

The **Clarendon House**
Short Story Magazine

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Issue
11



Four gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet:
Peter Toeg, Jim Bates, Alexander Marshall and Gary Bonn

The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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A man's spirit haunts an ancient treasure hidden beneath the ice.

Cutting It Fine by Gary Bonn

A young stranger leaps from his bicycle in the rain and visits a family - who begin to wonder just how strange he is...

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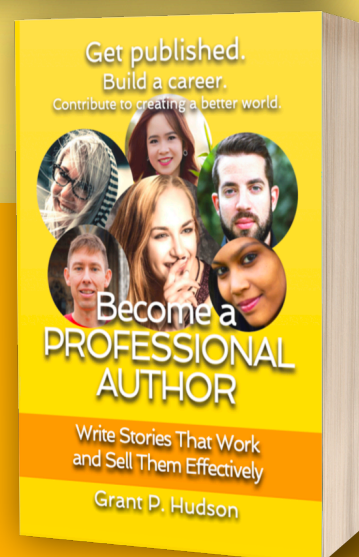
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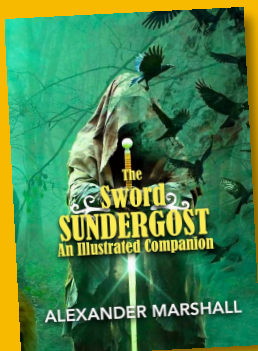
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G. MARINO LEYLAND



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***Pezzi Pazzi* | Crazy Pieces 2: Collected Writings**

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A story of two lovers is set in an old castle housing a museum.

I met a girl by mistake...
She climbed inside my head
Rearranged the furniture
And sat there with her cats.
-Anonymous.

#

Marie and I happened upon that castle walking in Upper Town during a violent storm that raked Croatia's capital on a late afternoon in October. We ducked into the building to take refuge from the downpour, the city lights already blazing and a torrent of water flowing down the stone street.

The flag standing outside, and the sign indicated a public building. The clay brick façade showed damage, and the heavy double doors desperately needed restoration. No one greeted us on entering, as if the storm had chased the occupants to higher ground.

A museum, read the sign. She laughed.

"I hate museums, and you know that," said Marie, still smiling and dripping water on the stone floor of a foyer, intimate with two small tables and two chairs oddly modern in design, brochures in a rack.

We shed our coats, and a middle-aged name-tagged woman—Elena—appeared like an apparition. She smiled, spoke in Croatian at first, and, recognizing our lost expressions, switched to English, welcoming us to the castle. The foyer and rooms off to our right and left were all white and bathed in lights.

"Shouldn't a castle be bigger and on a hill with a moat?" deadpanned Marie, where we faced her. Even after we doffed our wet jackets, the familiar earthy scent of stone and the chill were strong.

Elena didn't laugh; she just wrinkled her brow. "This is part of a 16th-century castle, part of the Kulmer Palace. We pride ourselves on simplicity." A recitation, perhaps of an answer to a question frequently asked.

"Are the exhibits old?" asked Marie, my playful love with whom I traveled Europe for eight months. With long, dark hair and a crooked

smile on an otherwise perfect face, she always followed my lead as the consummate travel planner. I had selected Zagreb for our itinerary, knowing the city but not knowing we'd end up here this day.

Elena pointed to an arched entryway. "You will see various exhibits in many rooms. Enjoy our castle, and a fine bistro at the end has ample food for the guests who may not be coming today."

A thunderclap punctuated our conversation. "Where to start?" I asked.

"Anywhere is fine. I think you'll find your own path if you keep moving to the right. All halls end at the bistro."



Memories Left Behind Peter Toeg

I followed Marie for once into the first of the rooms, stark and windowless, each with an array of spotlighted pedestals with objects of all kinds displayed, some recognizable and others requiring us to read the accompanying descriptions or stories on the wall behind. We were preceded by one couple, and the slight echo of their voices charmed me.

Intimate, odd, emotional, strange, occasionally shocking. Over two hundred exhibits—specimens—lay open for display. Marie and I sometimes separated, lingering, depending on what caught our attention. She laughed at times and gasped at others, as did I. Only three or four other visitors passed us, none I could remember. The simple presentations transfixed us.

I easily committed to memory some of the printed stories for Marie's benefit. I wanted her impressions on subjects so deeply personal and—final. The short descriptions, some a few words, poured out from the submitter's heart.

Some stories and objects were humorous, but embedded in the writing lay pain disguised. All mementos of regular people's experiences. After a loss, we often manage to deceive ourselves. Marie seemed moved as I watched, a few times almost to tears.

I found myself ahead, Marie pausing more and impulsively backtracking when I arrived first at the quaint, pink café bistro. A few other diners huddled in conversation in an authentic arched castle room. High windows revealed a dismal evening, rain sketching patterns on the panes, the din of small talk providing warmth. I ordered at the bar, selected a quiet table, and in minutes sipped an excellent Bura wine served by an older man, David.

When Marie entered, her hand up to her red face, she walked slowly to me. She'd been crying. I stood and took her hand.

I told her to breathe regularly to counts of four, in and out, then relax. "Their stories are not yours," I said in my best assuring tone. In the months we'd been together, I'd only seen the bright, exuberant Marie, vivacious and fresh. We'd not plumbed the subject of love, and deep emotions had not come up in all that time. Rather, we'd immersed ourselves in sights and activities. We'd left many of our personal experiences unspoken.

#

We'd met at Montmartre, the medieval French country village idyllic but with an avant-garde edge. She fell for the charm, and I for the music and architecture. Winding cobblestone streets and pedestrian staircases lead to small, locally owned boutiques and art galleries evoking the quarter's bohemian past. I approached her in a quiet square at an outdoor café, she, a teacher on holiday with friends, and me, a Hungarian stonemason wandering alone admiring the stonework.

"Ah, a fellow American," she'd said when I asked if I might join her. "Please sit. My friends will join us later."





I revealed my native identity to her surprise. She was amazed by my recitation in fluent English, and I'd raptured her switching seamlessly from New England brahmin to Southern gentleman. Language was a gift of mine.

She later "ditched" her friends. "Only acquaintances," she'd explained with a wink.

We spent a month traveling France, most of our time in Annecy, on a large lake, the town straight out of a Disney movie. We wandered the forests and cobblestone streets. The twisting canals delighted Marie, and the old buildings favored a stone man.

"To know Europe is to know how to live well on little money. To love well in Europe is an art. To love forever...is elusive," I'd said, and she agreed.

Next, we traveled the Highlands with their warm blend of colors, stoic countrymen, the wind that whips your face, and ancient Caledonian forests that soak up unpleasant thoughts. I loved the unruly weather and escapism mentality. Enchanted by the history, Marie lived vicariously through Scotland's ancient clans and aristocracy at Forter Castle. She reluctantly experienced her first piping-hot peaty bath after a long cold walk.

In Berlin, less picturesque but exciting, we lost ourselves in the city, and visited the chaotic flea market, now a melting pot of locals and visitors. The seemingly endless lanes of stalls sold everything from attic junk to collectible figures while busking musicians provided the soundtrack. Marie balked at the regular afternoon Bearpit amphitheater Karaoke

session, enthusiastically applauding my Home On the Range performance.

Marie said a firm "No!" to paragliding.

On to Hungary. One of my greatest pleasures of Budapest is the city's spectacular thermal baths, surrounding a labyrinthine network of saunas, steam rooms, and naturally warm pools whose mineral-infused water springs straight from the ground. I sensed Marie, tiring of our pace, refreshed by the waters. And, yes, as in every country we visited, Marie got to hear the orchestrated sounds of the cities in a cacophony of languages. We ate simple food and were welcomed by the locals.

We watched the sunrise over the historic Charles Bridge in Prague a week later, joining its Old Town with Mala Strana over the Vltava river. While it's stunning at all times of day, it is truly magic at daybreak, the sunlight playing on the river against the backdrop of the beautiful city. Our preceding evening had somehow dissolved into dawn after one too many absinthe cocktails at the Black Angel's Bar. The City of a Hundred Spires never failed to impress.

#

Today in Zagreb, at the end of our tour in a cozy bistro, Marie appeared as a little girl, her face soft in the light, her beautiful hair dried flat by the earlier rain, no makeup, and her eyelids drooping. I'd imagined lying next to her in our hotel, caressing her.

"Sit." I gently guided her to the old wooden chair closest to the small fireplace, bright and welcoming.

"The wedding dress...so sad. I-I'd forgotten loss living such a rich life. The dress, when worn by the bride, must have been so beautiful. But, to put it in a bottle, displayed to the public, so unrecognizable, a mass of colored fabric—like a sacrilege." Her voice a wavering reed. "The marriage had failed, and its owner could not bear to see the dress hanging in her closet or worn by anyone else. She wanted it to take on a new shape. Oh, Lord."

"She had love and maybe many days before and after that dress," I said softly. "We'll never know. It's the moments we treasure that should last."

She emitted a small laugh, as she often did, her mood shifting in a flash. "Leo, the poet-philosopher."

I motioned to David, tending the small bar, pointing first to my glass of Bura and then miming the act of drinking and eating. He smiled and nodded. I'd eyed the menu when I stood at the bar and selected for us.

"What did you feel, Leo?" asked Marie. "Can you allow your poet's heart out from that runner's body?"

"Too many people assign value to items that only remind themselves of pain as if swimming in a river, caught in the current and carried along. Their course is determined not by their will but another force—they invested their love and were disappointed, hurt, or so we've seen today."

"Yet that object of love has turned its face on them like Janus. Is that it?"

"Perhaps, but Janus is a myth, supposedly the god of beginnings, transitions, and endings. The

two faces look forward and backward. Not like the broken-hearted we've glimpsed today who only gaze backward. I think Faust understood far better."

"Tell me." She swiped at her tear-streaked face, so beautiful in questioning.

"Faust is a classic battle of good and evil. With his large mustache and devilish grin, the male figure bartering with Faust is Mephistopheles, the devil disguised. By signing a pact in blood, Faust makes the original deal with the devil, which ends in dire consequences with murder and eternal damnation when he falls in love. It's a classic tale of tragedy, as Faust follows the devil to satisfy his ambitions, only to realize the error of his ways far too late."

David placed the dry Bura Plavac red I'd ordered before Marie, but she didn't even glance at it.

"So these lost loves are a result of the devil's work, Leo?" she asked, her voice a half octave higher than usual. "Do you believe love is...doomed?"

"For some. Others, no." I laughed and took her hand to dispel the darkness I sensed descending on her. "I haven't given up on love, Marie."

A moment of silence longer than I wanted.

"Are you saying love is a deal with the devil?"

I didn't answer her question. "We've seen a snapshot of the world today, haven't we? People from all over face separation, that moment of loss. So many responses were...beautiful, were they not."



"Yes, that's true." She sipped her wine. "The woman who left the CDs. What she wrote got to me. Something to the effect that after she dies, her family will sort through what she's left behind and not find Mr. Thirty-Four. Yeah, I remember the name, Mr. Thirty-Four."

"Yes," I said, sensing this discussion was not going where I wanted. "She removed all the 'evidence' and stored the memories in her heart. She kept him entirely to herself."

"Except for four discs of music her lover put together... something important to him."

"He gave her music. That's sentimental," I said, looking for some response, getting a slow nod. "So many people don't feel that way."

"No," she said, finally, her eyes looking off. "Then we have the woman keeping the checkbook after their divorce. Recording the entries for psychiatrists and lawyers and—"

"Remember from the description on the wall? She ended up in a psych ward," I said, immediately regretting the words.

"Oh, no!" said Marie. "I'd forgotten that."

"Maybe you wanted to forget."

"What do you mean, Leo? That I don't care?" Her eyes on me a hint of anger in her voice. "That I push away the painful memories?"

"Not at all, I simply mean that our minds are able to blot out pain. When needed. Naturally."

David brought two individual baking dishes of Štrukli and placed them before us.

"What is this?" Marie asked, diverting her attention from our discussion. "It smells wonderful."

"Pasta with cheese in layers, topped with more cheese, baked till gooey and melty. It's a classic local favorite. Very popular here."

"You would know. The well-traveled stonemason." She devoured the food, and David came and refilled our glasses. I studied Marie for anything different and considered her words. Something had changed.

"I needed food, I guess," she said, staring out the rain splashed window. The silence between us had felt good before today. But, tonight Marie seemed withdrawn. Vulnerable, examining, and processing.

"Their stories are not yours. We all have our own, don't we? Remember?" I repeated.

The sound of the rain beat against the window, but she wouldn't look at me.





"I recall the man who carried that silly statuette his lover left behind along with him." Marie's voice wavered like a thin reed. "He had to be so desperately lost carrying that little ceramic Shiva wherever he went. For who knows how long."

"I remember," I said. "He also tried to leave it somewhere forgotten, a cave or something. He couldn't let go of it. Something ugly too, but meaning so much."

She looked up at me. I did see anger. "Ugly doesn't matter when you love someone."

I didn't drop her gaze but waited a moment. "What matters to you, Marie?"

"Trust for starters. Protective. Open. Being available for your lover."

"Available, yes. That reminds me of the man who gave his lover his mobile phone at the breakup so that she couldn't call him anymore.

"Oh, Lord!" She put a hand to her face.

"And the woman who gave her lover an x-ray of her shoulder from a car accident on which she had written sweet words explaining why her heart was not in the image. And the creep who left a copy of a book, 'I Can Make You Thin,' as a parting gift?"

"Does that justify murder?" she asked in a strong voice.

"It's poetic in a bizarre way, no?" I said, expecting her to agree.

"No," Marie pronounced firmly, without hesitation. She gave me that steady opaque look.

"I think the worst story was of the poor woman who simply left her lover with a magnifying glass as she walked out the door without explanation. He finally recalled she said she felt small whenever she was around him."

"Do people have that self-awareness around those they love?" she asked. I knew Marie could describe every other patron in the café without looking back. "Or are we so self-focused we miss the cues? Did that guy ever learn of the subtle damage he inflicted?" Over her shoulder, I spotted one of those patrons turning; Marie's voice now raised a notch.

Hmm. "I have to believe he did," I said, my voice sounding a little empty. I really didn't believe it. I had not witnessed Marie's emotions so charged before. I tried again. "Another positive story comes to mind. The poem. The man who wrote it after the breakup. Something about the girl who climbed inside his head and re-arranged the furniture. She still haunts him. In a good way, I suspect."

"Yes. Yes." Marie perked, and I hoped I was back on the right track. "And also the two astronomers who fell in love. The gift of that graph thing, the—"

"Spectrum," I said, "really a plot tracing the path of light leaving a star. She had to recognize that it took twenty-six years for that light to reach Earth. The plot covered twenty-six years on only two inches of paper."

"I didn't follow the meaning of the number?"

"She was twenty-six when they parted," I said, looking for some response. "To the scientists, it's a picture of how twenty-six years look. Like a coded message." I sipped my drink. "Talk about romantic."

"You think so? Or would you rather have something of value, something lasting?" Marie gave me that withering look.

"Okay. Let me think romantic." I assumed a philosopher's stance, sitting upright in my chair, looking skyward, one hand on my chin.

"Oh, please."

"I see a couple of lovers in the Scottish Highlands, mystical—with the warm blend of colors about, a wind whipping their faces, and the ancient Caledonian forests that soak up unpleasant thoughts."

"I'm impressed, Leo." She didn't look impressed, pushing her food around the plate.

I did the humble nod of my head without telling her I'd memorized the words from the travel guide. "Can you ever forget those days?"

"I can forget the leeches and the rain squalls."

I still felt disquieted. Marie's intensity had surprised me. We'd seen love—and hate—from many different angles this night. During our travels and intimacy, we'd skimmed each other's past, preferring talk of a future in general terms. I had not seen her cry before or the depth of her inner self. Until today in a strange place, we intruded on the lives of others who left their memories behind like objects to be placed under glass and studied. I did not know how to respond to Marie.

"One exhibit comes to mind now," she said. "The canister carried around the world by the widow whose husband died of cancer after thirty years. Afterward, she'd sprinkled his ashes in the world's oceans and seas and deserts over many years." She looked at me, expecting a response.

"She needs to move on," I said softly, again taking her hand. "She needs to let him go."

#

Marie left the hotel before I'd risen, but I'd heard her and feigned sleep. Packed and gone before the sun came up.

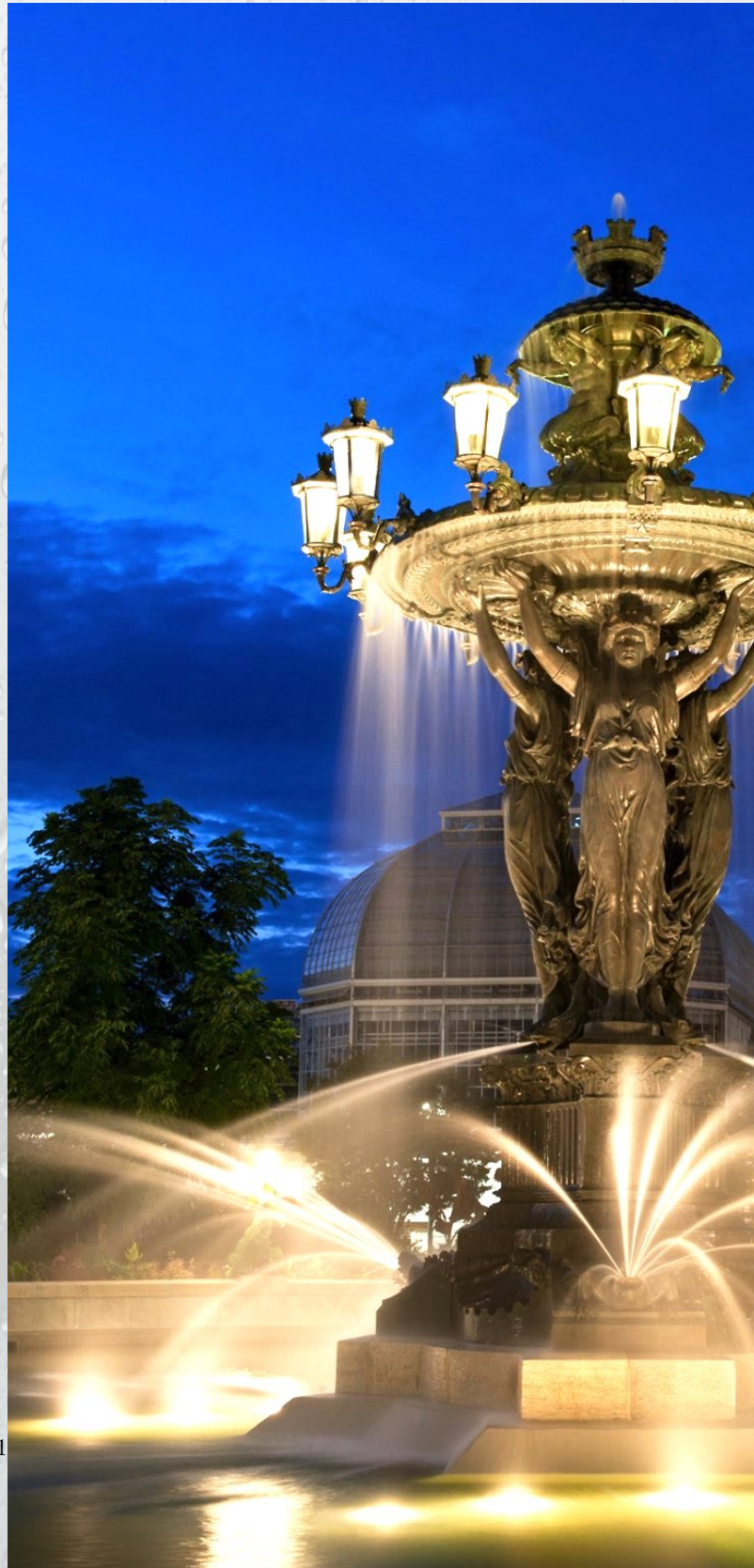
She needed to move on—another casualty of the Museum of Broken Relationships.

I packed, replaying our time together the night before.

The ring I'd given her had been my romantic offering in Germany. We'd stood in the middle of a fountain before the Polizei came—verboten—but the sprouting water so appealing on a hot day. She called it romantic.

I held on to the memory of that day and so many others we shared. All I had of value after Zagreb.

I would move on too.





#

I traveled alone for three months seeking no new relationship after Marie. Winter in Europe colder than I can remember.

She'd been the one.

In March, I returned to Zagreb and stopped at the museum. Another Thursday, as it was when Marie and I last visited, the day Elena always worked.

Elena ushered an older couple in the direction of the exhibits. A din of voices suggested a busy day.

She turned and held out her hands to me. "You've come back, Leo. Why am I not surprised?" She spoke in our native Croatian. I took her hands, pulled her in, and hugged her.

"I am wondering, is there an exhibit I should see?"

"Yes, Leo. But first, a question. Do you have a purpose in life now?"

I smiled, probably sadly. "First, tell me where I can see it."

Following her directions, I walked through a few clusters of people, some chattering, and taking cell phone photos, but no one laughing.

I approached the pedestal and saw where Marie had left it, covered with a protective cap. It did look valuable. Two printed paragraphs summed up our relationship just above the pedestal at eye level on the wall.

I sensed a mutual attraction immediately when we met. He had that European charm, but his voice could be Kansas—or Alabama, depending on his choice. We laughed a lot and, as a couple, grew closer with each adventure, despite the exhaustive pace we traveled Europe. Maybe that was a distraction being dazzled by the countries and

geography. Maybe I didn't ask the questions that needed answers. So I believed.

My search for some elusive peace and footing in this crazy world was simply too much. Faced with the stories of people who were casually discarded, I saw the signs, real or not. I needed to assert myself and not be crushed. I sensed love could not be crushed. Yes, I needed his strength, but I didn't hear the words or see what I needed to see expressed.

I realized I was nodding, almost involuntarily, my vision blurry at the last words.

I returned to the small office off the foyer.

Elena sat at her desk, her attention on the mail before her as she opened an envelope. I stopped a few feet from her desk, thankful she was alone. She put the paper down and focused on me. "What is your opinion of the new exhibit?"

I thought back on what I'd seen and chose my words carefully. "I think my invitation that she join me in paragliding tipped the balance for us. She yearned for the romantic and I adventure." I tried to say it blithely, but the words fell heavy.

"And her words?" Elena appeared to look into the soul that I had effectively shielded from anyone I'd met in my travels. "What do they mean to you?"

Darkness descended upon me, a new sensation, one that frightened me. "I am crushed."

"Do you have another ring searching for a finger, Leo?"

I felt small, like the man given the magnifying glass as a parting gift. He'd made his lover feel small whenever she was around him. Standing before Elena, I knew that feeling. Small.

"Are you alright, Leo?"

"Ivana. I am finally Ivana, not Leo, Elena. My true self. There will be no other ring until I find the one that counts. As to my purpose in life, I will be a faithful man awaiting a faithful woman from this moment. No more running."

#

On a warm late summer day six months later, I worked high on an old building in Zagreb, overlooking the sea of colored tiled roofs of the city. Again a genuine stonemason, I looked out, then down, a figure catching my eye approaching the building, too indistinct to make out features but wearing a bright blue dress. The color was familiar. I followed the figure, growing closer.

We retreated to a shaded outdoor café in the Upper Town and sipped Bura again. She looked tanned and radiant in a sundress, facing a workman wearing coveralls and the dust of my trade, probably looking like an apparition.

"You look older, Ivana. It must be the work. Stone is unforgiving, no?"

In reality, she found me. "How did you know?" I asked.

"Your vocation and residence appeared on my passport. I'd discovered it fallen from your trousers as you showered during our travels."

"You—"

"I'd not been poking," she said quickly. "It was simply chance—or fate." She brushed her hand against my arm.

I believed her.

"Is that the reason you left abruptly? Because I was not honest with who I was?" I asked and was answered with a look as she seemed to pull thoughts together. "You had every right to," I added.

"One reason. At the time, I was confused. I had to leave and get out of the whirlwind, the travel, the pace, the emotions, and, yes, you. I didn't truly know you—I could only meet you at the level of your intentions." Sadness shaped her soft face. "Do you understand?"

"Yes. So tell me—what exactly happened at the museum?"





“The accumulation of hurt and pain.” A deep breath. “Overwhelming. I didn’t want to be another exhibit.”

“Yet, you are—we are.” I looked down at my wine. “I saw the ring and the note.”

She took my hand, one part of a man who felt small. And I raised my eyes back to meet hers. “That exhibit is on loan, only temporary,” she said so quietly I had to lean forward to hear her.

I took a deep breath. The adventurer about to jump from the cliff. “Perhaps a third paragraph remains to be written to your story.”

“I want to believe that,” she said, still holding my hand.

“I will write it if you want me,” I said. “I need you.”

“I need to know you, Ivana. Deeper.”

Do I know myself? A question I’d pondered these last months. I released her hand and leaned back, taking another deep breath. “I fix stone that has been worn or broken. It can never be fully restored. And, yes, it can be unforgiving.” The words came naturally. “I am incomplete without you, Marie.”


“What about ‘moving on?’ You said those words on our last night regarding the woman who spent her life casting her late husband’s ashes around the world.”

A pall of darkness began to fall over me, and I mentally banished it—in silence on a busy street. A voice broke the darkness.

“Are you alright?” Marie looked alarmed. “I said something. What is it?”

“I carry my past with me. I became like that woman, carrying a loss to unreachable places.” Now, I struggled with words, having told only Elena. “I found relief from the pain in my work and travel. And casting ashes.”

“Whose?”



“My wife died two years ago... giving birth. Nothing could be done. And our baby.”

“I’m sorry.” She leaned in, took both my hands, and kissed me. “It is painful to let go.”

I breathed as I had instructed Marie at the museum—the breathing exercises I’d been using for these last years. Marie counted for me.

“Let me help you... In any way.”

I reached into one of my pockets and lay it before her in my palm.

“The ring? From the exhibit?”

I slipped it back on her finger. “A theft from the museum. It’s where it belongs.”

She held her hand out, looking at the ring, smiling. And in that smile, I saw the terms of our relationship shift to open and honest. A new start. No regrets over the past. We would pick up where we left off, already knowing each other better. The travels—the running—were over. Zagreb would be our home for now.

“You are a hopeless romantic, Ivana,” she said.

I nodded.

The End

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

PETER TOEG



LOVE & FATE



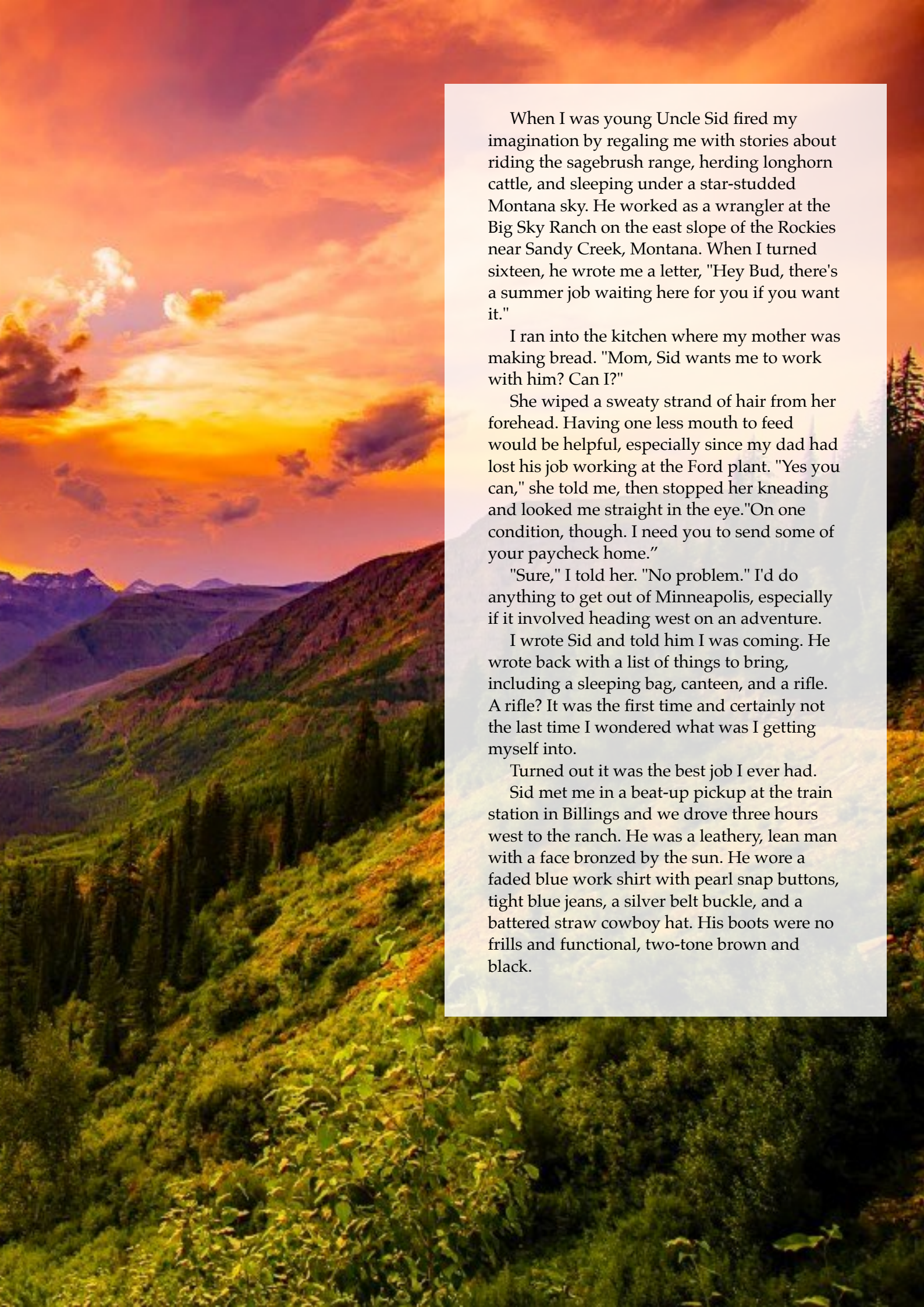
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the unexpected
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transcendent
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Rattlesnake Canyon

Jim Bates



When I was young Uncle Sid fired my imagination by regaling me with stories about riding the sagebrush range, herding longhorn cattle, and sleeping under a star-studded Montana sky. He worked as a wrangler at the Big Sky Ranch on the east slope of the Rockies near Sandy Creek, Montana. When I turned sixteen, he wrote me a letter, "Hey Bud, there's a summer job waiting here for you if you want it."

I ran into the kitchen where my mother was making bread. "Mom, Sid wants me to work with him? Can I?"

She wiped a sweaty strand of hair from her forehead. Having one less mouth to feed would be helpful, especially since my dad had lost his job working at the Ford plant. "Yes you can," she told me, then stopped her kneading and looked me straight in the eye. "On one condition, though. I need you to send some of your paycheck home."

"Sure," I told her. "No problem." I'd do anything to get out of Minneapolis, especially if it involved heading west on an adventure.

I wrote Sid and told him I was coming. He wrote back with a list of things to bring, including a sleeping bag, canteen, and a rifle. A rifle? It was the first time and certainly not the last time I wondered what was I getting myself into.

Turned out it was the best job I ever had.

Sid met me in a beat-up pickup at the train station in Billings and we drove three hours west to the ranch. He was a leathery, lean man with a face bronzed by the sun. He wore a faded blue work shirt with pearl snap buttons, tight blue jeans, a silver belt buckle, and a battered straw cowboy hat. His boots were no frills and functional, two-tone brown and black.

On the way to the ranch, he filled me in on what was expected of me, "Your main job is cleaning out the stables. We've got a dozen horses and Mr. Littlefoot wants them cleaned every day. You'll be hauling hay bales, pumping water fixing, anything that's broken, going to town for supplies and that's just for starters." He grinned at me with surprising white teeth.

"Think you can handle it?"

It was 1962. My hormone-driven friends and I were full of energy. We lifted weights, played sports, and worked on junked cars; we were active all the time. "Sure," I said confidently. "No problem."

Sid pulled the brim of his cowboy hat down to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun.

"We'll see," is all he said.

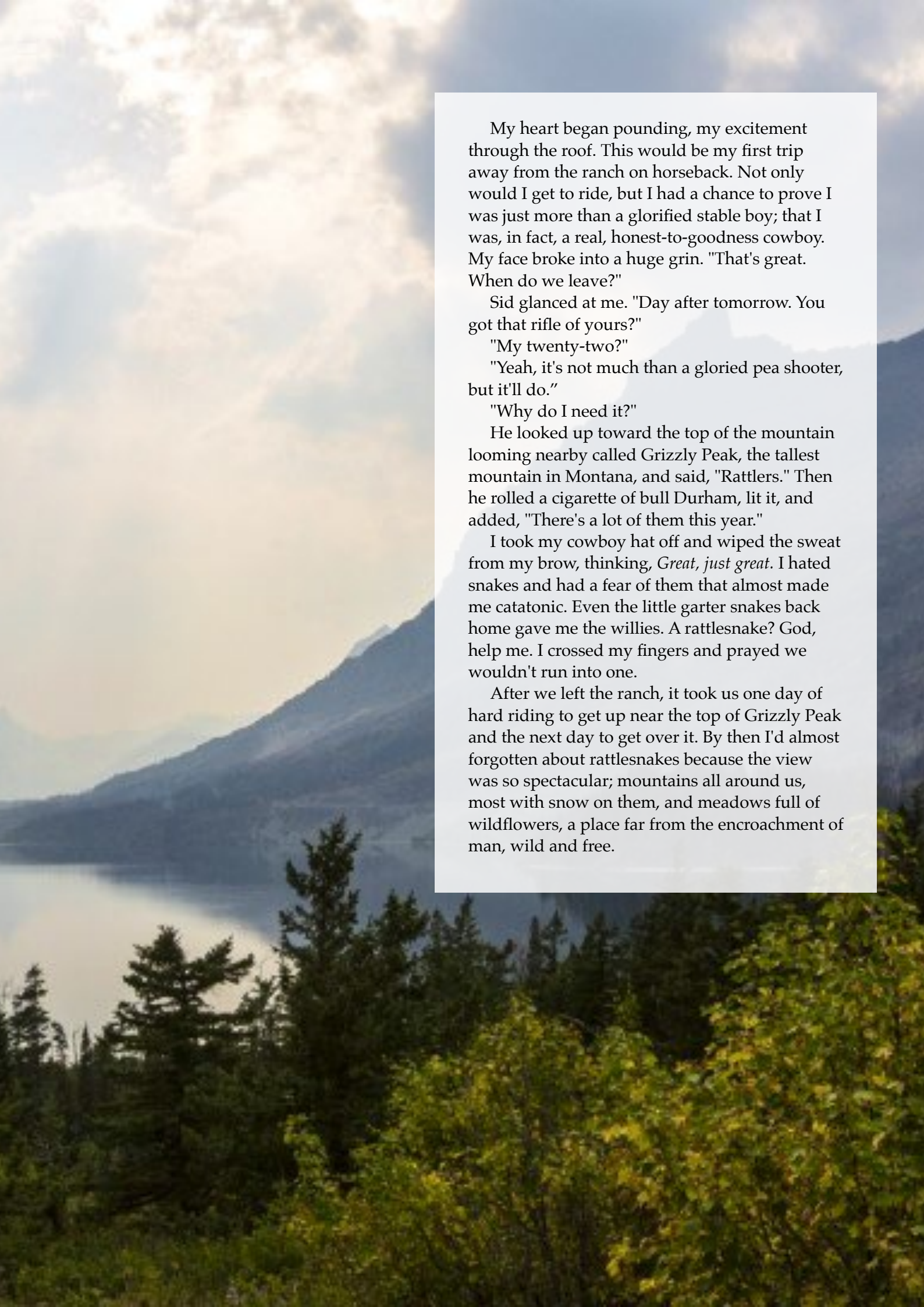
I will say that the first week was hard. Cleaning out the stalls was physically demanding, not to mention hot. But I liked the work. I enjoyed being around the horses and Mr. Littlefoot, the owner of the ranch, was fair-minded.

"Just do your job and keep your nose clean and we'll get along just fine," he told me that first day when Sid introduced us. Then he turned to my uncle and said, "Make sure he stays in line." I found out later that he was referring to staying away from his sixteen-going-on-twenty-year-old daughter, Josie. He didn't have to worry, I was so wrung out at the end of the workday that I could barely eat dinner before falling asleep in the bunkhouse, let alone think about girls. Mr. Littlefoot's daughter was safe from me.

If hard work was the only thing I did that summer it would have been enough to make it memorable, but there was one thing that made it stand out; the one thing I'll never forget. It was the time that I almost died.

In August Sid had to round up a herd of a dozen horses that had been spending the summer on the other side of the mountains, up at a place they called The Ballpark.

"We'll take a couple of pack horses with us," Sid said when he first told me.

A scenic landscape featuring a calm lake in the foreground, surrounded by dense evergreen trees. In the background, a range of mountains stretches across the horizon under a sky filled with soft, white clouds. The lighting suggests a bright, slightly hazy day.

My heart began pounding, my excitement through the roof. This would be my first trip away from the ranch on horseback. Not only would I get to ride, but I had a chance to prove I was just more than a glorified stable boy; that I was, in fact, a real, honest-to-goodness cowboy. My face broke into a huge grin. "That's great. When do we leave?"

Sid glanced at me. "Day after tomorrow. You got that rifle of yours?"

"My twenty-two?"

"Yeah, it's not much than a gloried pea shooter, but it'll do."

"Why do I need it?"

He looked up toward the top of the mountain looming nearby called Grizzly Peak, the tallest mountain in Montana, and said, "Rattlers." Then he rolled a cigarette of bull Durham, lit it, and added, "There's a lot of them this year."

I took my cowboy hat off and wiped the sweat from my brow, thinking, *Great, just great*. I hated snakes and had a fear of them that almost made me catatonic. Even the little garter snakes back home gave me the willies. A rattlesnake? God, help me. I crossed my fingers and prayed we wouldn't run into one.

After we left the ranch, it took us one day of hard riding to get up near the top of Grizzly Peak and the next day to get over it. By then I'd almost forgotten about rattlesnakes because the view was so spectacular; mountains all around us, most with snow on them, and meadows full of wildflowers, a place far from the encroachment of man, wild and free.

"Let's make camp here," Sid directed us to a spot next to a grove of pine trees. "Then go looking for those horses."

Making camp amounted to unloading the two pack horses and tying them with long lead ropes to a couple of stakes in the ground. We ate a quick meal of cold beans and cornbread from the night before and then began our search.

Even though it was the end of summer, at this elevation the air was chilly and we both wore our jean jackets buttoned all the way up. "The horses will be out of the wind, somewhere sunny," Sid told me. He was right. We hunted on the far side of a nearby hill about two miles away. Fresh droppings gave the horses away, making them easy to find, and by the end of the afternoon we had them all rounded up. All except for a feisty filly that had broken from the herd with her colt and run down into a narrow canyon.





Sid pointed. "You go get her. If you're not back in an hour, fire your rifle once, and I'll come looking for you." Then he took off at a trot back to camp with the other horses.

My little bay was called Patsy and she was as surefooted as they came. We worked our way down the side of a steep ravine, sliding on loose shale while trying to avoid the sharp dead branches of pine trees. We made it to the bottom without incident and had started up the canyon when suddenly Patsy jumped to the side. Just as I was wondering what had spooked her, I heard it, the unmistakable buzzing rattle of a rattlesnake. She'd seen the snake before she heard it and had tried to avoid it. When it shook its rattles she spooked and jumped again and bucked in fear, kicking her hind legs out behind her. I lost my grip on my saddle horn and fell hard, cracking my skull on a rock. I lost consciousness momentarily but came to only to find myself face to face with the snake. It was coiled tightly about two feet away and its tongue forked out toward me. I thought for sure it was going to strike when a sudden snorting sound caught its attention. I kept my head still but moved my eyes. It was Patsy and she was still with me.





Then she did an amazing thing, something Sid told me later that horses will do. She reared up and stomped hard on the ground to scare the snake. It worked. I watched in awe and relief as the thing tensed its body as if to strike, but then slithered away. I got to my feet, feeling a little woozy, but I hugged Patsy before managing to grab my rifle and fire a shot.

Sid showed up later and got me back to camp. The next day he went back for the filly and her colt and we headed down the mountain. That was the end of the summer. I was sent home so mom could have a doctor check me. It turned out I had a mild concussion and I've been prone to headaches and the occasional blackout ever since. I don't mind. It was worth it.

That next spring Sid was killed by a kick in the head by a bronco named Bushwhacker. Mom and I went back to Montana and we scattered his ashes off Granite Peak high above the Rattlesnake Canyon. I like to think he's still out there somewhere, out where the wind blows free across those wild mountain meadows, and that summer we shared, never ends.

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

JIM BATES

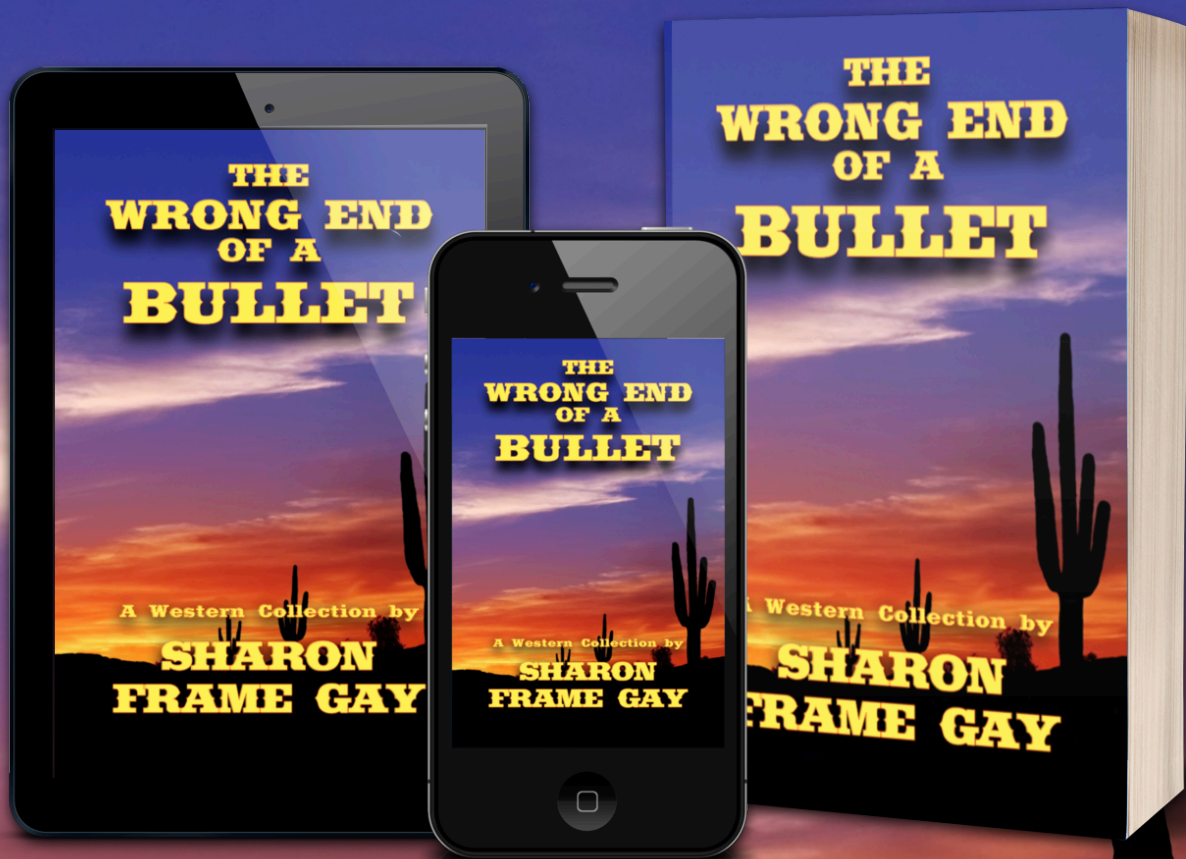


Overlapping memories, overlapping lives, wide open spaces and soft but sometimes heart-breaking reminiscences, with the mighty Mississippi running through it all — let Jim Bates take you on rich, human, intertwining journeys into a landscape of souls where you can glimpse beauty and peace, longing and contentment, the burden of past decisions and their forgiveness, and perhaps find yourself . . .



Dreamers

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR SHARON FRAME GAY



Award winning author Sharon Frame Gay grew up a child of the highway, playing by the side of the road.

Her westerns have been internationally published in anthologies and magazines , including Saddlebag Dispatches, The Writing District, Rope and Wire, Fiction On The Web, Five Star Publishing, Frontier Tales, Owl Hollow Press, Zimbell House, Clarendon House, New Reader Magazine, and others.

The short story "North Star" won a Will Rogers Medallion for Excellence in Western Writing in 2021. "The Actress" won Publication of the Year for Spillwords in 2022. Other westerns have been nominated for the Peacemaker Award and the Pushcart Prize.

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/sharonframegay



ALEXANDER MARSHALL

TALES FROM EMERALD:
THE GOLDEN
KURU



Before the Great Icetime, there was a goothman called Tharald who lived in the island of Fynn. He was a son of Karld, who had lived there for a long time. Tharald was a man of great influence, a great gatherer of store, a mighty hunter.

When Spring came on Fynn, the other people on the island saw that there were some sea-skaters in distress nearby and reported it to Tharald, who brought out his iceboat. He put out on the open ice as quickly as possible to save the skaters, but their sled, with most of their goods, sank and was lost. Tharald brought all five skaters to his chimney, where they stayed for a week drying their skins. Then four went away to the South — but Rettar stayed behind with Tharald, keeping very quiet and speaking little. Tharald gave him food, but took little notice of him. Rettar held aloof, and did not accompany Tharald when he went abroad every day hunting. This disturbed Tharald to some degree, but he did not like to refuse Rettar his hospitality; he was a goothman who kept open chimney and liked to see others happy. Rettar went about visiting the others in the island.



There was a man named Dun, who dwelt at the chimney of Hem. Rettar went to see him daily and became friends with him, sitting there all day long.

One evening very late when Rettar was preparing to return to Tharald's chimney, he saw an eruption on the headland below Dun's chimney, and asked what place that might be. Dun said there was no need for him to know.

'If they saw such a thing where I come from,' said Rettar, 'they would say that such a fire needs to be cultivated.'

'He who dwells in that chimney,' answered Dun, 'is best left alone.'

Rettar would not keep silent, but asked Dun to explain.

'In that chimney,' said Dun, 'lies the body of Karld, the father of Tharald. Once upon a time father and son held that chimney together; but ever since Karld died his fylde has been walking and has scared away all the other comers, so that now the whole of Fynn belongs to Tharald. But we are content, as no man who is under Tharald's protection as goothman suffers any injury.'

The *fyld* of a man was his spirit, his walking aura, living apart from his body of flesh.





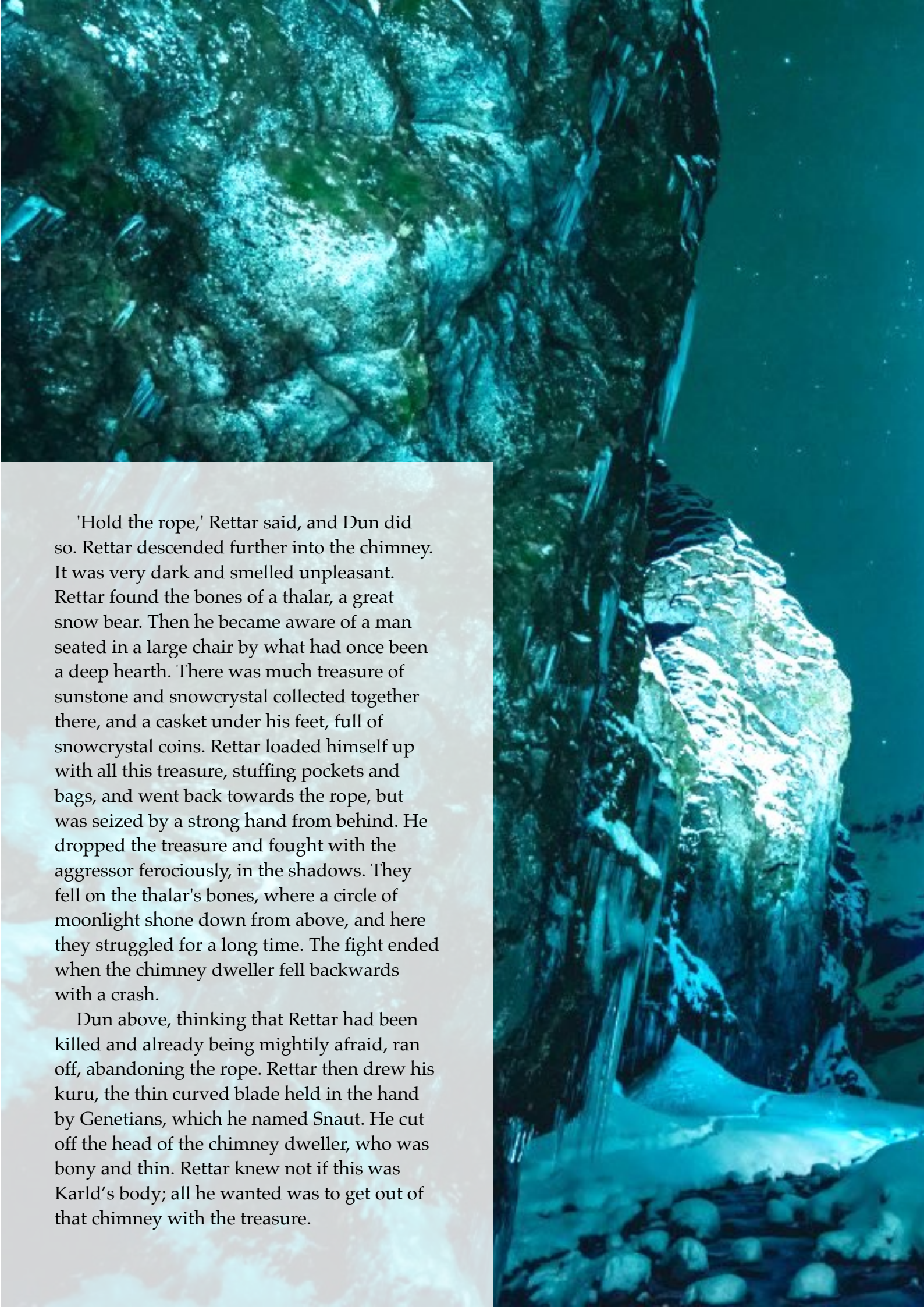
'This bodes well for us,' said Rettar. 'Tomorrow morning, be here with tools ready for digging.'

'No,' said Dun, 'I won't permit this. It will bring Tharald's wrath down upon you.'

'I will risk that,' Rettar said.

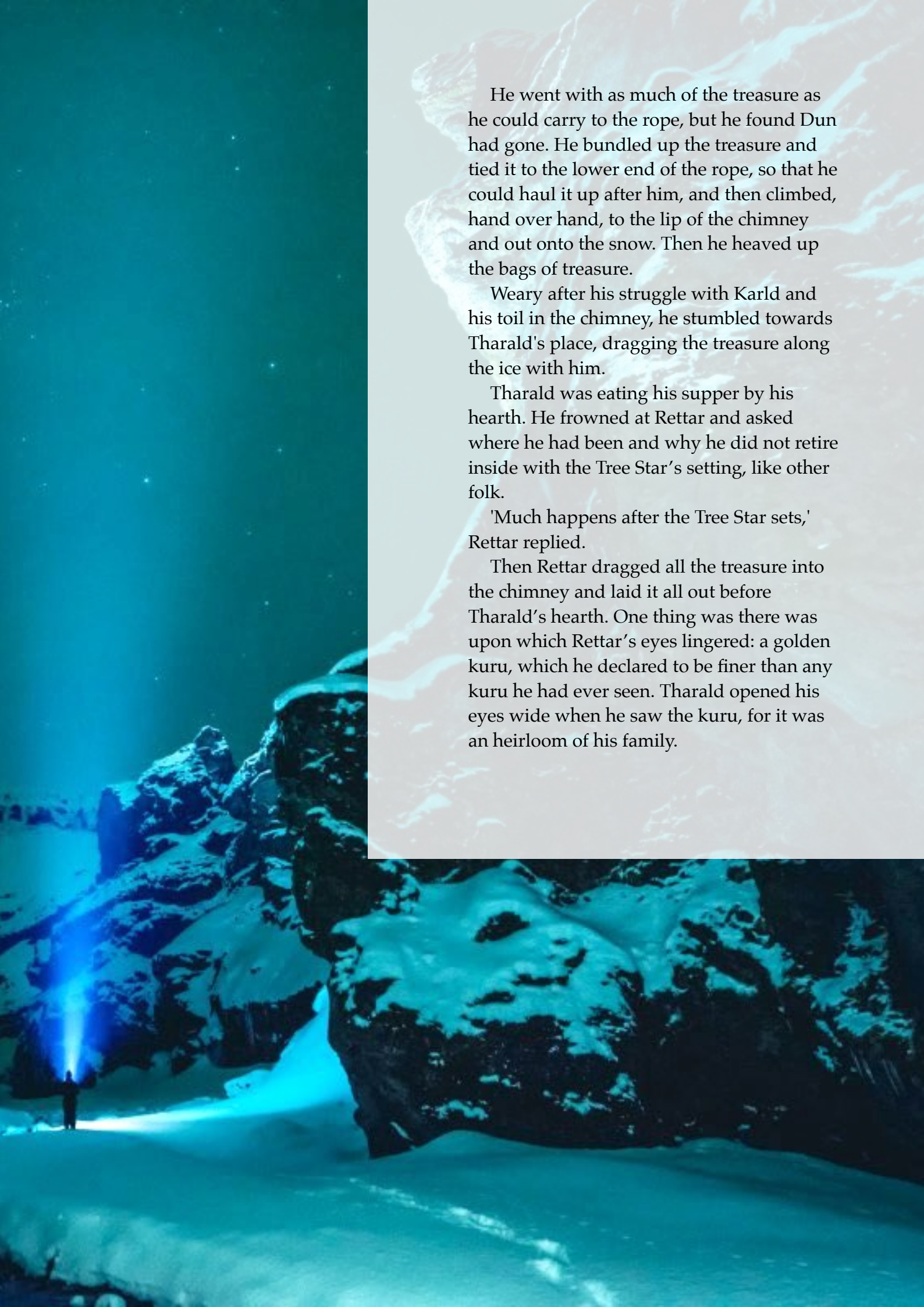
They retired for the night, Rettar going back to Tharald's chimney to sleep. But early the next morning, Rettar went to Karld's chimney and broke open the grave, and worked with all his strength, never stopping until he came to tundranite, the bedrock beneath the ice, by which time the short day was already spent. Rettar chipped away at the tundranite, but Dun came and begged him not to go any further down. Soon a hidden chamber was revealed.





'Hold the rope,' Rettar said, and Dun did so. Rettar descended further into the chimney. It was very dark and smelled unpleasant. Rettar found the bones of a thalar, a great snow bear. Then he became aware of a man seated in a large chair by what had once been a deep hearth. There was much treasure of sunstone and snowcrystal collected together there, and a casket under his feet, full of snowcrystal coins. Rettar loaded himself up with all this treasure, stuffing pockets and bags, and went back towards the rope, but was seized by a strong hand from behind. He dropped the treasure and fought with the aggressor ferociously, in the shadows. They fell on the thalar's bones, where a circle of moonlight shone down from above, and here they struggled for a long time. The fight ended when the chimney dweller fell backwards with a crash.

Dun above, thinking that Rettar had been killed and already being mightily afraid, ran off, abandoning the rope. Rettar then drew his kuru, the thin curved blade held in the hand by Genetians, which he named Snaut. He cut off the head of the chimney dweller, who was bony and thin. Rettar knew not if this was Karld's body; all he wanted was to get out of that chimney with the treasure.




He went with as much of the treasure as he could carry to the rope, but he found Dun had gone. He bundled up the treasure and tied it to the lower end of the rope, so that he could haul it up after him, and then climbed, hand over hand, to the lip of the chimney and out onto the snow. Then he heaved up the bags of treasure.

Weary after his struggle with Karld and his toil in the chimney, he stumbled towards Tharald's place, dragging the treasure along the ice with him.

Tharald was eating his supper by his hearth. He frowned at Rettar and asked where he had been and why he did not retire inside with the Tree Star's setting, like other folk.

'Much happens after the Tree Star sets,' Rettar replied.

Then Rettar dragged all the treasure into the chimney and laid it all out before Tharald's hearth. One thing was there was upon which Rettar's eyes lingered: a golden kuru, which he declared to be finer than any kuru he had ever seen. Tharald opened his eyes wide when he saw the kuru, for it was an heirloom of his family.



'Whence came this kuru?' he asked.

'I was overcome with greed,' Rettar said, 'and I violated the grave of your father and fought with his *fyld*. This kuru and all this treasure came from there.'

'No one ever before has had any wish to break open Karld's chimney grave. But all treasure which is buried in a chimney is in a wrong place, so I hold you guiltless of any crime, especially since you have brought it to me.'

'I ask merely for the golden kuru,' Rettar said.

'Before I can give you the kuru you must display your prowess in some way. I never got it from my father whilst he was alive.'

Then Rettar and Tharald fought suddenly, by the hearth, and long was their struggle, for both were strong. Blade clashed with blade, and both gripped each other's throats many times; first Rettar crashed to the ground, then Tharald, for neither would give way. Rettar was weary from his fight with the *fyld* and his heaving of the treasure; Tharald was tired after a long day's hunting on the ice. In the end, Rettar clutched the golden kuru from the heap of treasure and tried to slice Tharald with it. He stepped upon ash made slippery with melted snow by the hearth, and he slipped and cut his own throat instead. He died on the hearth where he fell.

Tharald took the treasure and kept the golden kuru near his bed. The winter came on bringing Tree Star Eve, and no more was ever seen of Karld's *fyld* in the island of Fynn.

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As you will come to understand there is a very good reason why I can't name the young man leaping off his bicycle. It's easy to describe his form – clothes are glued to him with running water revealing a trained athletic body including broad muscular shoulders tapering to a narrow waist. Sweeping streaming hair from his eyes, cheeks and neck, he exposes a handsome symmetrical face; the sort of face which could wear a pointed goatee and curled moustache: the face of a cavalier, a musketeer, a privateer. It's a cinematic hero's heart-stopping face.

The clouds are so low and heavy it almost feels as if night is imminent. Street lights flicker into life despite its being nearly midday in summer. Rain hurls itself into a mist over the pavement and ripples down the high wooden gate our young man pulls open. The gate has a burned and lacquered name-plate 'Windhover'. Water runs from creases in his sodden clothing as he decides remounting his bike will be too risky. The drive ahead is a mix of flat stones and gravel – hazardous enough in the dry.

The garden extends further than he can see. He's read about such designs, always a blocked horizon to create surprises and the illusion of no boundaries.

When he does get a view of the house, a rambling residence to which several new rooms have been added, the rain turns to hail, obscuring everything. Leaves are torn from trees in the deafening furore; the puddles dance and turn white.

The man leaps into the porch for shelter, only to turn just in time to witness the hail, rain and even wind, stop abruptly. He closes his eyes and absorbs the relative hush, silence being his favourite music. Only gurgles of water in gutters and drains punctuate the peace.

A light comes on. He looks down and watches the growing pattern of water flooding from him and running in squared rivulets between tiles. "Hello?" a voice asks behind him.

Cutting it Fine Gary Bonn



He turns to see an open doorway in which a woman stands. He thinks she's probably in her forties but lithe under clothes resembling a kimono. Her pale freckled face is framed in strawberry blond hair falling in lazy waves past her shoulders.

The young man says, "Flowers would look lovely in your hair."

A micro-expression of confusion flashes through her features. "Can I help you? Are you here to see Esther?"

"I ... um no. It was a man." He digs into the pocket of his jeans and pulls out torn and pulped paper. "Oh ... uh, I'm here about engraving glass."

"That'll be Roy then. Come in." She stands aside.

The young man looks down at his dripping clothes. "I ... I really shouldn't."

"Well, I can't leave you here. Come in and be warm. Just leave your ... isn't it a bit cold for sandals?"

"No."

"I'm Ingrid, by the way."

"Glad to meet you." He steps into brighter light, blinking droplets from his eyelashes.

"And what's your name? So I can tell Roy who's here."

"Ah ... ah, he doesn't really know me. Just say the engraver." He slips a rucksack from his shoulders.

Ingrid claps her hands. "Oh, yes. Now I remember, the set of glasses and decanter. Come with me."

He follows her into a more comfortably lit room in which the only sound is that of a log fire spitting. Sofas, tables and square pillars pattern the room. The walls harbour bookshelves and muted tapestries in turn. "Roy, here's a man about some etching, engraving, whatever."

Roy rises from a couch. He is a tall man, his blond hair swept back into a pony tail.

"Take a seat," says Ingrid, indicating a sofa.

The young man shakes his head. "I'll make it wet and I don't have to stay long. I just need to ask a question. I've ... I've done some work on the glass you gave me but I need to know more." He opens his rucksack and pulls out a tangle of pullovers, pillowcases and other soft things. "Won't be a moment. I've wrapped it."

Roy reaches for the glass. "Ask away. May I look?"

"Of course." The young man extracts it from a sock and studies the glass against a lamp. "Yes, that'll do." He turns. "Here."

Roy stares at it, moving so it can be studied in different light. Ingrid sits down but after a moment rises again. "What?" she asks Roy.

"Take a look at this! Be careful though, very careful."

"I do know how to hold a glass."

"You've never held one like this."

"I bought them, remember." She also turns the glass. "What? ... how? ... *what?*"

Roy asks the young man, "How long did that take you?"

"About six hours. I'm really fast at that technique. It's the diatom which is the problem. You can see I've left a space but I couldn't find any pictures."


"There will be plenty online. As I said when I gave you this, surprise me."

"Online," the young man echoes, "I ... I don't have an online. Do you have a book or something?"

"Of course, several." Roy turns away and walks to bookshelves. "But the best photos are in this one. I'll wrap it in something waterproof for you, though the sky is lightening now."

The young man takes the glass back from Ingrid and reaches for clothing he's dropped while unwrapping it. He stops, frozen, staring towards the other end of the room. Ingrid looks round. Her daughter, dressed only in a towel and with her hair wrapped in another, approaches them. She's slightly paler than Ingrid, making her freckles more obvious. What hair has avoided capture by the towel is a deep red, glowing gold where light shines through it. "Hello, people. Are you having a party and not inviting me?"





Ingrid answers. "You have to see what this chap has done to one of our glasses." She looks at the young man. "Meet, Esther." She stands and reaches for his rucksack. "Can I get it out?"

He's broken from his trance. "Yes, of course. Here, I'll do it."

Esther looks at him and tilts her head. "You look like a rat that's been drowned for a week. You want a towel?"

"I ... no!"

Esther laughs. "Did you think I was going to give you this one?" She hugs herself still laughing. "Actually, I can. Hang on a sec." Esther strides to a staircase and takes them two at a time. Once she's out of sight the balled towel flies down, unravelling itself and hanging over the edge of a stair. "Towel for you! Back down in a minute," she shouts. Footsteps fade as she runs, laughing, along the landing.

Ingrid takes the glass before it falls from the man's limp fingers. Roy offers him a book. "Here, this page is a good place to start. The second picture especially."

The young man holds his hand out but still looks up the stairs. Shaking his head he turns back to Ingrid and Roy, whispering in awe, "She's absolutely *gorgeous!*" They fail to answer, not being ready for such personal comment from a stranger. Ignoring the offered book he drops his hand and walks to the stairs, scooping up the towel and beginning to dry his face. "That smile..."

Ingrid asks, "Does the towel smell nice?" He keeps his face covered to hide a burning blush.

Roy laughs and says to Ingrid. "Stop torturing people. What is it with you?"

She chuckles. "I'm just jealous."

The young man returns and studies the pictures, memorizing one by recreating each detail in his head as if drawing it. He takes the glass from Ingrid and imagines putting the design into the space he's left.

Esther comes bounding down the stairs, pulling a brush through damp hair. She's changed into a loose strappy top and frayed denim shorts. "Hey, what's this glass about then?" She grins at the young man, and reaches for it.

He turns to Ingrid and Roy. "It will take me an hour and a half or thereabouts to finish it. Would you like me to come back and show you?"

Roy nods. "Perfect."

Ingrid shakes her head. "Not a chance – not in this weather. We'll drive you back. You can phone us when you're done and we'll bring your bike."

"How do you do this?" Esther whispers, staring into the glass. "I mean just how? It's impossible."

Roy interjects. "No, Ingrid. Esther can take him back and watch him working ... if that's alright?" He places a hand over Ingrid's mouth.

"I'd love to. Come on." Esther grins at the man again.

"Stop smiling like that or I'll have to marry you," he says and gives her the glass.

Her eyebrows rise. "Whoa! What's the rush, mister?"

"There is no rush. I give you a whole hour and a half from now to choose the colour of our bridesmaids' dresses."

Esther laughs and passes the glass back.

He shakes his head, and almost croaks, "Please stop."

Esther tilts her head. "Stop what? Smiling?"


"Um ... nothing." Turning towards the front door, he adds, "I'll be back shortly."

Esther follows, grabbing her bag and car keys. She darts onto the porch and taps his shoulder as he pauses by his bike. "Can you open the gate for me? It'll be quicker."

"Yes ... yes of course." He jogs up the path, glad for a break in a conversation which started uncomfortably and ended in terror. Deciding that talking to three people is too many at once, he wonders how to ensure it doesn't happen again. Water floods his sandals, cooling and tickling his feet. He can't understand why people wear shoes.

Watching seagulls gliding high above, the young man waits. Out of sight, a car starts up and crunches gravel, growing louder. Esther drives through the gates, and waits. The man dithers as if not knowing what to do. She leans over and opens the passenger door for him. "Close the gates and get in." He settles in the seat and looks around the interior before turning his attention on her.



The background image shows the interior of a Bentley Continental GT. The focus is on the dashboard, which features a large central touchscreen display showing a navigation map. Below the screen are four circular air vents with horizontal slats, a central analog clock, and a row of control buttons. The center console has a gear shifter and handbrake. The overall aesthetic is one of luxury and precision, with dark wood and leather accents.

Worried now, he looks away to avoid eye-contact and wonders what faux-pas he's committed.

Esther watches him for some moments. "You'll need to close the door..." He looks at her and then the car door. She points. "That metal bit there. Pull it hard, then put your seatbelt..." she pauses, biting her lip and frowning. "Here, I'll do it."

She lets the clutch in slowly and pretends not to notice his head jerk in shock and hands tighten on the door and seat as she accelerates and asks, "Where am I going?"

"To my house. This is very fast!"

"I'm only doing thirty. Your house? Good," she replies, smiling. "Any idea where it is?"

"Up the big road that goes to the open place with the fountain, over the bridge. My house is on that side. It's the house away from the road."

"I know it. I've posted leaflets in every letterbox round here." She looks at him briefly. "Earning pocket money when I was young." She steers round vans unloading. "I'll park in The George. Mike won't mind. You'd like him. He's one of those people who's just nice to everyone. Here, I'll drop you off. Press that red button. I'll catch up with you in a minute."

Esther looks surprised when she gets back, as if not expecting him to wait at the gates. "Ooh, you gentleman, you." She tilts her head. "Good, you smiled. That's nice. You seemed very tense or upset earlier. I hope it wasn't me."

He lets her pass and closes the gate behind him. "This way, Esther. My workshop is round the back. It's lovely that you'll see it and be in it with me."

Esther stops and looks around. "Huge square flagstones and four animal statues. Hmm... and a square house with square windows. I feel as though I'm in a 3D chess game but without the fun colour scheme."

The man almost doubles over with laughter, hugging his stomach. "That was a joke, wasn't it? That was brilliant!"

"Was it really that funny?"

"Yes, come with me down these steps."

"What number is this? I must have missed it."

“What do you mean?”

“Your house, what’s the number?”

“I ... I don’t know. There are a lot of things I don’t know.” The man leads her down into a cellar.

Esther yelps, “Wow! How big is this cellar? It’s huge. Why candles? Don’t you like lights? Hey, can I use this space for dancing?” She gasps. “Wow! I could do whole performances here. Could I? Could I? Please say I could!”

“You don’t need to ask me for things – just tell me what you want. What’s that saying? – your wish is my command.”

As he lights a candle Esther lifts it and peers into the gloom. “Is that the part where you...?” Taking a few more steps she says, “Oh, my giddy aunt! Did you do all these? You could sell them for a fortune: oodles of money.”

He stands beside her. “I don’t need any more.”

She turns to him. “What? Did I hear you right?”

“I think so. I think I’ve more than I actually need. Here, I’ll show you my box and you can tell me.” He leads Esther towards a shelf. She digs in her handbag. “Oh, that reminds me. Dad’s written you a cheque for a hundred to keep you going.”

He turns, frowning. “A cheque... Thank you very much.” Taking it from her hand he drops it in the cardboard box.

“Wait, wait, wait, a bloody minute. I need to write your name at the top.” She fishes the cheque out, but stops. “What? What’s all this? Is this all yours? There must be hundreds in here.”

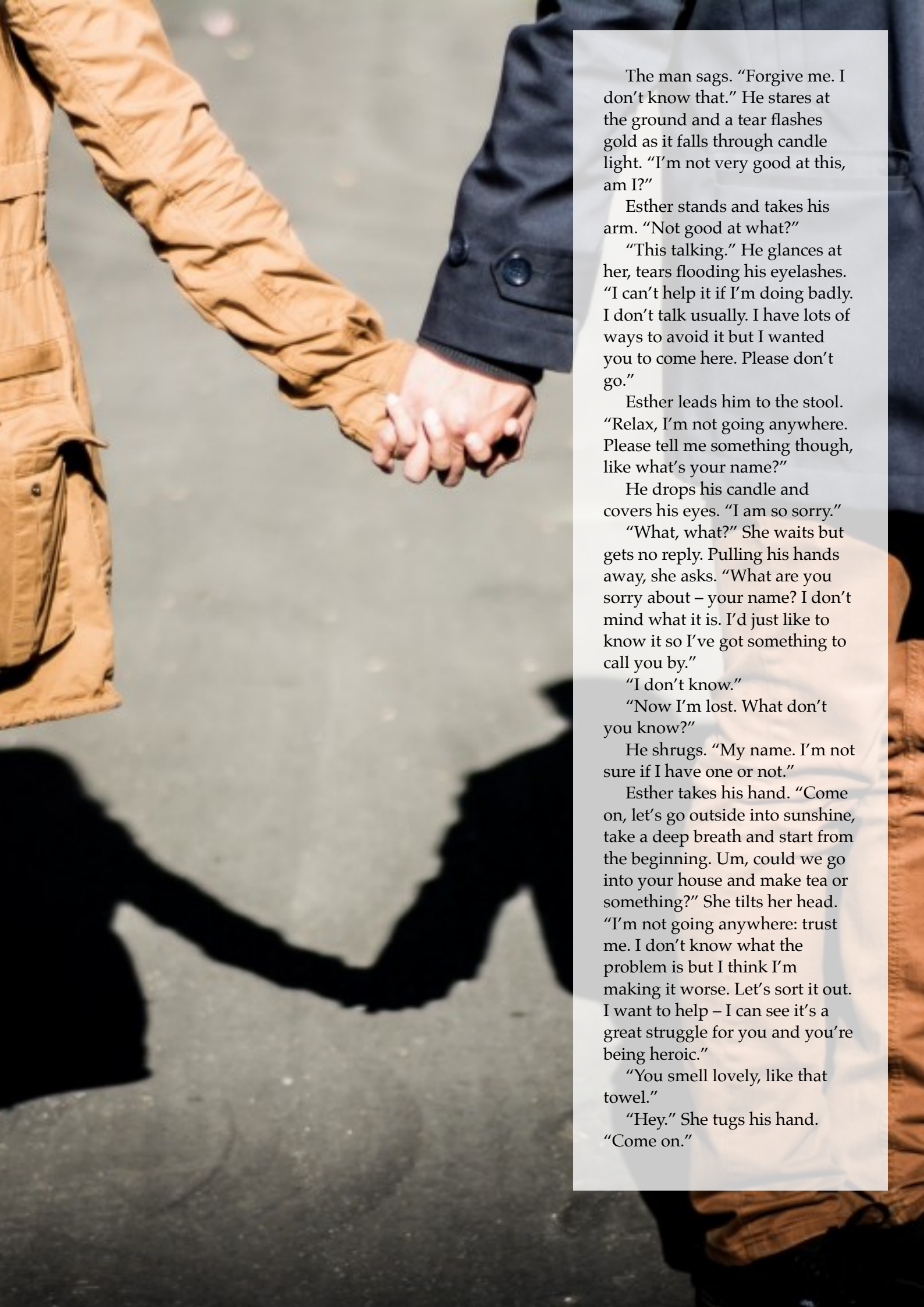
The man, however, is staring at the cheque. “What are those words? They’re strange shapes.”

“My dad’s handwriting.”

“Writing ... hand ... he made the words with his *hand*?”

“Shit, I need to sit down.” Esther heads for a stool. “Please, please, tell me about yourself. You’re totally scrambling me. You speak words I know and don’t seem to have an accent but pronounce a lot of them in ways I’ve never heard before. Where are you from?”





The man sags. "Forgive me. I don't know that." He stares at the ground and a tear flashes gold as it falls through candle light. "I'm not very good at this, am I?"

Esther stands and takes his arm. "Not good at what?"

"This talking." He glances at her, tears flooding his eyelashes. "I can't help it if I'm doing badly. I don't talk usually. I have lots of ways to avoid it but I wanted you to come here. Please don't go."

Esther leads him to the stool. "Relax, I'm not going anywhere. Please tell me something though, like what's your name?"

He drops his candle and covers his eyes. "I am so sorry."

"What, what?" She waits but gets no reply. Pulling his hands away, she asks. "What are you sorry about – your name? I don't mind what it is. I'd just like to know it so I've got something to call you by."

"I don't know."

"Now I'm lost. What don't you know?"

He shrugs. "My name. I'm not sure if I have one or not."


Esther takes his hand. "Come on, let's go outside into sunshine, take a deep breath and start from the beginning. Um, could we go into your house and make tea or something?" She tilts her head. "I'm not going anywhere: trust me. I don't know what the problem is but I think I'm making it worse. Let's sort it out. I want to help – I can see it's a great struggle for you and you're being heroic."

"You smell lovely, like that towel."

"Hey." She tugs his hand. "Come on."

“Dad, if Mum’s there, put me on speaker,” Esther says into her phone. “I’m in his house and everything is hunky-dory. You’ll want to come. His mind-blowing work is everywhere – where there aren’t piles of books on top of heaps of books. But don’t come yet. The situation is ... delicate. Stop interrupting, listen and do what I ask, alright? Our man doesn’t have a name, may never have had one. *Listen*, damn you. No birth certificate, no photos, no memory of where he came from or of his parents. Apart from this house he only remembers the landlady, and that sounds like a single visit years ago. Find someone who can make birth certificates.” She listens for a while. “No, no, nothing. He can read but doesn’t know how to write. He can’t count, he doesn’t really know what town or country this is, he doesn’t have a TV or radio and has literally no understanding of the internet. Though really, with looks like his, does he actually need anything else? What? Fancy him? Are you kidding? I think I need to get a blindfold to stop me doing something shocking. Get him a birth certificate and I’ll sort a bank account out for him. He has tons of cash he doesn’t know what to do with. Do you know how he buys stuff? He goes down the corner shop, takes what he needs or asks, *for anything*, even if they don’t stock it, like his bicycle and clothes. The man there gets them for him, and takes the money out of his money box. That’s it. He has a kind guardian angel but needs more, much more. I don’t think he’s eaten a hot meal all his life. Certainly, looking at his cutlery and crockery drawers, nothing has been used in years. Now get cracking. No, don’t come over, neither of you. No, I can’t come back just yet. It’s just that he’s absolutely terrified I’ll go and he’ll never see me again. I don’t think he’s ever had a friend and he’s finding it all scary and overwhelming. You would only make things worse. Oh, one thing, he really reminds me of someone, any idea who?”





She cuts the connection. From behind she hears, "I'll be your friend too."

"You were listening, you total fiend. Who was at the door?"

"A customer. I'm to do a portrait in this magnifying glass." He holds up a photo of a little boy. "This one. It'll be easy. I can put the picture behind it so I won't have to memorise anything."

"Come on, we need to think up a name for you, any name you like. Do you have a favourite? You could use the names of authors for inspiration." She points. "Try that shelf." She scans the room. "How many books do you have in this house? I'll rephrase that. How many hundreds have you read?"

He wrinkles his nose. "All of them of course. Here we go." He runs a fingernail along a spine. "Anon."

"Don't be daft. Keep going."

"Charles Dickens."

"Now you're talking. No, you're not a Charles, Charlie or Chuck. We shouldn't settle on anything like that. Hmm, Ken wouldn't work either. Dick? Suits you. Name of a highwayman many years ago. Yes, Dick. I've always had a soft spot for it."

"Really?" the man asks, stifling a grin.

"What? Oh... I did not say that. I just didn't. Move on immediately. A surname: now."

"Whatever you say. Here, Cole."

"Boring, something more ... no!"

"As you wish." He runs his finger across spines. "Conner, Cox, Head, Hunt..."

"Slow down. No ... no ... no! and no ... what?" She smirks. "Can you choose another shelf?"

He ignores her and continues, "Ingham, Kerr, King..."

"Are you making these up?" she splutters.

"Palmer, Ryder..." He leaps away as a book hurtles in his direction.

"Another shelf," snarls Esther, "and only read the ones that are actually there."

"Stoker, Tait..." He stops as she screams and they both dissolve into laughter.

Esther jumps up and leapfrogs a pile of books. Looking at the shelf, she says, "You *did* make those up! How on earth? Your brain is faster than lightning – and you had me fooled."

"Updyke..."

"Stop, for pity's sake!"

"Alright." He turns away to another shelf.

"Only the names on spines?"

"No mucking me about."

"I give you my word." He scratches his head. "Ah no, this one." Walking into a beam of sunlight his hair and eyebrows are picked out in jet black against pale skin and pouting lips. Esther leans against a bookshelf and watches him study a row of leather-bound tomes. "Here we are," he says, "Anon again, Bacon, Engels, Euclid, Faraday, Forester, Forster, French ... for Beginners: oops."

"Bingo! Forester. That just rolls off your tongue and sounds like some medieval outlaw. Um, Faraday is OK. Which do you like?"

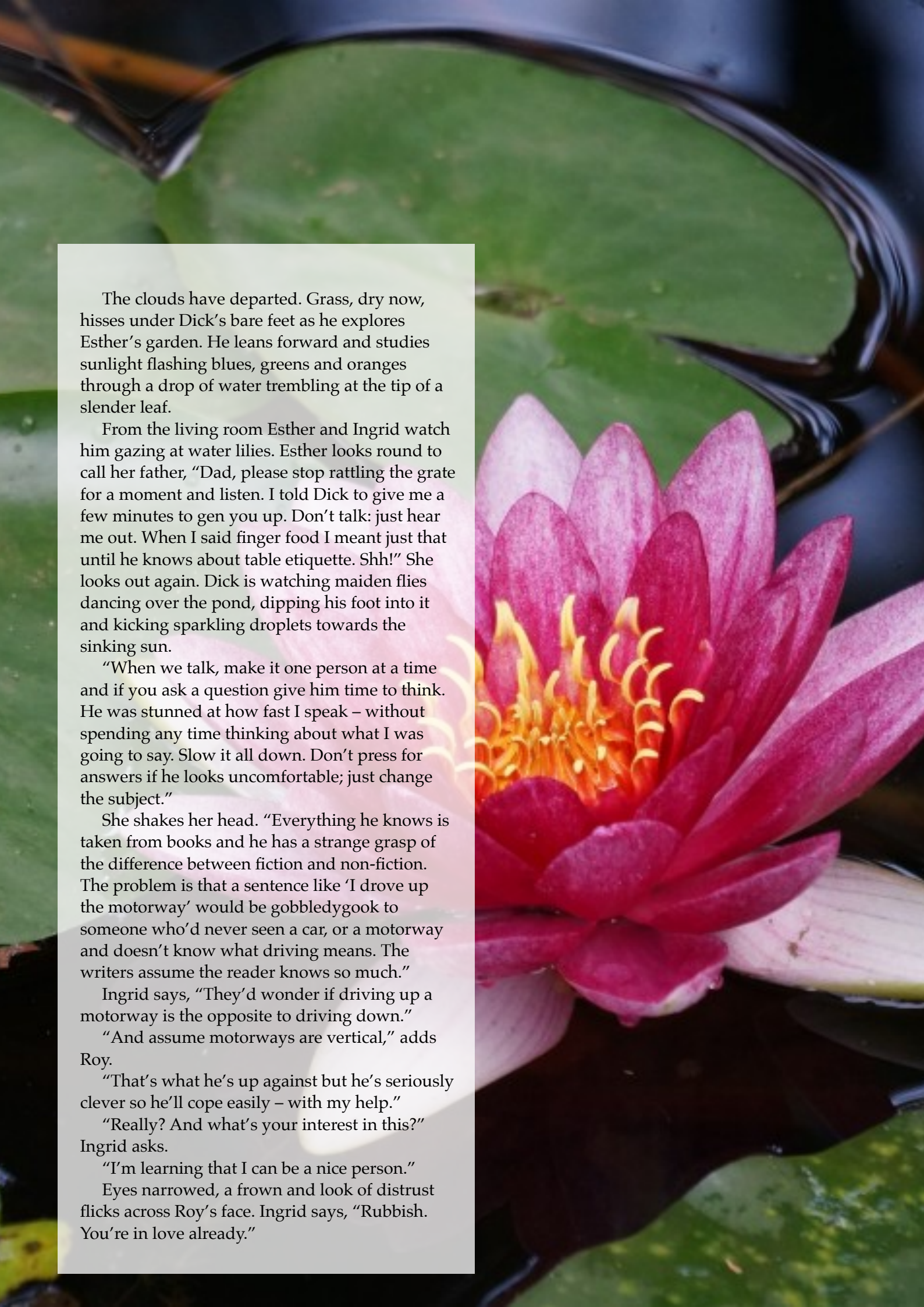
He shrugs. "Either. It's up to you."

"Well, Mister Forester, we've made a start."

"And I need to get on with the glass."

"Oh yes. Can I watch after I've texted Dad?"

"I'd love that very much. You can have a go if you like."



The clouds have departed. Grass, dry now, hisses under Dick's bare feet as he explores Esther's garden. He leans forward and studies sunlight flashing blues, greens and oranges through a drop of water trembling at the tip of a slender leaf.

From the living room Esther and Ingrid watch him gazing at water lilies. Esther looks round to call her father, "Dad, please stop rattling the grate for a moment and listen. I told Dick to give me a few minutes to gen you up. Don't talk; just hear me out. When I said finger food I meant just that until he knows about table etiquette. Shh!" She looks out again. Dick is watching maiden flies dancing over the pond, dipping his foot into it and kicking sparkling droplets towards the sinking sun.

"When we talk, make it one person at a time and if you ask a question give him time to think. He was stunned at how fast I speak – without spending any time thinking about what I was going to say. Slow it all down. Don't press for answers if he looks uncomfortable; just change the subject."

She shakes her head. "Everything he knows is taken from books and he has a strange grasp of the difference between fiction and non-fiction. The problem is that a sentence like 'I drove up the motorway' would be gobbledygook to someone who'd never seen a car, or a motorway and doesn't know what driving means. The writers assume the reader knows so much."

Ingrid says, "They'd wonder if driving up a motorway is the opposite to driving down."


"And assume motorways are vertical," adds Roy.

"That's what he's up against but he's seriously clever so he'll cope easily – with my help."

"Really? And what's your interest in this?" Ingrid asks.

"I'm learning that I can be a nice person."

Eyes narrowed, a frown and look of distrust flicks across Roy's face. Ingrid says, "Rubbish. You're in love already."

A photograph of a blue door set within a brick archway. Above the door is a black lantern-style light fixture. The door has a brass knocker and a mail slot. The surrounding wall is made of red bricks. In the foreground, there are green plants and red flowers.

“No, but he is. The trouble being that he’s only ever read about love, has never experienced anything like it, doesn’t know what to do and is already drowning in too many new sensations as it is. He’s also learned that he’s socially inept and feels that very deeply. Don’t react to anything. If you’re shocked at him building a rockery on the kitchen table or something, just smile and cope.”

“This begs the question...” Ingrid thinks for a moment. “Why now and with us, you? Why didn’t this happen, say, with the shopkeeper?”

“Something about me – *I think*. He doesn’t have a clue why and neither do I. He’s absolutely captivated by me. It ... it doesn’t feel normal. No comments, please. What’s the news about his name?”

Roy replies, “I believe it can all be done legally and without too much fuss. I went ahead and kicked off the process. How did he come by the name Forester?”

“I picked it.”

“You did what?” Ingrid covers her face and snorts with laughter, doubled up.

“What’s got into you?” Esther snarls.

“Dick Forester ... think about it...”

Esther frowns, stiffens and yelps, her eyes wide with alarm. “The *bastard*. I’m going to kill him!” She blurs across the room, vaulting a sofa. The front door slams, shaking windows. Several minutes later she and Dick fall through the door, lying on the carpet and laughing between desperate gasps for air. Dick pulls a twig from Esther’s scalp. “You have a tree in your head.” He rummages. “Several ... and a couple of bushes.”

“Your face is all scratched. Was that blackthorn? I’d better treat it or your face will fall off. Where did you learn to move like that?”

“Mrs. Blessed, my landlady, said I needed to learn to dance. There are books on ballet and a bar and things I can use to practise.”

"Ballet? Why ballet?"

Dick frowns. "She said dancing would be very important. She didn't say what sort or why. I tried all the dancing styles in the books and liked it best. It's a great way to get completely exhausted without having to run all along the river. Especially in summer when there are..." he falls silent.

"People?" Esther strokes the scratches on his face.

"Yes," he whispers and looks down.

"I know just how you feel. People ... they're all bastards." He makes eye-contact.

Nearly choking at his grateful expression, Esther bounds to her feet. "Bathroom, now," she points. "You need your face sorted before it gets even more scary. Thank goodness I don't have to teach you how to use a toilet."

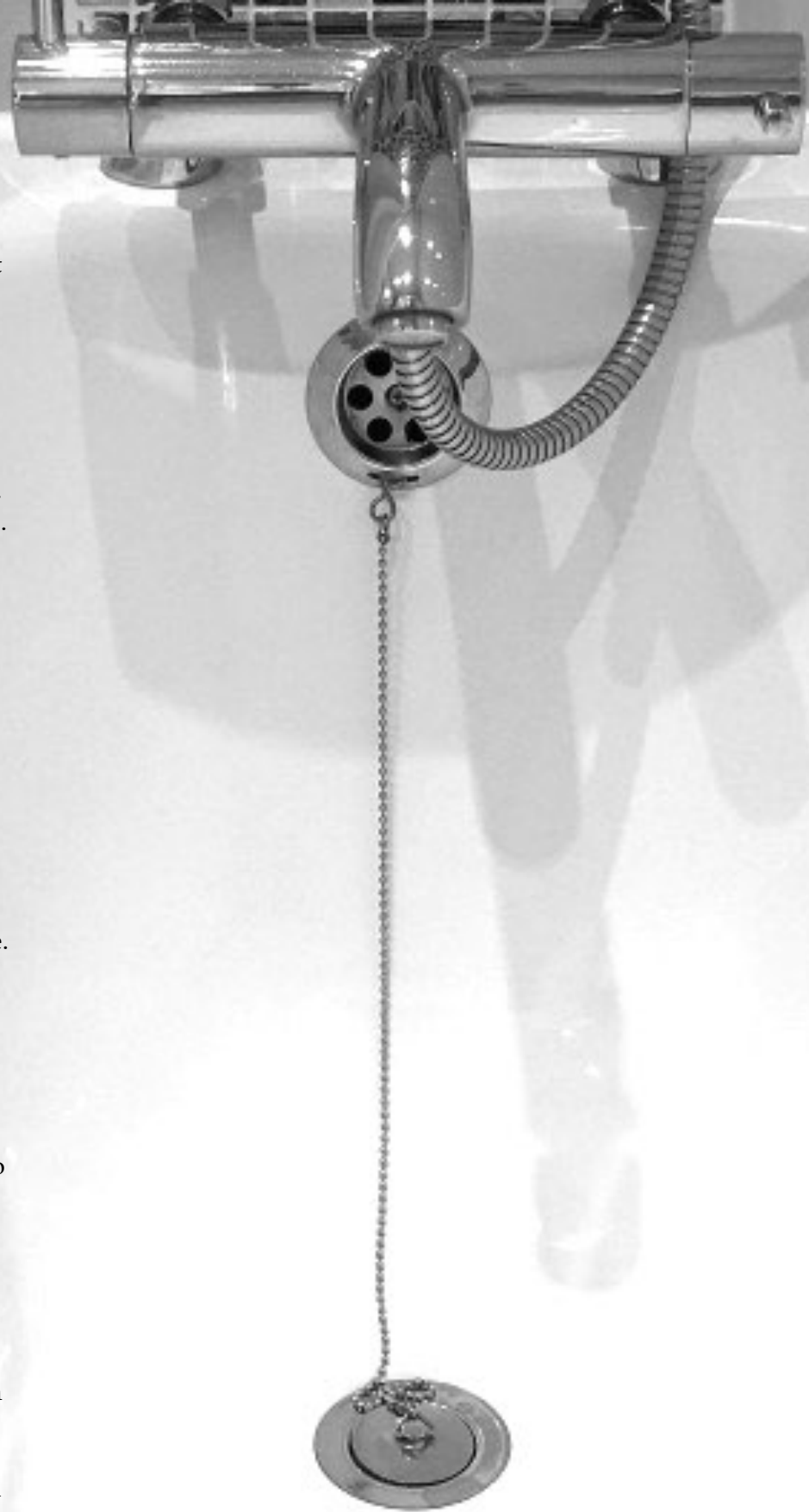
"Mrs. Blessed did. But you could show me advanced techniques."


"Shut up and move. Living room, turn right, up the stairs. We'll use mine. Race you, it's nearly dinner time and my stomach is thinking of leaving home."

After a thundering sprint in which Dick takes every wrong turn available, he looks around the bathroom in wonder, never having seen anything so luxurious. Esther says, "Sit there, good. Soap and water, lots of water to dissolve the toxins. Ow! This cut is deep. Can you feel it?" She rinses a flannel under the hot tap while dabbing with another. "That thing you're frowning at is a toilet, a modern one. I'll show you in a minute. The ghastly monstrosity you have in your house probably predates the formation of the solar system. Oh, what? You have blood in your hair. Stay still."

He grins. "I'm not going anywhere: trust me."

"Tell me why you were told to learn dancing. Do you actually know?"





"It was one of the important things. I had to be athletic, have long hair, be artistic, able to recite poetry... You wouldn't believe how many books there are of romantic poetry. There were more things; I think I'm sufficiently skilled with a rapier and poignard, though I've never actually practised with another person. I had to learn about women and falling in love too. I'm supposed to be able to ride a horse, but I've never had the opportunity."

"And all this was in books? Watch out. This is a tiny bit of thorn and I have to rinse it out."

"Everything I had to learn was in the books."

"And magazines. Falling in love, huh? Tell me about the heaps of steamy chick lit upstairs."

"That was something I had to learn too."

"And the feminist literature beside them?" Esther squats in front of him and wipes a smear of blood from under his chin. "This is all very mysterious and weird. I mean really really weird. Did Mrs. Blessed tell you all this stuff?"

"She made a little book for me. It includes food and eating, washing, dealing with rubbish and callers, and how to use the toilet."

"But, beside the erotica and feminist stuff, there's a whole shelf of conflict resolution and conciliation books."

"I've read them through and through. They're my favourite."

"I wish you'd work on my family. Maybe I should have met you before I decided to go to war with everyone and everything. But when and why and what's this all about? I'm so confused! We'll have to get Mum and Dad in on this. She's a lawyer and has a scarily devious mind; he's a general sorter-outer of just about any problem – everything from exposing corruption to bridges that

are falling down. How ... how did you know how to read that book?"

Dick shrugs. "I knew how to read."

"But how, when you can't count or even write?"

"Writing is going to be easy. Just don't make me write drippy romantic poetry: I'm sick of it. I don't know why I was able to read."

"Oh! Look at your filthy feet. Mine will be the same. Arg, I'm starving."

"Here, let me wash yours. It'll be quicker."

"We can do each other's to save time," she says.

"No, we'll end up fighting with water, knowing you."

"Me? Oy! don't pull my foot so hard. I need it to stay on."

After the screaming water fight, Esther leads the way back to the living room. Roy and Ingrid dodge past each other with plates and food, attempting to reach the coffee table first and use the last remaining space there. Ingrid wins and leaves Roy holding a tray, frustrated. Esther snatches it from him. "Any more plates can go on my lap with this. Hey, Dick, what do you normally eat? Sit down here. These are corn chips and those pots are squishy stuff that you snap them in."

"I get boxes from the shop. Vegetables and fruit and cheese. I like nuts too."


"Bread, biscuits, crackers, rice? Hang on..." She wipes hummus from the tip of her nose. "Do you cook anything?"

"No. I do have instructions but I can't get anything to work."

"You have no gas or electricity. We'll need to..." She stops as Dick leaps from the couch and runs to the nearest window. After looking both ways and up into the sky, he runs to the next and, hands splayed on the glass, presses against it, scanning the garden.

"Uh? What's up?" Esther comes to his side, licking dip from the edge of her hand. "Problem?"





"It was me," says Ingrid. "Did the music startle you? Sorry. I'll switch it off."

Esther puts a hand on Dick's shoulder. "It's OK. It's only music. That's why you went to the window, isn't it? Any music ... well ... any noise in your house comes from the outside." She tugs his sleeve. "Come and sit down. We need food and lots of it."

Dick looks around the room. "Music ... from inside this room?"

"Sit down! I'll explain..."

Esther is cut off by Ingrid saying, "Shh. Here, Dick, I'll play Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. I'll turn it off if you don't like it."

Roy comes in from the kitchen but stops and, like everyone else, watches Dick. About thirty seconds in he's standing, leaning back against the window, and appears to have left the world behind. Fist pressed against his mouth, he's wide-eyed and clutches the sill for support.

Esther stares at Dick, stunned and forgetting to breathe. She puts an arm around him, whispers, "Hey, you," and leans her head on his shoulder. Ingrid creeps over and hands Esther a tissue. Six minutes later Esther wipes tears from Dick's face. He looks at her with an expression she's never seen before.

Dropping her gaze, she leans on the glass, and murmurs, "Shit."

~

"I give in," Dick lets the knife and fork drop on his plate. "Why? What's the point?"

Esther sniggers. "It's the way things are done. Everyone eats with knives and forks round here."

"But why? It makes no sense. Go on, tell me why."

Roy leans back in the other sofa. "Do not ask a culture which calls itself civilised to give you logical reasons for its actions. You invariably end up in an incinerator."

"Oh God, he's off again," growls Esther. "Mum, suffocate him with a cushion or something. We can say it was in self defence."

Ingrid nods. "Justified."

"Enjoyable and satisfying."

"Please don't," Dick exclaims. "I haven't given him his book yet."

"There you go, kill him with the book. It'll save time," Esther says.

"Really ... a book for me?" asks Roy.

Esther nods. "Yes, a big heavy one, ideal for crushing the thickest skull and splattering the smallest brain. We can all pitch in to stamp out escaping epigrams."

Dick wonders about a strained edge to Esther's voice, as if the joke had some real anger or resentment behind it. She's not been as relaxed as she was when alone with him earlier. He goes to the hall and rummages in his rucksack. Returning, he flips pages, and says, "Because you like diatoms. This is a book about small things too." He holds it out. "Here."

Roy takes it. "The actual *Micrographia*? Where on earth did you get this?"

"I don't know."

Ingrid rises. "That's Roy silent for a while. Dick, Esther, give me a hand with these plates. Then I want to try something."

Ingrid's experiment is to give Dick some sheet music to see if he understands it. He's sitting beside Esther, frowning and turning the score round. She asks him, "Why are you holding it like that? Are you long sighted or something?"

Dick flushes red and closes his eyes. He realises it's an opportunity, though a little risky, to relax Esther. He chuckles. "Oh, I've been caught..."

"What?"

"I was only pretending to look at it so I could look at your feet instead."

"My feet? Why?"

"Interesting..." Ingrid says. "Do tell."

"Oh ... well, from an artistic point of view they are remarkable. Feet produce every possible curve a human body can make and, apparently, fit perfectly with Classical Greek mathematical theory and something called the Fibonacci sequence. They also change shape more than any other part of the body."





Ingrid says, "Not true."

Esther flashes a glare at her.

"Mother, behave."

Dick notices the tension growing, and wonders what he can do about it. While thinking hard, he continues, "When you're standing they are a quite different shape to when they're off the ground – like yours." He nods towards Esther's feet. "The corner of an eye, with the tear duct, does it well, so too the corners of some mouths. Hands are amazing, even nostrils. Look," he holds a hand out. "Like this you get a whole bunch of curves interacting. You see? There's depth to them, not just an outline." He crosses his legs. "Now the foot. You can see the big toe curves to that secret space they all have underneath, which rarely gets to touch anything and probably feels ignored. Oh yes, then the ball of the foot and this fabulous curve of the instep leading to the heel; its curves are about strength; you can't miss that. Heels never fail to surprise me. I draw them too small sometimes, they're big and bold. Now, if you were looking from the side, this side, you would also see the sole and how it curves and flattens to the straight outside edge of the foot." He smiles and looks at everyone. "It's incredibly beautiful, everything echoing and reflecting everything else. Now, if someone keeps a foot extended and puts their weight on the ball of it, everything changes and the bones produce this fabulous and elegant fan and both the upper and lower surfaces proclaim strength, pressure and tension, like they're saying 'I can handle this easily!'. Feet just radiate confidence, except for the smaller toes. They like to look vulnerable but don't let them fool you. It's all so mind-blowing."

Ingrid coughs to get attention.
“Permission to speak. Have you answered Esther’s question?”

“Ah...” Dick looks away. “Not even a little bit. Well, from an engineering point of view, they are miraculous. When you’re running and jumping they can take a shock weight like,” he holds up fingers, “that many of you. I think you call it eight, and they can do it for hours without the slightest problem. Ballet dancers spend a lot of time making their feet and ankles even stronger.”

“Fascinating,” Ingrid murmurs. “Have you answered her question yet?”

Eyes closing, Dick shakes his head. “Ah ... still no.”

“Well, go on then.”

Esther says, “This is a fascinating speech. You have the energy of a simmering kettle at all times, but just then you were boiling over. Pray continue.”

Blushing again before the last one has quite faded, he turns to her. “I like feet. I like your feet. Esther, you have seriously sexy feet.”

In one lightning fast movement she tucks them under her. “What? I mean what?” She adds, “Mother, stop laughing!”

Dick tries to explain, “What with ballet and anatomy books and those on massage...”

“Massage?” Ingrid interrupts, sitting bolt upright.

“Yes, massage. I’ve studied face and foot massages. I can probably adapt the techniques. But there’s one which I do on myself for practice and to force me to relax.”

Ingrid beats the seat beside her. “Show me, show me! No, show Roy. But you can use my feet.”

Esther punches Dick’s shoulder. “Do not touch my mother. I forbid it.”

He frowns, “It’s ... it’s not harmful. I wouldn’t...”

“I’m sure it isn’t. I’m worried about her harming you, innocent and unsullied as you are – well, except your weirdness regarding my feet.”





"I could do it on Roy..."

"No... Arg! I've interrupted you again. I'm trying not to, honest. But, anyway, don't go near Dad's feet, they're desperately unhygienic."

Ingrid laughs. "That leaves you then."

Esther grabs cushions and piles them over her legs. "You can forget that. Dick, what are you doing? Leave the coffee table. Pull it back. This is not going to happen!"

Ingrid darts across the space Dick has made. Esther squeals, "Dad, Dad! I'm being abused by perverts."

Roy turns a page. "Shh."

The other sofa turns into a tangled scrum spitting cushions until, gasping for air, Esther says, "OK, OK, I'll come quietly."

"We need ropes," Dick says.

"And leather with studs, lots and lots of studs," Ingrid adds.

"Are you quite comfortable?" Dick asks, sits on the floor with his back to Esther, and rests her ankles on his shoulders. "This should work like this but I've not actually tried yet."

"Be gentle with my feet. It's their first time."

Ingrid takes the Micrographia from Roy. "Watch and learn."

"But I..."

"Or die horribly." Roy sighs and sits forward, his chin resting on cupped hands. Ingrid kicks him.

"No, you're going to do it to me. Just don't wreck my nail polish. Get on the floor like Dick."

Dick watches them prepare. He and Esther move aside to make more space. "Alright, Roy. I'll talk you through it. It'll help me too as I've only imagined doing it on another person. Just check your hands aren't too cold and then start at the front of the ankle just where it becomes the foot. The trick is to touch but not to touch, in other words, the lightest caress you can achieve. I'll come back to that. This area of the foot isn't ticklish so the person will start to relax. By the time you get to ticklish areas the person will have passed through the tickle barrier. This is crucial because... Are you alright, Esther?"

"I suppose. It is weird though."

"Good, where was I? ...because this is only enjoyable if the person is deeply relaxed. The more relaxed they are the better it is for them." He pauses, watching Roy. "What?"

"Nothing, I thought for a second Esther had stopped breathing."

Both of them have lowered their voices to a low murmur. Dick says, "There's a moment when the feet stop being just things you walk on. The sensations take over and you lose yourself in them. Maybe it was that. Let's just continue for a while."

After some minutes Dick cups Esther's heels and slips between them turning round and kneeling. His voice is barely a whisper, "About gentle touch. There's another part of you you can use even more magically." He leans forward and, with the tip of his tongue, strokes under and behind Esther's ankle bones. She squeaks and stiffens momentarily, frowning, but relaxes again. Head back and eyes closed, Esther sinks into the sofa, sighing. Dick says, "Then the tips of the toes and that secret place beneath."

A tremble passes through Esther.

"Now, Roy, there's a place on your foot which never gets touched and you can't get your finger in easily. It's that skin between the toes, at the back. Use the very tip of your tongue."





Esther stiffens again. "I don't think..."
"Hush, give it a try but tell me to stop if you want me to." Dick watches her brow almost clear as he continues.

Ingrid lets out a low moan.

Esther's frown returns. "I really think I want you to..."

"Can I just finish this foot to show Roy?" He runs his tongue up the centre of her sole and lowers the foot. "There, done." Esther remains relaxed with her eyes closed. Dick turns to Roy. "How's it going?"


Roy smiles. "I think I need this done to me."

"I really liked doing it to someone else," says Dick. "There's a limit to what I can do to myself. It's everything about you focussed entirely on making someone ecstatic. That's amazing, isn't it? That's it, you could do around the ankles once more." He turns back as Esther's other foot rises and taps his mouth. He takes her heel and begins again.

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Ingrid moans, "I don't want to get up."
Esther whispers, "Move, but mind where you put your feet. He's fallen asleep on the floor. We need to lift him onto the sofa. Go and get him a blanket or something. Dad, when I've tucked him in we all need to talk. Can you turn the dimmer down in here and sort a candle in the kitchen? I don't want the lights showing through the glass; they're too bright." Roy pauses, glancing at her and frowning before heading away.

Ingrid and Roy each sit with a glass of wine at the kitchen table as Esther closes the door quietly. Ingrid asks them, "Is that really how artists see things? Bits of body proclaiming how confident and strong they are ... or pretending to be weak and hiding behind other bits? Secret places in a foot? I'd think that was all a bit silly and affected but he speaks as if it's normal."



Esther shades her eyes and peers back through the door. "He's fast asleep. It hadn't occurred to me that he'd find this evening so exhausting. I get the feeling he's had whole mountains to climb that we don't know about. I think we should leave him. He knows where to find the kitchen and a bathroom. I'll stop down here in case he needs a lift home."

Roy asks, "What's going on, Esther?"

She sits and, elbows on the table, supports her head. "I honestly don't know." Looking at her parents in turn, she adds, "He's unique, delicate and vulnerable. I really need your help. I'm winging it and feel I could make a godawful cock-up." She lets hair fall across her face. "You're thinking this is not the real me but a load of whitewash. You may be right. I'm hoping you're not."

Ingrid asks, "After all...?"

Esther interrupts, "After all what? They deserved everything. People pretending to be friends only to get to your money through me – and who turned vicious when I sent them packing. Men who professed love but wanted the same with the bonus of getting into my knickers in the process." She sweeps hair back and raises her head. "I had a lot of anger."

"You were spiteful and savage, again and again."

Esther closes her eyes. "Maybe some apologies are in order, but not yet. I ... I need to... What do I need?"

Roy reaches over and takes her hand. "To grow up a bit, but I'm stunned. I never expected you to say even that – about apologies, I mean. Has the anger gone?"

"A lot of it but you both being away working for several days and nights – it felt like weeks – and leaving me alone as a child, is a lot of frightened loneliness to get over. Gran came as often as she could but..."



“She could never stay long, you know that, and said you never cried when she left.”

Esther almost strikes the table but stops her hand before making noise. “You told me not to!” she hisses. “You made me believe it would be betraying you.” She covers her face. “Sorry to bring all this up again but I still don’t think you’ve grasped just how bad it was. Everyone else I knew caught that anger because I was too terrified to turn it on you two. We’ve never spoken about it. You always change the subject or say it’s not a good time.”

Ingrid takes Esther’s other hand. “We made terrible mistakes.”

“And you’ve apologised. But it can never be enough and we have to ... not now...” She squeezes their fingers, her eyes lighting up. “I don’t think that horrible bitch was really me. Something’s happening. Dick is a highly intelligent, witty, kind and selfless person. He’s totally vulnerable and naive. My next project is to see he’s supported through what is going to be a difficult adjustment. So ... so I’m not promoting myself for any more work until I know he’s OK, and...” She purses her lips and looks away for a moment. “And, I know exactly what kind of me is happening. Dick may burst my bitch balloon but I don’t know what will come after it.” She lets out a long breath and wipes her eyes. “I don’t know I can trust myself. We are all too aware I have a track record of starting things, getting bored, and leaving everyone else to finish them or clear up the mess. I just don’t know if it’s all going to repeat itself. This thing has started and can’t be stopped. He’s put all his trust and faith in me, gods! he’s besotted – and I could let both of us down.”

Roy sighs. “We have heard a lot of this sort of talk from you.”

"I'm asking you for help and advice. I've said that before and not meant it, I know. Help me."

Roy asks, "Are you up for family therapy now, do you think? All three of us?"

"Yes, let's give it a bash. I never thought I'd say that. I need, we need, to get all this crap out of the way and start afresh. I want a clear head."

Ingrid asks, "How are you doing? I mean, feeling right now?"

"Like I may actually be a good person and it's doing my head in. Sorry. Seriously, I'm OK, just frightened that I'm going to mess up a person through lack of ... anything."

"I'll be here. Even when I'm working, call me even over tiny things, OK? We'll make this a conversation which can be picked up at any time of day or night. Now I'm going to think this whole situation over and see how I can help you. Right now not only are you doing a fabulous job but you've taken my breath away. Good for you, darling."

Esther looks at her father. "You're not convinced, are you?"

"Not yet, but I want to be and I'm always hoping." Roy stands. "Bedtime. Oh, one question. How old do you think Dick is?"

Esther shrugs. "I keep changing my guess. About four years younger than me – around nineteen seems about right. It's just that he's way ahead in some ways and miles behind the world in others."

Ingrid rises and pushes her chair under the table. "I'd say that's about right. The most outstanding thing I noticed is his ability to know how other people are feeling and guess their reactions: that's where he's ahead. He handled us very skilfully with that massage session, easing us past our comfort zones. Instinctively I knew I could trust him. Maybe he's highly empathic."

Roy says, "And another question: who owns that house?"

Esther's head jerks back in surprise. "Ooh, now that is a question. A Mrs. Blessed, I think."

She watches the candle flickering and listens to her parents getting ready for bed – a sound so often denied her. Armed only with a glass of water and a blanket crocheted by her grandmother, she settles on the couch opposite Dick, stroking her feet and watching him until she dozes, still half-alert.

~



Esther patters down the steps into Dick's cellar workshop. "Ha! Thought you'd be down here avoiding me." She spots the pool of candlelight and illuminated strands of Dick's curly black mane. The radio she's lent him plays music so softly she can barely hear it. Walking through the subterranean gloom, she reaches his side. He's concentrating, hunched over, everything motionless except his long fingers. A diatom design behind ripples of water decorates the glass, impossibly trapped within its substance. She sits on the bench beside him.

"It's OK, you don't need to talk to unimportant boring me." She waits, studying his profile, wishing men looked at her with the same intensity he gives to his work. "It's just that I've brought hot coffee for you." She places an insulated beaker beside him. "And the world is about to end due to the Moon crashing into it. Your T-shirt is on fire and I'm turning into a lizard." She waits for a moment. "I'm dying and will expire in about twenty seconds but don't let that distract you from anything interesting."

Dick straightens as he turns to her. Laying his stylus down, he lifts the candle and, holding it close, studies her face. "What do I see in those brown, brown eyes that reach into the infinity of your dark and twisted soul? I see intelligence, kindness, gentleness, fire and frost. There's strength and courage, passion and compassion. How can I, a mere mortal, possibly not be overwhelmed? And then there's your face, exquisite perfection – and with a smile which softens my skeleton to leave me quivering and helpless. Your physical grace and poise, elegance like a queen among the greatest of dancers, your perfect form... I have given up resisting you, it is beyond all my strength and, defeated, I lie at your feet in adoring supplication for eternity."

"You don't half talk bollocks at times. You forgot to mention my beautiful use of language in that otherwise excellent speech. Coffee, drink, be grateful for it, for my deigning to visit you, and..."



COFFEE



King

25c.

Columbia
33 *authentic*



"What do you want?" Dick asks.

"I came to see you."

He leans back and raises an eyebrow. "Hmm, I spoke to God this morning."

"You did not."

"Well, you're quite right. To be more accurate, he spoke to me. If we are going to save humanity from the falling Moon, I have to kiss every one of your freckles. A horrible prospect but it's something we both have to endure I'm afraid."

"Fine, let's all die." She notices the candlelight shining through the very tips of his eyelashes.

He asks, "Are you alright? You gasped."

"Did you know the light...? Forget that. I gasped because of your revolting body odour accumulating down here. Mother says it's time you actually encountered a warm shower and not shivered in cold baths while washing your clothes – you apeman. I'm taking you to our house and we'll shout instructions from outside." She opens the beaker. "Why don't you answer your phone?"

He snorts, "I'm having difficulty. It's..."

"Dead simple. I showed... Oops, sorry. Do finish your sentence all by yourself – if ever you get round to it."

"Working it is easy enough. It's just ... I can't believe I'm talking to a person and not some pixie trapped in the casing." He shakes his head.

Esther grabs his hand. "Careful, you'll singe your lovely ... candle. Can I see how you're getting on with the glasses?"

"You can have a go yourself. Would you like to use my stylus?"

"That had better not be a creepy... No, you wouldn't: not you. Yes please, I'd love to." She claps her hands. "I'm actually excited. Show me how to do this ... thing you do. I don't even know what to call it. I mean, how do you get the designs inside the glass?"

Dick sets the candle on his bench and lights another from it, the new wick spluttering and crackling into life. "I have an idea, follow me." He leads Esther deeper into the cellar. "I think the previous owners ran a bric-a-brac shop. There is so much down here. Behind that bank of books is a chunk of glass I've never felt ready to work on. Now seems just the right time." He turns, holds the light close to her face and watches the reflection dancing in her eyes. "It is the right time. Think of the most beautiful sight you've ever seen, involving light."

Esther closes her eyes. "That's easy ... no! It's really difficult. There are so many. Sunlight on a stream, on a starling's feathers, the back of a beetle, in a dewdrop or tear, an insect's wing... Help! there's so much."

"Here, hold the candle while I uncover the glass and try to lift it." As he hefts the block to his bench, he adds, "Think of what you'd like to create, no matter if you think you can do it or not. It'll be a brilliant idea. You'll know when it happens, just don't reject it because you think it's beyond your ability to draw it or whatever." He shakes a rag, jerking his whole body. The two candles flicker, flames trembling. "I'll clean it and finish this glass for Roy while you think. Here, sit beside me."

Eyes closed, Esther lets ideas blossom. "Oh ... oh, I've got it."

"Good, we'll strike while the bird is in the bush. I won't be a minute. Just let the idea stay in your mind. Maybe look at the glass. The idea may suggest changes. You'll know if they're right."

"I'm ready right now."





"I... What...?" Esther turns to look at Dick. Her mouth moves to speak again but nothing comes out. She's looking inward, frowning, pale.

Dick slides the stylus from her hand. "Let's go out into sunshine and talk about what happened. You may have forgotten some of it or do remember but it's a jumble of which you make no sense." Esther rises and walks with him, holding his arm. He lays a hand over hers. "You feel a bit cold. We could stroll beside the river for a while. It was like that for me at first, and still is at times. It's as if you were thinking in a way that makes no sense after you stop." He guides her up the steps before him, letting her pause as she adjusts to the light. "And you think it must be a dream, unreal, something to dislike or look upon with disdain because the way you think now detests you thinking like that. At least that's how it felt to me. Sooner or later you can think in both ways at the same time. Then they merge into one, which becomes *you*, a bigger you who's less sure about anything but more comfortable with everything. It feels like a crab must when it's shed a carapace that was too small. Actually, that's good because the crab probably feels vulnerable and strange for a while." He leads her to the gate but slows as she's ignoring everything but him. "Are you alright? Do you want to do something else instead?"

Wide-eyed, she gulps air. "We went somewhere strange. You were there and brought me back. I feel safe ... so ... safe now." Tears flood her eyes and stain his T-shirt as she hugs him, jerking his breath out.

Traffic roars up the narrow main road; gulls swoop high overhead. He looks up, stroking her hair. "I think there's rain on the way, maybe a storm."

Esther pulls away from him partially. "I want to go to a cafe, to take you to one. I bet you've never been in one, have you?"

"No."

"My favourite is in Saint Mary's Street, two minutes away. Come on." She smiles and tosses her hair, flashing wild, from blood red to bronze in sunlight. "I want to take you into a new place and make you feel safe there now. It's only fair." Releasing him she pirouettes on the path, laughing. "Whee! I'm safe: I'm..." Esther stops, her hands frozen in mid clap. "What's wrong?"

"Don't stop. Do you know? if Mozart had heard you laugh, he'd have abandoned music and invented microphones. Where's Saint Mary's Street?"

"To the right. Away from the river. Have you been that way before?"

"No, it's noisier than the river. You'll have to show me what to do so I seem like everyone else. There will be rules too. Cafés have saucers and tablecloths – I've read about them. Will I see some?"

Esther squeezes his arm. "Oh-oh, this may be harder work than I supposed. Um, only talk to me and only when other people can't overhear."

"Oh, I've always wanted to ask," he says, pointing up. "That's an aeroplane, isn't it?"

"Yes, very high up. Stop looking," she pulls him to one side, "or you'll end up run over by that pushchair."

"Aeroplane... Until I read about them I thought those tiny things flying were animals. After that I wondered if they were arrows Robin Hood had shot."

Esther snorts. "This is going to be much harder than I thought. We cross here. That's Saint Mary's Street. Don't let go of me and walk when I do."

"I know how to cross roads. I've watched from the garden. That's how I got to your house."





“So this road but not so close to the centre of Wallingford? Really, it needs a fortune teller either side just to know what your chances of survival are.”

“I like being with you. What are those black lumpy things for? It’s silly, they’ll stop cars using that small road.”

“They’re called bollards and they’re to stop cars using that small road. Hey, the cafe’s nearly empty. Good, you won’t freak too many people out at once.” She pushes the door open. “Follow me and don’t do anything but that, OK?”

“Your wish is better than a stitch in the broth.”

“Precisely.” She pulls a chair out. “We sit and wait for service while talking about the weather.”

“Excellent.” His chair scrapes as he pulls it. “What’s wind shear? Why’s it a problem for aeroplanes?”

“We talk about ... something else. Anything.”

“Would you like a foot massage?”

“No, yes, not here! No for the moment. I haven’t dealt with the last one. You’ll have to show me your book. That was pretty mind-blowing.”

“It fails to mention the bit with the tongue.”

“How did you learn about it then?”

“I made it up.”

“You ... you total...” Esther splutters and bursts into uncontrolled laughter – momentarily silencing all conversations in the cafe. She shakes her head. “You are too weird ... well, too open and honest to be a human.” A shadow falls across her. She looks up to see a slim waitress wielding a notebook and pen. “Hello, could we have two black coffees, please?”

“Americano?”

“Whatever, provided it’s black and it’s coffee.”

The waitress turns to Dick. "Would sir like anything from the menu?" she says, pointing.

He stares around the table. "This? This is an actual menu? Oh wow! I know all about these. Ah, do I want anything from it? Well, I like the turquoise ink but how would you get it off? and anyway I can make that colour if I need – mmf."

Esther places a hand over his mouth. "Don't worry about him. He's new on this planet. A couple of Danish pastries would be lovely. Different ones, please, makes food fights more interesting." She winks at Dick as the waitress departs. "She's new and needs a hard time. She gave me the 'that man is too good for you – I'm more his class' look. We may have to run if she does it again. Do you have washing powder which can get blood and brain stains out?"

He looks over to the counters. "Her? How could any other woman be remotely interesting now that I've met you?"

"Perfect answer. I'll give you three out of ten. Keep this up and there won't be any detention today." She glances at the waitress. "She is attractive though. Out of interest, what do you reckon? Oh, just remember my comment regarding detentions."

"I've read about this too. Some books imply you can be attracted to physical features – external things and makeup. Why is this? It's not *really* how people think, is it? First you have to find the very essence of a person. If that is beautiful then everything else is. It's like attraction from the core first and then outwards. Everything else follows."

"Another bloody speech happening. Emergency, emergency, everyone stay calm and leave by the nearest window or wall: save yourselves."

Dick continues regardless, "Everything. The tip of a finger becomes the most beautiful one in the world. Love radiating and enveloping it."





"Gods! Am I hearing this from a man? I mean who's possibly still a teenager? No way. I can't believe... That has to be a first in the history of the world. What...?"

"You say I'm honest? Very well. Remember I looked in your eyes and told you what I saw?" Dick waits for her to nod. "I said only the nice bits. Where I said there is fire and frost, I see passionate conflict. It's sapping your strength." He takes her hand. "What can I do? If there's anything you can take from me that will help ... anything. There is also doubt and fear but everyone probably has those. I don't think they're a problem for you."

"Did you just say I could take anything from you?"

"I won't be happy until you've taken everything."

Esther snatches her hand away and leans, elbows on the table, covering her face. "Gods' sake..."

"Ah, detention after all?"

She stares at him for long and intense moments. "Yes, it could be a really long one." She sits back to make room for the tray.

The waitress takes her time, and says, "Is that all to your liking, sir?"

"Thank you so much. I'm celebrating. This is the first time I've been able to tell my sister I'm gay ... and she's even coming on the march!"

The waitress smiles and hugs the tray. "Oh, that's so sweet. Congratulations."

Once she's out of earshot, they both relax and Esther takes his hand again. "That was amazing. She doesn't believe you though and gave me a filthy look. I reckon she thinks you're pussy-whipped."

"Is that like a cat of nine tails?"

"Almost exactly. Oh..." She answers her phone.

Dick tunes out, using all his focus on Esther's eyes, expressions and tones of voice. Words, he's coming to realise, are a distraction. He waits until she puts the phone down. Esther's hesitant, as if not sure whether she should be using it again. Dick says, "A conflict, a choice, too many possible outcomes, some of them potentially causing irrecoverable loss."

"How do you do that?" She sighs and rests clenched fists on the table.

"It's as easy as breathing. Just don't listen to what people are saying. What can I do?"

Releasing a tension held too long, Esther sags. "Just continue being you, and don't mind if I hit you with rocks and hurl abuse. I'm ... a show I was in has caught a lot of attention and, potentially, huge backing. It's going to happen again and may go around the world. I have to go to London for two days so we can all practise and prepare again. Then we'll perform before funders, patrons, and take it from there."

Dick leans forward and takes her hands. "Oh, can I watch you dance. Oh, please!"

She shakes her head. "Not this time. It'll be for backers only." She closes her eyes. "Why does everything happen at once?"


"Really? I thought *I* was overwhelmed. What's the problem?"

"The problems... First, this is a dream opportunity and could lead to a minimum three month contract: usually the States, Vienna and Japan, plus a couple of others. It could run for eight months. That's serious money and recognition. The fact that the organisers and backers are all slimy creeps that think dancers are alive just to entertain them..." She opens her eyes and looks at Dick. "The only real man among them is the choreographer Leadbetter, Dave. It's a shame; he's married and nearly seventy. Good men are rare in the art world."

"If you need a, what do you call them? body, ah ... protector, something like that."

"Bodyguard. No, I can handle them."





“So what else is happening?”

“I have another project, probably, more...” she slumps, chews a bite of Danish, and catches scattering flakes.

“Definitely more important. Did I actually admit that *to myself*? Shit. This making the right decision is the hardest thing: I’ve never done it before. Does it get easy with practice?”

Dick shrugs. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think all my decisions have been made for me. What’s this other project?”

“Top bloody secret.” She opens her mouth to speak, but stares at him and starts with something else, “Dick ... are you really real?”

“This is debatable. The project: can I help?”

“Let’s talk about the glass sculpture I made ... or didn’t make. Any more thoughts on it?”

“This is you saying we’re not going to discuss the project further. I’m not surprised; your pupils are at maximum and lips pale. I willingly oblige and change the subject in accordance with your wishes.” He winks and smiles. “Your sculpture? No new ideas at all. We both felt you were doing something. The fact that we can’t see it is a little bit of a mystery. I’ll see what I can work out. When are you away dancing?”

“Tonight, I should really go tonight so I’m fresh for practice tomorrow or the next. But there will be delays, there always are. So let’s say we have a day or two to muck about.” She grimaces. “But it’s OK, I won’t be zooming around the world any time soon. There’s something more ... urgent.”

Dick's face glows in the light of a candle, the single flame reflected in both eyes. He's stroking the lump of glass Esther worked on and wondering why it glows and sparkles from time to time. He whispers, "What are you, you lovely mystery?" He looks up into the dark. "And where are you, Mrs. Blessed? Why couldn't you stay and teach me more? This world seems to be strange and a struggle even to those who know about it; I'm overloaded. And Esther, where did she come from? Was she in your plan? I think you knew something at least. You'll know why I feel as though I was in love with her before I knew she even existed. If you had anything to do with that intoxicating creature I'd forgive you everything. I'd hug you and say you'd done a perfect thing."

Esther, meanwhile, sits by a plate glass window overlooking Charing Cross Road: London. She's scanning pedestrians and waiting for the gleam of her mother's hair – always the best way to find Ingrid in a crowd.

Esther's only in the café because the first floor is high enough for her to look over the shambling hordes. She's vowed never to return.

Seeing her mother approaching, Esther slaps a fiver down and bolts for the door, fighting her way past a queue waiting for seats.

"Mother, darling. Not this café. I've renamed it the Brown Waterhole. The coffee tastes of swamp and they make tea with the same tepid water as coffee – so it tastes of nothing. The only sensory input I got was the smell of badly washed cups."

They hug, causing crowded pedestrians to stumble all the way back to Soho. Ingrid spins Esther round. "There's another this way. "How's the dancing?"





"The usual. It's a warehouse in Gunnersbury we're in at the moment. The stage limits are chalked on the floor. No one's crashed into a virtual wall yet or fallen into a theoretical orchestra pit, but two dancers have picked up injuries already. Never rest: never stop stretching. Idiots. On the bright side, I was able to squeeze a couple of friends in to take their place."

"Ooh, sounds like you're becoming a big shot."

"No, I just get on with Dave. He's the biggest shot involved, as usual. He's sweet, honest, kind and shouldn't be in production at all. There ought to be a cabinet position, minister for male development, and he should take it."

"Which brings me to..."

"Very dangerous ground."

"Dearest, I've been in a minefield, on thin ice in a trembling caldera since you popped out. I'd be bored if there wasn't a major emotional disaster always disrupting everything." She points across the road. "Here, will this one do?"

Esther scans the café. "Yes, probably, but you're paying. I couldn't buy a peanut in that place. Where have you been anyway? When are you going home?"

A waiter shows them a table for two. Ingrid unloads bags, her shoulder bag, miscellaneous shopping and her coat before sitting. "I'm investigating; Roy's snooping."

"Is there a difference?"

"Other than the spelling, no. We've done Dundee together, Halifax and Huddersfield separately and he's doing Leicester today. I'm having a day off to see my precious daughter and see how she's getting on with her beautiful boyfriend." She watches Esther for a moment. "You didn't kill me for saying that. What's going on?"

"I'm not telling you because I'm denying it myself. Leicester is a mystery but those are places Gran lived. Wasn't she born in Huddersfield? Do tell me all."

"Nothing to tell yet, just hunches and dead ends."

"I can smell coffee! actual coffee. They know what they're doing here. Good choice, Mum."

"It's an excellent choice. I love these places. If you complain loud enough they usher you out immediately so you don't have to pay."

"Nice. I'm making you my role model."

"Discretion, darling. Only take my bad bits. The rest are frightfully boring. Now tell me why this couldn't have been done by phone."

"Because ... just because everything. Look, Mum, I'm terrified. Helping Dick is scrambling my brain. He's so ... he's so *fragile*."

"Is there room for a personal question here?"

"Not even slightly. Remember that minefield you mentioned?"

"Have you had sex with him yet?"

"What? Don't be silly! I'm still a virgin anyway."

Ingrid freezes in shock and wonder. "No ... you, you can't be. You're twenty-three ... or thereabouts for goodness sake."

"I can be and I am. I was feeling so angry with the whole world that nothing could get close to me. I needed something that was mine and in my control. Any one thing would have done but I went for that, made it precious and inviolable. And no way would I sleep with him. He'd see it as a sign of commitment on my part – because it would be for him. That would be a great way to let him down. That's my biggest fear: that I could get things very wrong and undo everything I've ... we've achieved."

"Have you spoken to him about it? Like asking him if he's prepared to take risks? There's only one answer you could possibly receive. Therefore you have a choice of one. Take all the time you need."

"No! I'm not going to hurt him. He's... I'm helping him and... Great, I'll send you a postcard from this minefield." She sighs. "Mum, a major disaster is looming and I know it's just me who's going to tread in it."

"That's because you don't know that trying to help and doing it badly is almost as important, or as important, as doing it right."

"That sounds like something Dad would say."

"Then maybe you ought to listen to him sometimes. My theory is that behind all this helping Dick connect confidently with the world, you're making him feel real, the critical point being that you have his permission and aren't charging all over his privacy and wishes as a result."

"Real? Oh..." Esther's eyes widen. "Oh ... I asked him something like that. What do you mean?"

Ingrid wrinkles her nose. "It's something a lonely girl told me at school. She said she didn't feel real unless she was with her friend."

"Did you become her friend too?"

"No. I should have done. I have made mistakes – as you know all too well."

They both fall silent as coffee arrives and Esther chirps, "Hey, did you notice the waiter didn't say 'Enjoy your coffee' like he was making sure you knew what it was supposed to be in case you wondered after tasting it?"

Ingrid raises her mug. "If it's rubbish, I want you to make the scene. I still have one or two parenting goals to achieve and that's at the top of my list. Screaming and throwing tables is a good warm up for the real tantrum."

"I suspect you may yet turn out to be a good mother – now I realise it's up to me to train you."

Ingrid's mug clunks onto the doilie, spattering spots of coffee. "That's the best thing you've ever said. Wait, I need to put it in my phone. Keep talking. My last train leaves in six hours."





“Is he a boy or a man? Sometimes he winds me up or chases me round the garden and other times he seems so mature.”

“Yes, that definitely identifies him as a boy or a man: well done. What’s the problem?”

Esther sits back and stares at Ingrid. “Bloody hell... I don’t know what the problem is. Did I drag you all the way here just to tell you I’m scared shitless? I think that’s it!”

“OK, let me tell you something then. You’re beginning to glow. The lighthouse behind your eyes has been relit. I think help is happening both ways. Do you feel more alive? You don’t have to answer that to anyone but yourself.” Ingrid waits for Esther to reflect. “OK, I think you’re scared of you. Just relax and let it all happen the way it’s going to anyway. Stop thinking you’re in control and stop worrying about disasters – people sort them out afterwards. Young Dick adores you, probably is falling in love with every part of you he discovers, poor deluded man. I bet you can cock up badly again and again and nothing terminal will happen.” She taps the table with her phone. “Right now I trust you more than you trust yourself – that’s quite a dramatic reversal and I’m loving it.”

“Weird. That makes me angry like I want to reject your approval but I know I want it too. Accepting your approval means I might have to accept some of the things you told me before that I didn’t want to believe.” She frowns and shakes her head. “That sort of thing.”

“Wow, you take my breath away. Esther, you’re becoming an inspiration. Do you fancy lunch here?”

“You said ‘lighthouse’. That’s what I was trying to do with the glass. You know the rings of lenses they have with the big one in the centre? I wanted to recapture the wonder I felt when I saw sunlight reflected. Yes, lunch, big. I don’t need to be back until six for the next rehearsal.”

The waiter appears, making Ingrid jump. She asks, "Are you psychic or do the table flowers contain microphones?"

The waiter bows. "We have sacred spirits who float by your side, attentive to your every need. They desire to make you feel joyful, relaxed and fulfilled."

"Impressive ... and good looking. Are you married?"

"I am, madam."

She sighs, "Regrettably so am I. Rubbish isn't it? Can you order for us? Something nice."

Esther pipes up. "Different things, it makes food fights more entertaining. One day, *one day* I'll think of a new joke. We need Dick here. Oh, did I really choose that name?"

The waiter smiles. "I'll ensure you have rock cakes to finish with. Tried and tested. We use them on clients who complain."

Ingrid lays a hand on his arm. "We won't be complaining. We love it here." When they are alone again, she says, "Phone your dad while we're waiting."

"Why? What's up?"

"Why? Because I want to overhear your conversation. I always do when I can. You speak about different things with him."

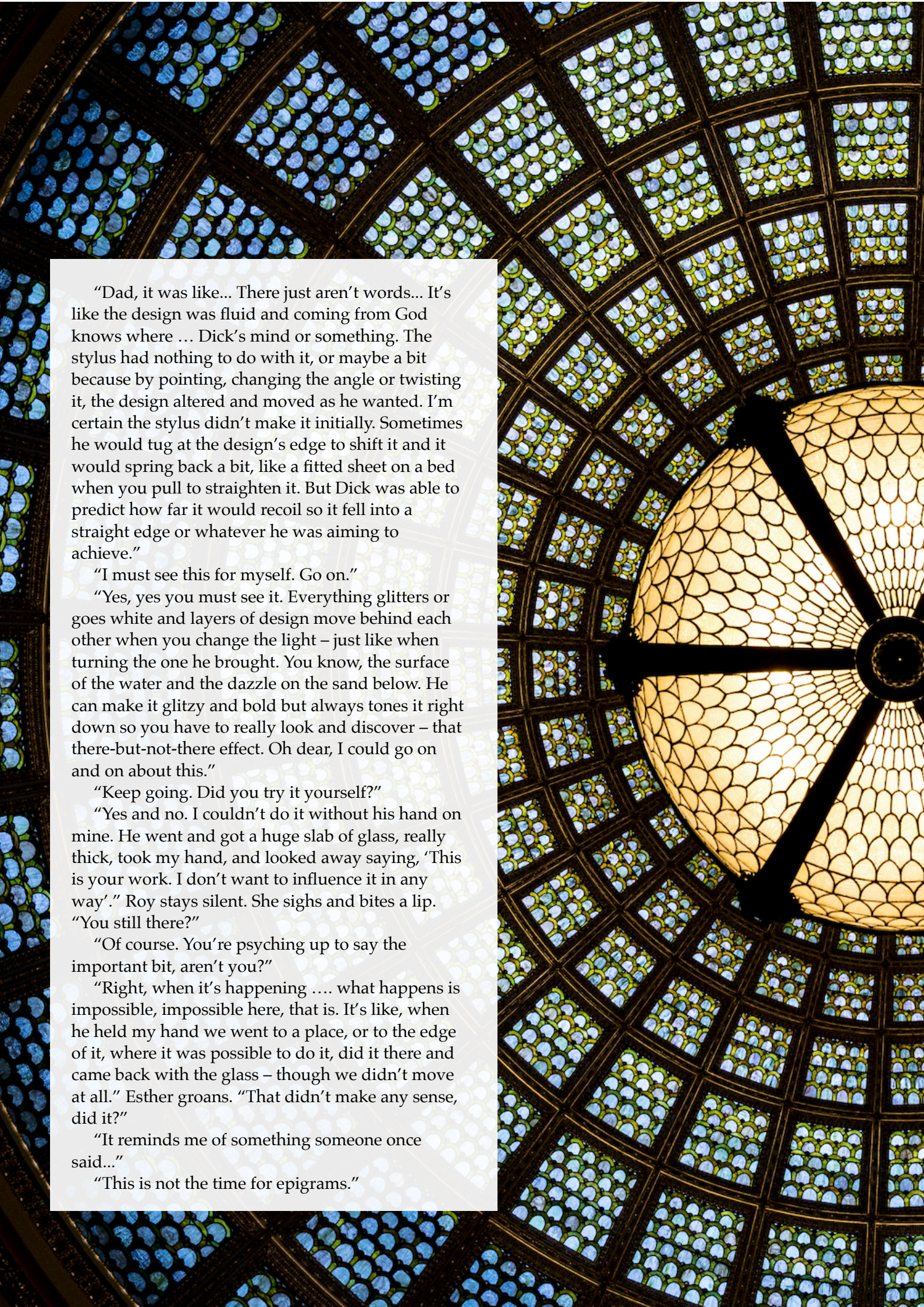
Esther draws her phone from a pocket. "Snoop, spy, traitor."

"I'm sure there are more appropriate words. Maybe not ... I think you have the subject covered."

*







“Dad, it was like... There just aren’t words... It’s like the design was fluid and coming from God knows where ... Dick’s mind or something. The stylus had nothing to do with it, or maybe a bit because by pointing, changing the angle or twisting it, the design altered and moved as he wanted. I’m certain the stylus didn’t make it initially. Sometimes he would tug at the design’s edge to shift it and it would spring back a bit, like a fitted sheet on a bed when you pull to straighten it. But Dick was able to predict how far it would recoil so it fell into a straight edge or whatever he was aiming to achieve.”

“I must see this for myself. Go on.”

“Yes, yes you must see it. Everything glitters or goes white and layers of design move behind each other when you change the light – just like when turning the one he brought. You know, the surface of the water and the dazzle on the sand below. He can make it glitzy and bold but always tones it right down so you have to really look and discover – that there-but-not-there effect. Oh dear, I could go on and on about this.”

“Keep going. Did you try it yourself?”

“Yes and no. I couldn’t do it without his hand on mine. He went and got a huge slab of glass, really thick, took my hand, and looked away saying, ‘This is your work. I don’t want to influence it in any way.’” Roy stays silent. She sighs and bites a lip. “You still there?”

“Of course. You’re psyching up to say the important bit, aren’t you?”

“Right, when it’s happening what happens is impossible, impossible here, that is. It’s like, when he held my hand we went to a place, or to the edge of it, where it was possible to do it, did it there and came back with the glass – though we didn’t move at all.” Esther groans. “That didn’t make any sense, did it?”

“It reminds me of something someone once said...”

“This is not the time for epigrams.”



"No, I agree. It is a bit of an aphorism though. Hear me out. It's about the older a person becomes the more they realise they don't know anything and never did. I think it's more like the stronger you grow, the more you're able to cope with the fact that you're completely ignorant. Every time I think I understand reality it does something to prove me wrong. I must see Dick at work. I really must. And something else I must ask, are you implying that he can do magic?"

"Don't be silly."

"I'm quite serious. Do you really think you know everything about everything?"

"I told you not to be silly but you're not listening."

"So if you don't know everything and don't know what you don't know, how can you tell what's real and what isn't?"

"Well done for your dogged persistence in the face of my commands."

Roy laughs. "Tell me about this non-magical place you went to the edge of without magically moving."

Ester stutters at this, "I ... oh ... well ... ah ... what are you doing in Leicester?"

"Following leads but every time we do it's dead ends or generates more possibilities than we can handle. I'm off to look at a diary in a museum in Carlisle tomorrow. I think your mother is inspecting shops and commercial properties in London. I think that's smoke and mirror language for shopping and getting her hair done."

"What are you actually doing and how's this connected to Gran?"

"That was a wild goose chase on a vague hunch. We got nowhere. We're trying to find out who owns the estate ... the house Dick lives in. Someone must. Every square millimetre of the UK is owned by someone."

"I think being a phone pixie must be a rotten job. One day I'll find a way to free you and bring you eternal happiness. Incidentally, you really do sound like Esther. Well done, I say."

"Dick, my dear friend, that's twice you've successfully answered your phone. Where are you? I just stopped at your house and you failed to be there. It's no way to treat me."

"I've been running along the riverbank, bathed in starlight of course. Currently I've paused to summon sufficient strength to sprint past what I discovered earlier to be a hen party, barbecue, drunken orgy. No man is safe. Someone pulled my shorts down last time I passed."

"What does she look like? I'll kill her for you."

"She's not moving a lot at the moment. She may be dead already. Tall, coquettish, golden hair, incomprehensible, vomits over nettles and footpaths then passes out. Anyone you know?"

"Avoid them all. Swim across the river."

"Are you sure? Won't that damage this phone?"

"Dear God ... you actually read manuals? I'll buy you fifty bloody phones. Don't go near those women if you value your virginity."

"Should I? Am I really a virgin? Sometimes I..."

"Stop there – but good: sperm has a short shelf life. Swim. Now."

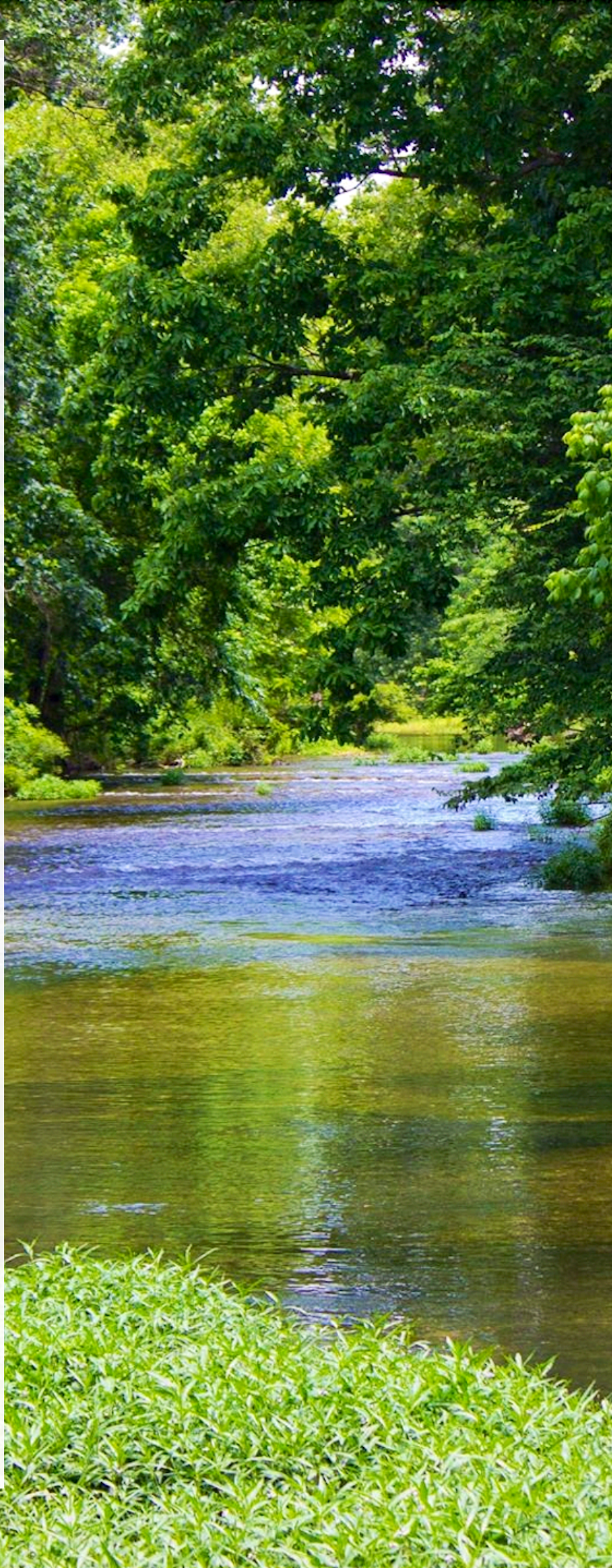
"I thought you wanted to visit a cousin?"


"I did but her waters broke two days early. Some people are downright inconsiderate."

"I'd better go; the women have seen me. Where are you?"

"I'll meet you at the end of the bridge. I had to park away from the house because of bloody roadworks."

"Wish me luck. I hope to have enough time to free my pixie so he doesn't drown. Do you have any tips on how to swim? It can't be too difficult."



A lush green forest with a river flowing through it. The trees are dense and vibrant green, with sunlight filtering through the leaves. The river is calm and reflects the surrounding greenery. The scene is peaceful and serene.

“Dick, forget I said that! I was joking.”

“Don’t you worry: I’ll be fine.”

Esther waits in growing tension, with elements of panic introducing themselves to her heart and breathing rates. Far away, on the opposite bank and upstream, is a source of light and noise she believes to be the party. She takes a few steps down a treacherous zig-zag path, and hugs herself against the night’s chilly breezes. Deciding there’s no good reason for both of them to break their ankles in the dark, Esther waits for the sound of Dick running and the snap of bones.

“Boo!”

“Shit!” Esther flails her arms in a futile attempt to stop plummeting down the slope in a popular dog-walking area famous for its repulsive odours. Strong arms forestall disaster and Dick sniggers into her neck.

Growling and batting his hands away, Esther turns. “You bastard, you total bastard.”

“Well, I was about to swim but then I remembered this bridge. You can walk right across the river and not get wet. It’s a really clever idea. I also discovered hen parties progressively reduce the speed, thinking capabilities and coordination of those who attend them. A quick dash was all it took. I must apologise if creeping up silently and shouting in your ear caused you to suddenly require new underwear.”

“If you go two paces back and take a running jump in that direction, you can land on spiked railings.”

Dick hauls her back up the slope. “Here, pavement. You can’t fall over so easily.” He looks at Esther in confusion, studying every part until he sees her shoes. “Is that ... are you wearing scaffolding?”

“They’re called high heels. You wear them when visiting girlfriends.”

“Why?”

Esther shrugs his hand from her arm. "Because ... because..." She wails. "I don't know!"

They walk back towards Windhover, Dick says, "Hurry, I want to show you something."

"I'm going as fast as I can. Don't say a word."

He stops and whispers, "Look, bats. I love the way they fly. We'd better be quiet so as not to scare them off."

"Keep going, I'm cold."

"Ssh. Here, you can have my T-shirt."

Esther whispers, "I don't want your smelly shirt. How on earth are you not cold? and how do you live in your unheated mausoleum of a house all winter?"

"I love crisp, cold mornings. When I get up I put my hands on the windows. Before long I've melted two hand shapes through the ice and can see out to check the weather."

"Dear God... Look, one day – my birthday perhaps – can you speak without scrambling my head?"

"I love the cool water and slivers of ice trickling to my elbows and splashing down my bare legs."

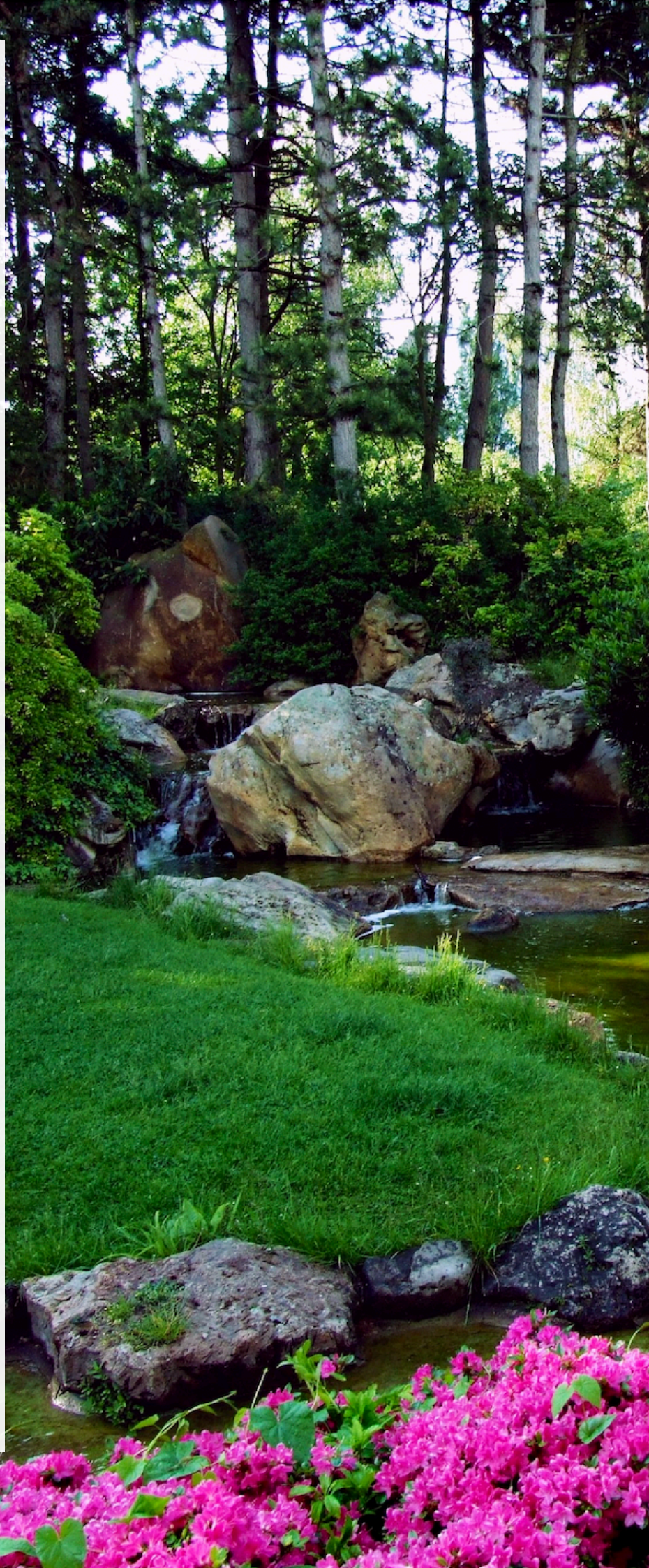
"I've decided my birthday starts right now. Begin by leaving out the word bare from every sentence." Esther lifts the latch and pushes. The gate swings. "Why is it so quiet all of a sudden?"

"I greased the hinges. I don't like scaring bats. We need them right now." He takes her arm. "This way."

"Keep your bloody hands to yourself. What's this about bats? Nobody really needs them."

"Shh. Through here. This is it. There's a stone bench and you can see most of the garden."

"Thank you for telling me about the bit of garden I designed several years ago when I was a child, and come to nearly every day. I almost forgot about it."





"Alright, sit here and look into that blackness where the pond is. Right into the centre where the flowerpot is on the stone."

"It's not on the stone. Someone's moved it. It's right beside me."

"I slightly know that already. Now pretend you are looking at something on the stone."

"Have you noticed my clever design? People can't see this area from the house. It's totally immune to parental snooping and those bushes mean no one can hear you."

"No, I didn't but that's very clever indeed. Stop looking at stars – or anything but where the flowerpot was. Don't blink."

"I'm cold, you... Oh! Oh ... what was that?" Esther's last words are muffled by her fingers.

"Keep looking. You can only see it if you're looking directly. It didn't work so well underground in my workshop."

Esther's right hand fumbles in the dark until she squeezes his. "Is ... is ... is that really...? And again!" She gasps. "It goes into the water! What's happening?"

Dick lays a hand over hers, sandwiching it. "I don't know. I just don't know. I was hoping you'd explain. That is your work after all."

Esther gasps again. "Oh, Dick, that's so beautiful. I've never..." Her words fade until she murmurs, "Oosh."

"Oosh?"

"It's what I say when something, or everything, is perfect, beyond imagining. Oh, Dick, did we really do that? There! You can see some of the lighthouse mirrors. But ... but surely I didn't draw them that well."

Dick strokes her fingers. "Very very occasionally, when I feel things are absolutely right, the design actually does what my mind wants rather than anything I'm capable of. You did it first time. I'm in awe. That was amazing." He releases her hands and strips his top off. "Here, put this over your jacket. You're starting to shiver."

"You're an ace. Do you know that? I want to sit and look. Squeeze up beside me. You'll be warmer." Esther watches the sculpture while allowing Dick to rub her fingers and the tip of her nose warm. She says, "It makes the bats glitter when they get close, like glowing fibres. I don't know anything about this but the glass is reacting to something. I know there are particles zooming through space, even right through planets. I wonder... Oh! Did you see that?" She lays her head on Dick's shoulder and nuzzles it. "Oh God. I give in."

"Is it happening to you now?"

"Ages ago but I fought like hell. It was all so quick."

"I just gave in ... saved a lot of time and effort."

Esther sniffs, lays her head on Dick's chest, and gasps. Tears, running down his chest, glitter in the strange luminescence of the sculpture. A storm of emotion engulfs her and cascades in juddering sobs. The tumult subsides, emptying her, with every stroke of Dick's hand on her hair. She gasps again. "Look... Did we really do that ... really?"

"It was mainly you. Hey, wow, if your beauty comes out in what you create, think how beautiful our children will be."

"Back off, mister. You've already trapped me. No need to screw the lid down and weld it. Hey, have you noticed the flashes happen so fast, like hundreds or thousandths of a second? I... Oh, that's just weird. That means we don't actually see them. Nerves just aren't that fast – not if you ask my biology teacher Smithy."

"You've lost me."

"I need to get my head round this. We don't see the lights ... we only see a memory of them." Esther chuckles. "That's too weird. I think I'm going mad."

"Let's get you inside and make lots of hot chocolate."





"Tempting, but I want to call Dad and send him a vid." She grips her phone, spilling clutter from the handbag. A hiss of frustrations precedes, "No, nothing. Everything's too dark and faint. Wait." She puts the phone to her ear. "What-ho, Dad. Luckily for you you've actually picked up your voicemail and, as a result, saved your life. I was going to boil you in ants for not listening to this, so you're spared. It's a bit of a disappointment but I'll save my ant army, very hungry ant army, for another time. Hope you've both found a nice posh hotel in Carl ... whatever, or are you sleeping under newspapers in the bus station? This glass thingy. It's weird and I reckon reacting to particles and quarks and neutrinos and other cosmic blobs which make waves of greens and blues on impact. You know, exactly like a cloud chamber but completely different. Sometimes it flashes a bit the same as opals or mother of pearl and even gold. Then you see big chunks of my lighthouse lens design. It's dead cool and doesn't need batteries. There is definitely some sciency thing going down. You know anything about patents? Go ahead: tomorrow will do. Thanks for listening. I love you and won't kill you in the near future. Sleep well and don't think of ants..."

Dick covers his mouth, suppressing an explosion of mirth. "Wonderful! But I'm a bit concerned you think the lights are caused by zooming things. I thought it was the magic kangaroos stampeding in the garden."

"What are you going on about now?"

"They're all over the place. I'll grab one for you." He wraps her in a hug and they both fall.

"Ow! Get off me, you creep! *Piss off!* My hair's in the bloody pond."

"Ah, you make a lovely soft landing. But is that actually you? I thought... That's an impressive disguise – though a bit ugly, even for a roo. Do you like my Australian hunting dive? I just invented it."

Esther turns into a flailing frenzy of snarls and vicious limbs. "Death!" But Dick flees into the night. She wrings out the ends of her hair while watching a curve of green and gold flow like a cataract through the glass and down into the water – not as a reflection but a continuation. "That's ... that's impossible," she whispers, and shakes from an enchanted trance as shivers rattle down her spine.

Esther remains enraptured until, from the front door, Dick shouts, "Hot chocolate all steamy and so thick you'll have to chew it. I used the cooker. Don't know about you but I'm impressed. Does everyone make smoke and flames or do I possess unique talents?"

Esther abandons her stilettos and weaves between flowerbeds until the front light switches on. Dick stands, bare-chested, with tangled curls lying on gleaming skin. She stops. Oh, gods, she thinks, he's wearing far too much. "Put the mugs down. You're in serious trouble."

"Really? What have I done?"

"Not enough: not nearly enough. Mugs, down: now."

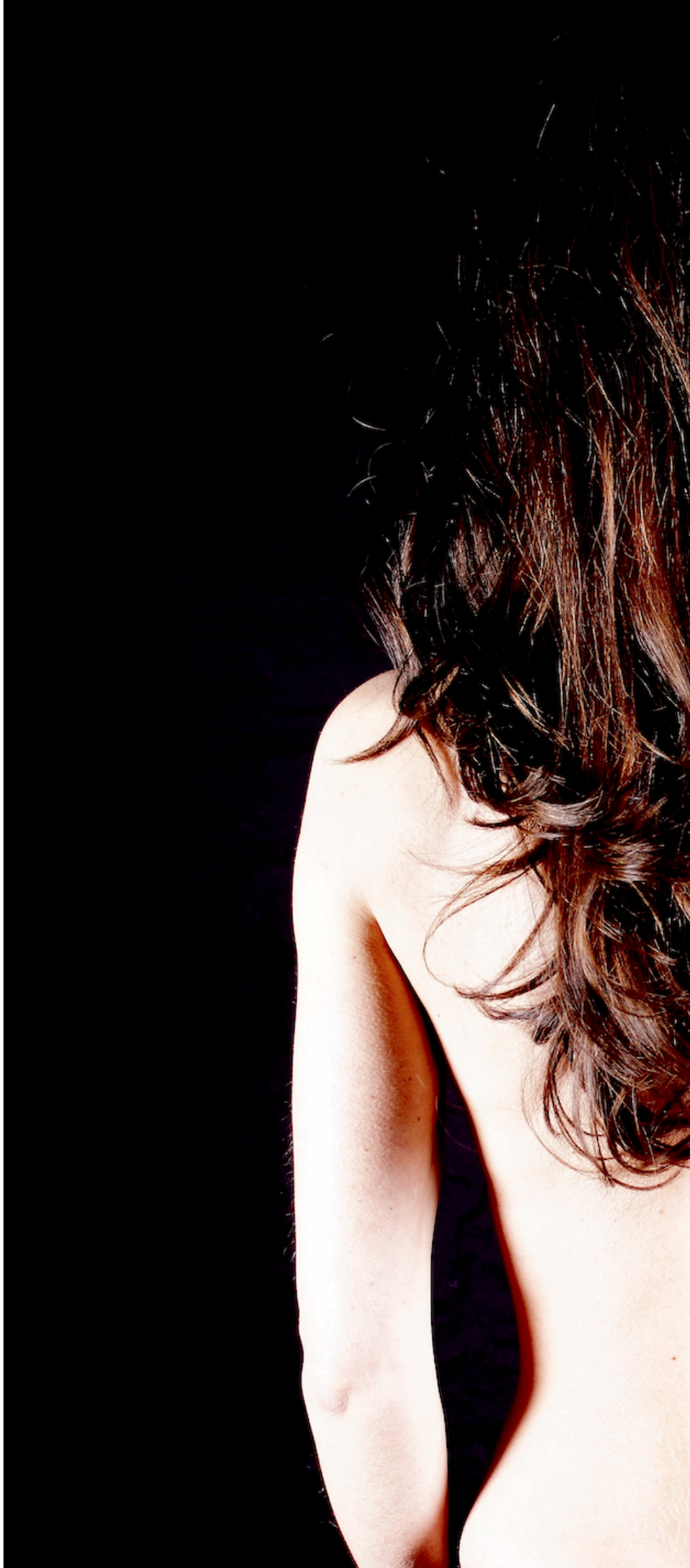
"I feel safer holding them. You look ... predatory."

She stands on tiptoes and growls in his ear, "Put them down or chocolate will go everywhere. I don't want our bodies sticking together afterwards." She takes the mugs and turns to place them on a cabinet.

"You mean ... what? Oh!" Dick dashes into the living room, leaps a sofa and flees up the stairs, laughing. "I'm too young!" Esther is five paces behind and closing fast.

Dick attempts to hide in a bedroom but only gets as far as opening the door. Legs pinioned by Esther's strong arms, he crashes to the floor. "Ow! Do you play rugby or something?"

"No. It's called 'Give me back my satchel, bitch'. It was a school activity." Esther sits on his heaving chest while she gets her own breath back. "Now you're for it."





"But, but, neither of us know what to do!"

"It can't be that hard. Mum and Dad sussed it ... well, once at least."

"Can't we find a book ... instructions?"

"Idiot, it isn't like assembling flat-pack furniture." She slides back and kisses his chest hair. "Oh, maybe it is. 'Remove all packaging'. Here, get my top off. Oh, for goodness sake, you'll be ages like that. Try this." A blouse flies across the corridor. "And this." Her bra follows it. "Stand up and take everything off."

"What makes you think you can boss me about?" Dick says, stumbling to his feet and slipping his shorts down.

"Just do everything I say and no one will be injured too much, OK? Lesson one: this is a naked woman. Right, 'Check you have all the parts listed below'." Pushing him back a pace, she adds, "So far so good. Now 'Take part B' – that's B for boy." She pulls him closer. "That's this bit. Wow, that's hot! 'And insert into slot G'. That's this bit. Give me your hand. This bit. right, that's... Oh, my God... Yes, just like you did with my feet. A bit longer, much, much longer. Shit, my legs are giving way." Her voice is faltering to a low murmur.

Dick lowers her to the floor. "Stop playing with part B. Now what?"

"Oh, the instructions go something like, 'Apply long or short screw as required'."

"Look, I'm not making you feel obliged to do this am...?"

"No, hurry up."

"Are you being pressurised by social expectations? or...?"

"I don't believe this. Lie on your back: I'll do it."

"Are you sure this is the right time for you?"

"F*ck me for f*ck's sake! But keep doing that for a while."

"You know I use my tongue when doing massages?"

"Arg! Yes, no, oh... I want all of it – everything: right now."

"What can I do that will give you...?"

"Stop talking! That's it, I'm taking command of the situation."

Their communication simplifies to cries, gasps and murmurs – the meaning of which is faultless language without words. Soon, not only does their sweat mingle but, if they had a moment to reflect, they've lost their boundaries and become one entity. They are entirely unaware of other noises such as splintering furniture or carpet tacks pinging against windows.

Esther sighs, relaxes and bumps her head on a wall. "We've travelled halfway down the landing. What happened? What was that?"

"You felt it too? Of course, I felt you feeling it. We felt us... Us ... I think that sums it up."

"Yes, a word isn't needed if you're actually being it. However, I have to congratulate you on gaining free access to all of my freckles forever." They lie tangled together. The only sounds are the soft susurrations of strokes and kisses.

"Do you think our chocolate is cold?" Esther asks.

"Fossilised. Anyway, I doubt if I can crawl that far. I think we should just lie on the carpet for a week and eat," he looks around, "carpet. I don't have the energy for the endless trek to our mugs. Did it say in the instructions to take a break sometimes? Like, you know, as they do in some sporting events?"

"Like a marathon with lunch breaks and time for the odd snooze?"

Dick sits up. "Oh ... you know what we forgot?"

"Yes ... now you've reminded me. Don't worry, we can use two next time to make up for it."

"Good plan. How many screws are left with your instructions?"

"We used at least half a dozen. There's about a thousand left. Don't worry, the shops open at nine."

"I'm still a little concerned. If you do become pregnant, you know I'll..."





“No! Stop! You’re wearing your speech face and I’m about to scratch it off. Go back to all romantic – drippy but it’s less exasperating.” Esther curls up, rests her head on his chest and plays with the springy hair. “That was like a baptism. Your soul emerges washed clean and ready for a new life.”

“Which begins with cold chocolate. I’ll help you up. Ah, I seem to have aged seventy years.” He struggles to rise. “Make that eighty – disastrous if you are pregnant with a number of little Esthers.”

“I want Dicks.”

“What are we talking about and how many? I’m running out.”

From behind the door Dick opened in his flight from Esther, comes Ingrid’s voice calling, “Have you two quite finished? I could make us all fresh cocoa.”

Esther screams and leaps to her feet, racing to the door and putting her head round. “Mum! Dad! ... you bastards! You *utter, utter bastards!*” she screeches.

Dick cringes, covers his ears and decides never to upset Esther unless he wears ear defenders.

Ingrid replies, “Calm yourself, dear. We didn’t want to disturb you. It was all so spontaneous and beautiful.”

“You could at least have covered your ears.”

“We did – well, Roy did ... sometimes. Is Dick still naked? I want to see his...”

“Mother! Anyway, it’s not his now: it’s mine.”

“Relax. Anyway, it’s a fabulous opportunity for us all to jump into the jacuzzi and discuss our situation – with the convenient opportunity to drown each other. We have amazing news. Maybe Roy and I will become sleuths. Get up, you lump. Esther, take Dick and shower yourselves; you’ll both be sticky. I’ll make cocoa.”

Esther slams the door shut and leans against it. Watching Dick hopping around and pulling shorts on, she says, "I'm so sorry," and bangs the door with her head. "I can't believe they're in such a hurry to be strangled. Not to mention that Mum's shrugged it off and gone into organising mode. The problem with old people is they think they're in charge."

He walks over and hugs her.

"You are an adult and wonderfully in charge of you."

"More than either of them, yes, but, I dunno... Jacuzzi ... all of us at once? Maybe they regressed to about two and a half while I wasn't looking."

"Or maybe they know something we don't."

"What?"

"Something ... haven't you noticed? Let's just see where this leads." He kisses her. "Take a risk with me. Something good may happen. I've read about Jacuzzis, I think. Is it rum, ice and fruit – and sometimes fizzy water?"

"Don't give the maniacs any ideas." She grabs his hand. "I'm taking you to my shower. Right now."



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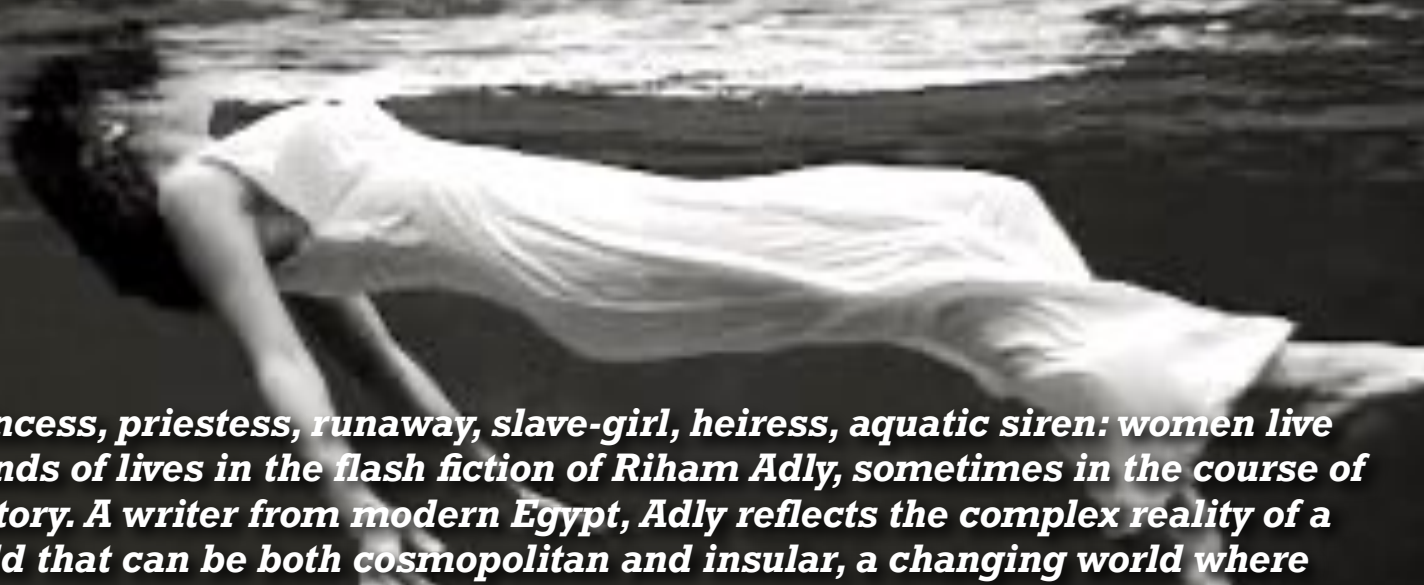
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