their records. I spoke with Mr Stead himself. I asked him about his relationship with the Billings sisters. He confirmed what Westbrook said about how it was his wife who knew the family, but since coming to work for the firm, Karen Billings had been a model employee until her unexplained disappearance. Offering that there might be information at their family home which could help solve this disappearance, he allowed me access to the property to investigate. I then went to your office to ask if I could have PC Marcum once again for a task I had in mind regarding this case. Since you were kind enough to lend me the good constable before, I proceeded to the old Billings' home and with Marcum's help, I dug up the garden under the tree in the backyard.'

'Davy, you didn't?'

'Yes, I did, John, or should I say PC Marcum, as he did most of the digging - but what I discovered confirmed my suspicions about the state of Miss Billings' mental condition.'

'And what did you find there?'

'Well, since you have not yet been to your office, you could not have read Marcum's report about finding the skeletal remains of a

girl child in a shallow grave, under the big tree and covered over with a garden.'

'Oh, Davy; how horrible for this poor woman to carry such a secret with her all these years. No wonder her mind finally gave out.'

'A child's grave; but who is responsible, did the mother kill her or did her sister?'

'Don't be ridiculous, Andrew, you heard Westbrook state he was told the mother had a very determined and strong personality. After losing her husband, she probably could not face the death of her daughter as well, probably an accident from falling out of that very tree. The mother then forced, convinced, cajoled, who knows maybe even threatened her surviving daughter to portray her "ailing" sister.'

I shook my head in sympathy with my final analysis. 'By the time the mother had passed away, the damage was already done, and the surviving twin continued to exist as if the other were still alive.'

My brother put his hands on his hips as he absorbed the news about the Billings sisters. He shook his head. 'So what happens to her now? Who will take care of her?'

'Westbrook was correct, there was a trust established for the sisters' welfare and I am sure it is enough to arrange for Miss Billings here to be placed in a private facility.'

'But who is she really, Davy? Is this woman Karen or Sharon Billings?'

'That is the saddest part of all, Andrew; we may never know.'

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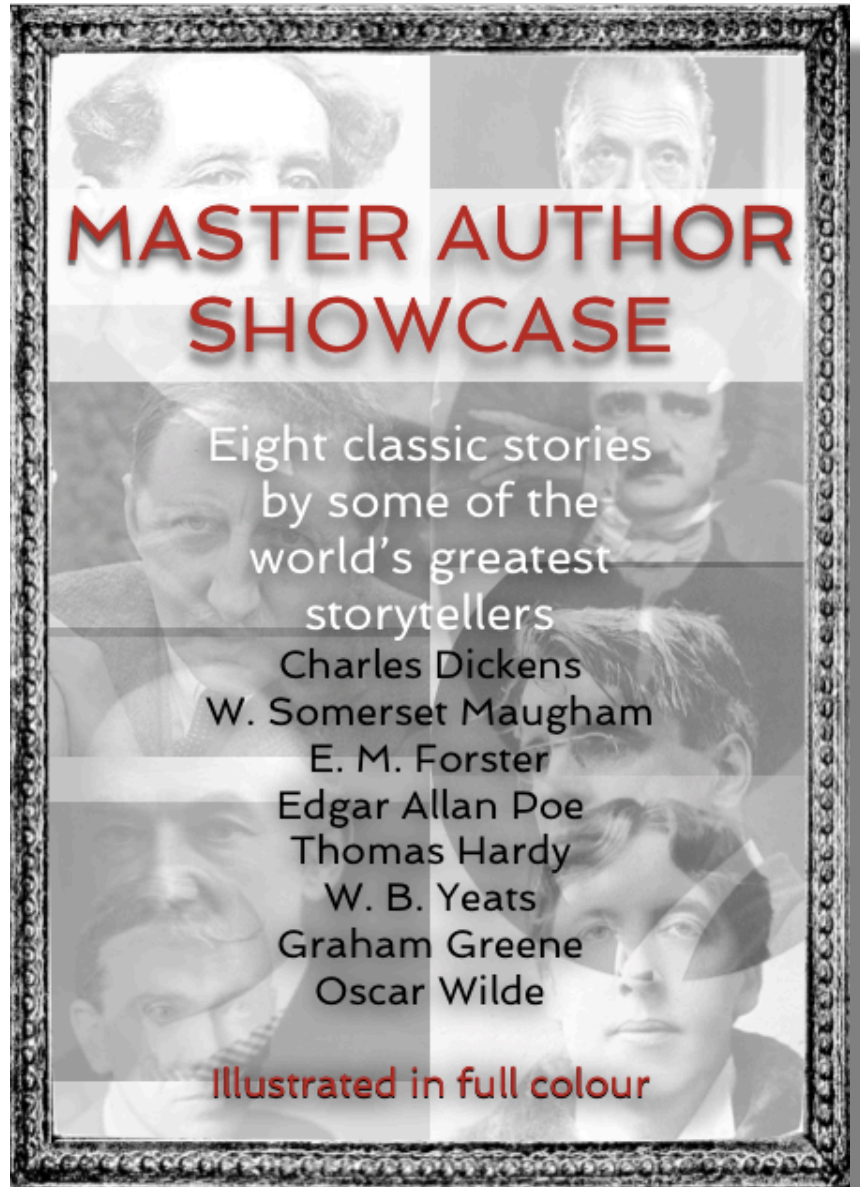
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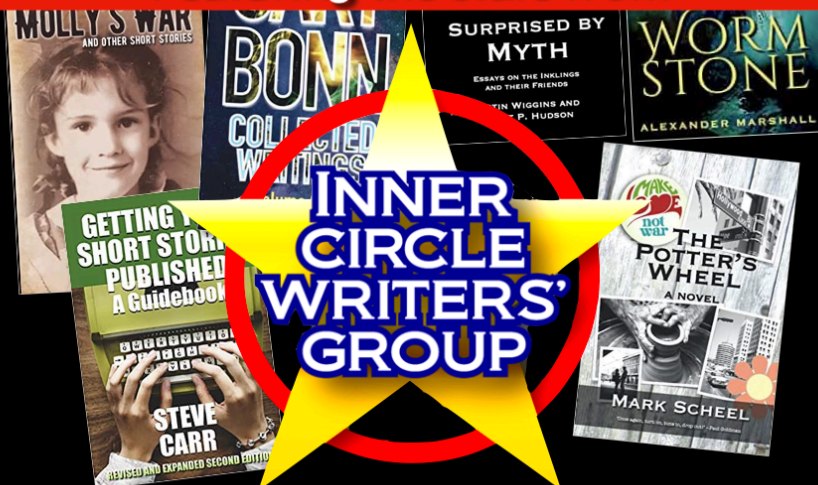
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Clarendon House Publications,
76 Coal Pit Lane, Sheffield, South Yorkshire,
United Kingdom S36 1AW
www.clarendonhousebooks.com
Email: grant@clarendonhousebooks.com