A HOUSE OF HAUNTED PEOPLE

ALAN COMBES

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St Mary's, the church from which I first came, had gradually fallen out of use. In the church's heyday, people had chosen to live at that point in the valley because it offered natural shelter and a point for gathering water. Roads mattered little in those days. Life was governed more by woodland paths and bridleways.

Gradually people came to settle two miles down the valley where the roads crossed and a substantial bridge had been constructed over the river. By then some water was being piped into people's houses and bricks and mortar did their job of protecting against the elements more precisely.

People still walked the length of the valley to their church until the advent of the working week; then they demanded worship closer to the place they called home. That was the point at which St Mary's was abandoned, becoming a refuge for owls and bats and vermin. During the summer months, the children of the village, those who ventured that far down the valley, dared one another to spend long minutes in the main body of the church building or to go in there for a piss, incurring God's wrath.

Without maintenance, the church crumbled and begged for demolition. That was how Fenby saw it, going past it daily with his horse and cart on the way to his stone yard. He knew the building was over four hundred years old; and he knew it would last only a few more seasons.

"There are good building materials in St Mary's," Fenby told his brother-in-law, George Ashcroft, "wonderful seasoned timber, quality stone and bricks."

"Why don't we take it?" Ashcroft asked in his usual direct manner. "We could buy some land and build our own house."

"We can't take the stuff because it belongs to the church and the law will chase us down," Fenby told him wearily. His brother-in-law's feckless ways tired him

"And who of the modern clergy ever goes out to St Mary's these days? They'll never know," Ashcroft asserted. He had a point, a very persuasive one.

As luck would have it, Lord Huntley's estate had let it be known that they were looking for a builder to construct a house for the estate's new gardener to live in. Fenby had heard about this during a drinking session at The Cock and Feathers.

"Could we do that – build a house from scratch?" Ashcroft asked him.

"I believe we could," Fenby said.

"We could use the materials from St Mary's," Ashcroft said, leaning in closer and lowering his voice, "That would be one hell of a saving."

"I don't want to get in law trouble – for stealing," Fenby told him. He had had more than his share of run-ins with the local constable, Benjamin Tapett, mainly about drunken behaviour.

"Listen, leave the materials to me," Ashcroft said, "You look around for someone who can architect us a house."

Reluctant as he was to play along with anything proposed by Ashcroft, this seemed to be the basis of a fair idea.

Ashcroft hired two rogues from the burgeoning village on the other side of the river and, by cover of night they made three runs down the valley in order to recover wood, stone and brick. A further dividend was the state of two of the window frames: they were near perfect and Ashcroft patiently eased them out of the wall with his builder’s tools.

“You must carry these on top of our load so they do not get damaged,” he told the meaty youths from East Harlington who were moonlighting for him.

For each run down the valley, Ashcroft, in a scouting capacity, rode his pony a hundred yards ahead in case Tappett should be out and about.

There was a small copse at the bottom of his own garden and that is where he asked the men to tip each load. Ashcroft made sure he was in position to rescue the window frames on that particular run. He realised that Makepeace and Quibell, the two hired youths, were full of cider and unlikely to remember his concern for the windows.

Fenby found an architect called Austin Lincoln. He had been one of the area’s finest until a nagging wife sent him to the consolation of the bottle. Lincoln was a regular at the Cock and Feathers, where he had a niche respected by all and sundry from the hour of eight till closing.

“Mr Lincoln, I am in need of an architect,” Fenby said, approaching him slyly from an obtuse angle.

Lincoln responded by way of a coughing fit that threatened to empty the entire frame of his body of any liquid contents. When the cough had racked his body into submission, Fenby spoke again.

“My brother-in-law, Ned Ashcroft and I have put in a tender for the building of a gardener’s house by the weir of the Chalk River on the Huntley Estate. We are worried by the prospect of flooding and would value the involvement, knowledge and experience of a man such as yourself. We have sought you out because of your good name.”

Little of this statement bore any truth. For a start no tender had as yet been submitted. Nor had mention been made of flooding between Ashcroft and Fenby, and finally the involvement of Lincoln was pure chance. Fenby happened to see him when he had visited the pub for a late night drink.

“Didn’t the feller over there used to be an architect?” he had asked landlord Bertram Jones.

“You’re talking a good 15 years ago, Mr Fenby.”

“But he was a good draughtsman, was he not?”

“They say he was the very best. He designed the Millers Arms out at Everly, you know.”

That was indeed a testimony to Lincoln’s skills. The Millers Arms was mainly a summer pub frequented by the well-off and demanding a horse and trap for the journey.

Following his proposal, Fenby waited a good five minutes, but no response was forthcoming from Lincoln. He decided to jolly him along.

“So what say you that you attend a meeting tomorrow at my house on Hungate? Let us set it for three’o’clock.”

Lincoln made a light moaning noise and then caught himself falling forward. Neither ‘yea’ nor ‘nay’ did he mutter.

“So, three’o’clock tomorrow. I expect to see you at 14 Hungate, Mr Lincoln,” Fenby repeated more in hope than expectation.

Fenby went home circuitously by way of his brother-in-law’s house. He excitedly told him that his mission was complete – an architect had been found – and that all three of them were to have a meeting the following day.

The Wednesday found Ashcroft sitting in Fenby’s living room listening to the clock ticking its way to a quarter past the hour.

“Ned, tell me who is this draughtsman we are waiting for?”

“He is called Lincoln. He was the architect behind the Miller’s Arms over in Everly.”

“Lincoln? So that would be Austin Lincoln?”

“The very same.”

Without further ado, Ashcroft pulled together the various personal possessions he had placed in front of him – paper, pencils, plans – and headed for the door.

“George, where are you off to?”

“Austin Lincoln is nowt but a drunkard and a wastrel, Ned. I’m surprised at your lack of judgment here. I am going.”

He eased open Fenby’s front door and there, standing before him, was Lincoln. Furthermore Lincoln had a large leather case under his arm which appeared to carry materials.

The truth of it was that Lincoln had retained nothing of Fenby’s exhortations the previous night, but the landlord, Lincoln’s brother-in-law, had overheard the talk and scribbled down the details. Once the drunkard awoke from his alcoholic reverie, it was impressed upon him that this was an appointment he must keep. Ashcroft returned to the room.

For two hours the three men scribbled plans and ideas on paper, talked and argued animatedly and finally shook hands on a deal. What had amazed both Fenby and Ashcroft was the manner of Lincoln’s awakening. It had seemed like the world had abandoned the former architect-cum-draughtsman and this sudden wanting of his skills and abilities had breathed life into the old dog.

The following day Fenby trudged through a foul winter’s morning to Lord Huntley’s estate office to find a tweedy, ridiculously bewhiskered official of the Lord’s and slip an envelope in his hand.

“Mr Fenby, isn’t it?” said Huntley’s man, Cawthorne. “And what have I got in here?”

“It’s Ashcroft and Fenby’s tender to build the gardener’s cottage on the bend of Chalk River.”

“Ashcroft and Fenby?” Cawthorne repeated, “I never knew that you were a company, a business.”

“Newly formed,” Fenby answered rather grandly, “and with our own architect.”

Four weeks later Fenby was told he had won the contract, (his price being a good £15 less than the nearest competitor), and, dear reader, my walls took shape.

Lincoln became a renaissance man and even developed a clever scheme for diverting the river along a lower, wider course to dispel the danger of flooding.

Lord Huntley’s man had been impressed by Ashcroft’s building materials and never thought to ask the whys and wherefores relating to their acquisition. Rather than perceiving they came from a church, he thought the materials were those being used in railway properties that were big business throughout the north of England at the time. The livery in particular looked like that favoured by the railway companies.

It was a mistake repeated by others over the years, but right then it had the advantage of clearing Fenby and Ashcroft of any suspicion that they had been stealing from the Church of England.

“This stone will impart a classic line to the cottage, Mr Fenby. I have spoken to Lord Huntley and he is prepared to increase the building sum in order to obtain the very best construction.”

So it was that I took on my new life, away from religion and the blessings of the clergy. I became a quite distinctive cottage, a home to the kind of people who previously visited me on a weekly basis for worship.

As Ashcroft’s hired men hacked out my foundations, I became aware of the soil’s coldness; colder than normal because of the river’s proximity. But Lincoln was clever with his diversion of the river. On top of that he gauged the work carefully, ensuring that the foundations were significantly above the river’s level even in its most swollen course.

Driven by Ashcroft, a harsh taskmaster indeed, the hired hands built me in the space of 16 weeks, spanning winter and spring. By May it was time for Ashcroft to take the window frames out of their muslin wrapping in his garden shed and supervise their installation.

At front and back there was first the main window by which the dwellers could view the river on one side and the wildlife on the other. Adjacent to this main window were smaller cabin-sized windows into which a person might squeeze head and shoulders only. He or she could sit at such a small bay and use the light of day to read a book or undertake embroidery. Ashcroft judged that such a quaint additional feature would meet with great approval for originality and he was right. Even Lord Huntley himself singled out this feature to Cawthorne when he was taken round the newly built premises.

Of course, not one of them knew the true function of these window frames during their church days. That was a secret known by no living man.

“We will use these men again, Cawthorne,” the Lord observed, “They do a good job.”

But things had not gone smoothly in the builders’ camp. Austin Lincoln had identified with the project so strongly that his plans had gone way over budget. Ashcroft and Fenby stood to

make a greatly reduced profit and could ill afford to pay their architect anything.

All came to a head on a Saturday afternoon when the three sat down to review the project in the front room.

“Mr Lincoln, we are only able to pay you half the sum agreed,” Fenby said.

“But I have worked longer and harder than anyone asked,” Lincoln said, slurring his speech due to a long Saturday lunchtime in the Cock and Feathers. “I have even helped with the construction on days we were a man short.”

“We don’t question that,” Ashcroft butted in, “but you have built in expensive features that were not in our plan.”

“And they are the features that will make the house noticed and bring you more work,” Lincoln insisted, banging the table.

“You may be right, you may be wrong,” Fenby told him, “but it’s caused us to lose money and made this contract hardly worth the winning,” (which was not strictly the truth).

One aspect of Lincoln that Fenby and Ashcroft had never found out about was his infamous temper. In truth, it wasn’t just the constant nagging of his wife that had made Lincoln turn to the bottle. Lincoln had lost so much work through his vile temper. His wife’s bouts of nagging had come about as a result of Lincoln’s irresponsibility in this regard.

“I will have the payment in guineas that you promised me and I will have it now,” Lincoln said, standing up in the alcove, but wobbling slightly.

“Don’t be ridiculous, man,” Ashcroft said, “we don’t carry money like that with us. We will pay you half of what we agreed and you can receive the money in notes and coins tomorrow.”

It was the moment at which Lincoln bypassed that part of his brain that suppressed anger and restored balance. Lincoln made for the cottage doorway where one of the hired labourers had left a hammer the size of a man’s forearm on the floor.

In no time he stood directly in front of Ashcroft, raising the hammer above his head.

“You pay me now, or I pay you,” he threatened.

Ashcroft, a little too cocky about the power of his own personality, turned towards Fenby grinning.

“Take the hammer off the clerk, Ned,” he said, making his disrespect clear in both word and tone. Fatally, he turned away from his would-be assailant and that was the moment that the hammer crunched down on bone and soft tissue.

The screams of agony from a grown-man are the most resonant, most piercing. The aura that radiated from this terrible act was absorbed by my walls and fabric. This was serious damage to my very heart at just the point where so much had occurred in the past. Here was an alcove, a delicately constructed seating point that had been created by men without knowledge of its terrible history. Now that history had been added to, and I wondered whether humans could ever live peaceably inside my walls.

Ashcroft was indeed dead, felled by a single blow. Fenby fled the building, leaving his partner's mangled remains and two local constables arrested Lincoln that night at the Cock and Feathers.

The blood from Lincoln's crime had not even been scoured from the floor of Chalk View when Lord Huntley's new gardener, William Binns and his family arrived.

William's wife Amelia screamed as soon as she entered and caught sight of the blood that had dried to deep crimson. She grabbed her children and turned their eyes away from the offending mark. William, equally shocked, but demonstrating masculine indifference, spoke up.

"Amelia, take the children outside and I'll clean out this room. We cannot have this stain on our family life."

In human years it was 1888 and William Binns and his young family had taken up the rental cottage that had been Lord Huntley's promise nearly a year earlier. Lord Huntley, a frequent visitor to Castle Howard, had heard much about the creative gardening skills of William Binns at the Castle estate.

Lord Huntley made a point of checking the topiary, the flower beds, how glass was used to grow vegetables on a large scale. Huntley had even visited Binns and his wife at their estate cottage. He did not belittle the poverty of Binns' then residence for that might prove counter-productive, but he did promise him "a more substantial house with a spectacularly panoramic river view."

"I have builders working on this house even as I speak to you now," Huntley had told him.

Binns was flattered. No one had praised his gardening skills so much, much less a member of the nobility.

He had accepted Huntley's offer and now he had arrived at his new home in this most auspicious of manners.

Many visitors to my walls have singled it out as a place of atmosphere? All dwelling places have atmosphere, though with many it is understated. Atmosphere is the totality of colour, of light and shade, of mood and temper, of life and death. Yet still there remains the indefinable, for houses, like people, have souls.

Formerly I had been a church building, but Fenby, Ashcroft and Lincoln transformed that. They subverted my purpose, even though the materials involved in my construction were unchanged. I was brick, stone, oak, yew and stained glass and brass.

From being a spiritual home, a place of repose and prayer, I had become the physical shelter for a family of people. Marrying the two functions was impossible. The screaming of those three children – whether in torture or play – could only be soaked up by my walls. A house can hurt beyond what people feel. A house can bruise and even the glass in its windows cries.

I did not mean to bring about a reign of terror. I merely reflected what my progenitors had said about reaping what they had sown. The mulberry coloured mark that now stained my floor was the doing of man; my only spillage until then had been the flow of skytears from my gutterless roofs. Try as they may, those who through the years scrubbed and scoured this mark could make no inroads.

Sleep did not come easy for the Binns. The baby girl, Letitia, cried incessantly through the night. The crying became screams of terror and the mother, Amelia, woke and sat up firmly in bed. For a fleeting second she caught sight of the pale cornflower blue face bent over her baby's crib, staring, staring into the baby's eyes.

"William, you must wake. William, the baby is in terror."

She described what had broken her sleep, the blue-faced visitor who communed with their baby girl, but the gardener thought the nocturnal mirage had been an imagining of his wife.

I knew the truth. The blue-faced one had been a visitor from the past, but not any past shared by people in this house; a past known only to those who frequented St Mary's.

"Amelia, you must forget the past of this house and live within its present. You are nervous at living so far from your old home. Time will pass."

"I will try, William," the wife said miserably.

The son Richard and his younger brother Nathaniel had been playing in a beck of the river.

"I don't like you playing there," the boy's mother told him at supper time, "it's dangerous."

"Mother, we fish with our little nets. Today I caught seven bullheads," Richard told her.

"Other children go fishing, mother; we make friends," Nathaniel, the younger child, said.

"The water's very deep at some points," their father declared, a chunk of bread in his mouth, "Do as your mother bids."

Soon the boys registered at the newly-established village school and their circle of friends grew ever wider. The summer months were best of all and at last the Binns family seemed to have found peace within my walls.

One July day, the boys rushed back from school, dropped their outer coats on the kitchen floor and headed for the beck. Barefoot they waded out to a point where the water was up to the elder boy's knees. He stooped in the water to catch sight of a fish; suddenly he fell forward and hit his head on a rock. He was not out of his depth, but his head remained under water for some time. Two or three of his classmates grabbed hold of his shirt and trousers and hauled him out of the water.

They lay him on the river bank on his side and water gushed out of his mouth, his lips pouting like a fish's. The boy's father and a gang of three workmen saw the incident from a nearby orchard. The four of them sprinted in the direction of the river.

"I told you to stay clear of the water, boy," Binns snapped, picking up the boy's prostrate body and striding towards the sanctity offered by my walls.

As soon as William was inside, he put the boy's body on the floor. The distraught mother bent over the dying child while the father alternately shook and squeezed the lifeless form.

There was little that could be done. This was still a time when men believed that death was fated; that the moving finger writes and, having writ, moves on. Resuscitation techniques were unheard of, except by a tiny coterie of those at the medical forefront.

Eventually, all hope of revival gone, Amelia bent over her son and gave his ice cold lips a final kiss; a kiss of death, not a kiss of life.

It was at this moment that it occurred to her exactly where William had laid the boy's body when he brought it in from the river.

"You placed his body on the bloodstain" the mother pronounced, "Richard was cursed by what you did."

Everything went quiet and the three labourers who had been in attendance, exited the building, abandoning the crushed family. Mother, father and younger son sat on the floor weeping. From the next room could be hard the daughter, yelling desperately from the baby pen in which she was enclosed.

Each parent thought the other the transgressor in the tragedy. William believed Amelia had been careless in her attention to the boys playing in the river; she believed William had been pusillanimous in his attempt to discipline the boys for playing in the water.

But worse than all this was where the boy's prostrate form had been laid to rest: on the site of Ashcroft's spilled blood.

William tried to be modern and deny that such superstitious practice could have any bearing on the boy's fate, but his wife was strong in the old religious beliefs that had been an integral part of her upbringing in the Howardian hills. A strong belief in witchcraft, ancient curses and remedies still characterised that rural backwater.

The whys and the wherefores are irrelevant; the marriage was doomed from this day forth. My walls absorbed the battle cries as their harmony fractured. One day Amelia's father arrived with a horse and cart, carrying his daughter and two grandchildren away from the scene of her misery. She looked back only once as the cart pulled round the bend. Her last glimpse was of her husband, the Huntley estate gardener, framed in my doorway.

I knew he was not long for this world. Lord Huntley had contracted a terminal illness and the estate had fallen into disrepair. Binns' poor husbandry was seen as a principal component in the estate's decline and the managers gave William due notice. His body was eventually found bobbing up and down in the mill race on land belonging to Mortimer Prince's farm.

Word on the estate and in the village was that a curse had been placed on the Huntley lands by the killer of George Ashcroft before he was claimed by the gallows. To simple folk it explained the destruction of a family and a belief took root that River View Cottage was a place to avoid.

An agent arrived one day to secure a 'For sale' sign in my tiny garden. He came indoors with a locksmith to make me secure.

"I don't know where they will find a buyer," he said to the locksmith, "I have heard it said that this house will bring only misery to any dwellers within."

Two harsh winters was the length of my abandonment during which time my fabric was seriously eroded. Glass was broken, seals corrupted and the weakest of Ashcroft's brickwork crumbled.

One February night at the turn of the century a drunken vagabond who had been ejected from several nearby hostelries saw the cottage as free shelter. He smashed his way into the property by damaging the rear door with stones and bricks and kicks.

He was a snivelling whelp of a man and threw up the contents of his stomach within minutes of gaining entry. That night the man suffered agonies as his stomach haemorrhaged and he moaned and groaned till the early hours. It was a human life without purpose and by the morning he was gone.

By 1900, shops had sprung up in the village and the path people took to get to them followed the river and came past my front gate. That frosty February morning a group of workmen, loud and noisy in the crispness of morning, wended their way towards the main village, oblivious to the small tragedy that had occurred within my walls.

A house is without choice in the matter of contents. The wastrel of a man's corpse was my possession until chance intervened. I watched timelessly as flies gathered, settling on his lips and brow, burrowing into his hair and skating across his eyeballs. They delivered their cargo and the stripping of the carcase began.

Days and weeks passed; the smell of corruption invaded my walls. First rats burrowed into what sweetbreads were available and then mice scuttled about nasal cavities and vacant eye sockets. So much had been gorged by so many.

When what had been a man was reduced to bone, the early summer sun penetrated the special windows that Ashcroft had lovingly restored and those bones were bleached.

A bevy of local women paused at my gate, ostensibly to admire the early morning sun's reflections on the river.

The tall, gangly one told the others, "This was one of the first railway houses, but the train never actually came this way. Look at the small windows in the corner – they are of old railway stock."

Of course, it was not true, but it had now come to be a common belief. No one recognised the old church within my structure.

"I would not live there for free rent," said the rotund woman, who looked in danger of tippling down the river bank.

"You would not? Then you are a fool, Edith," said the one carrying a child, "I would not let nonsense stories about hauntings and curses turn me away from the chance of free rent."

"Br-r-r-r," Edith answered back, "a goose just walked over my grave. Stuff like that would stop me from ever getting a night's sleep."

So now I knew it for sure. Word was about that something evil slept within my walls and those women did not even know about the dead tramp.

During the autumn, a man entered who was so gross that he could barely fit his frame through my front door. I could hear his laboured breathing, his nasal snorts seconds before he unlocked the door. He was talking to himself as though in confidence.

“Come on, Albert. It’s only an old house. Mrs Child said it was a matter of checking whether… my God, Albert, what is this someone has left?”

Albert Freeman had seen the bleached skeleton lying, back to the floor.

Is it real, Albert? Was it a person? Is it a joke?

Just at that autumnal moment, the wind whipped up and disturbed a faulty catch on a side window. There was a sharp slap as wood met wood. To me it was nothing; a house is always flexing its timbers, stretching above its foundations, chafing where there exists a poor fit. To Freeman it was a sure sign that the dead had inherited the earth. He hyper-ventilated, dropped the door key and exited out of the front entrance.

More men came the following day in the presence of a vicar. They carried a coffin and after a long hard struggle they pieced together the skeleton inside the box. The vicar was left alone to recite mumbo jumbo about a collection of bones. Every few moments he would give an anxious glance over his shoulder.

A few days later two joiners arrived and fixed the broken rear door before encasing both doorways in heavy wooden frames. No drunken vagabond or chancing thief would pierce the shield that now surrounded my entrances.

Almost four years had passed since I was inhabited by the Binns family. The Huntley estate had fallen apart, being sold to various farmers and landowners. The man who next appeared – the new agent’s boy – was tall and fair, as softly spoken as a young girl. Like many who came within my walls, he was a bundle of nerves. With the boy was a man in a black stove pipe hat. The hat was all the more remarkable because it belonged to an outdated fashion. It threw shadow over the man’s face, creating a sense of mystery that also unnerved the agent’s boy.

“So here we are inside the house, Mr Monse,” said the agent, “it was built many years ago by local constructors using local stone.”

“There’s a not-very-nice smell in here,” Monse said, “Can you open t’windows?”

“Of course I can, sir.” The girlish young man attempted to open one of the casement windows, but failed abysmally.

“Just leave it, lad. I’ll prob’ly do better mesen. Now what was t’price?”

Sheepishly the agent’s boy said “I think it was one hundred guineas or the nearest offer.”

“Mine is a very near offer,” Monse said, “it’s one hundred pounds and I won’t go a brass farthing above that. I don’t do guineas.”

The agent’s boy was phased.

“Can I let you know in the morning, Mr Monse?” he asked.

“You cannot. I have another property to look at and I’ll be plain – it’s more suited than this, but more money. I need to know today, so if you can get yersen back to yer boss with my offer…”

“Yes, but where will I find you?”

“Well, just here, of course. I’ll stay in here, waiting for you. I can examine everything then while I wait, can’t I?”

“You’re staying in here – this house – alone, while I nip back to Mr Thwaites?” the agent’s boy said with an almost hysterical note of disbelief in his voice. Oh, I knew then I had him as afraid as the others.

“Are you not happy with that? Frightened I’ll run away with your house in me pocket?” said Monse, accompanying his words with a big throaty laugh.

“Er, it wasn’t that, sir,” said the agent’s boy.

“Good. On your way then and let me know,” Monse bade him.

Two hours later, the boy returned with Mr Stanley Thwaites, the agent.

“Never let a boy do a man’s work, eh, Mr Thwaites?” Monse said, shaking hands on a final deal of £101 despite his ‘brass farthing’ protest.

Monse was a vulgar man with strange ways, but I did not mind him as an inhabitant for he took no notice of what rumour-mongers said. To him I was a home and he pooh-poohed any talk of dark deeds in my past.

The village one mile downriver had begun to expand and young families had moved in. Their children explored the water and in the depths of summer two young girls were drowned close to the beck that had claimed the Binns boy.

Mr Monse bought himself a small terrier and it became a favoured pastime of his to walk up and down the river walking the dog and wearing his black hat pulled low down on his brow. The children of the village, having been warned about me by their parents, were so afraid of ‘the man in the black hat’ and created a whole mythology round his being and the house he lived in.

Monse lived for 20 years within my walls. Most of the time he was a silent man, keeping his words within the privacy of his own skull. He only spoke aloud on two kinds of occasion: to curse when he cut a finger or once when he extracted two of his own teeth, and to share thoughts with his dog, Mungo. Even then they were bland and uninteresting expressions, nothing of a personal nature.

Monse appeared to have no bad habits, but he would spend long periods away from home. Before his departure for one of these periods, he always ensured that all curtains, upstairs and down, were drawn.

There were two unusual aspects to Monse: one was his vast collection of militaria, the other was the time he spent doing scribblings that consisted of letters and numbers and symbols. It took me a long time to combine these aspects with his air of secrecy and work out just what he did. That was when I knew why he had chosen my walls to dwell in.

He went away, presumably to die, as he never returned. I was only uninhabited for a matter of weeks though before a woman in her early thirties moved in. She came with an endless supply of bags and books, but nothing could conceal the nervousness she felt moving into River View cottage.

She was constantly looking around her even when indoors. Within days she had called in the electricity people to wire the building. The modern conduits of energy and light they constructed brought unaccountable change. I was now a far cry from those days when worshippers huddled within my fabric. Not only were my walls able to absorb, now they could convey messages and signals.

For Mary Ford, (that was her name and I learned she was Monse's niece and had inherited me), the illumination of the building came as a great relief. Still she was twitchy and uncertain, but the ability to throw light into a room before she entered brought immense relief.

Mary Ford was a teacher in the nearby town of Potgrave and each day a taxi arrived to convey her to the school. At night she would mark the children's work and constantly remark to herself upon its imperfections. Nothing could have been more marked than the contrast between her uncle's lengthy silences and Mary Ford's constant chatter to herself.

Within the year she had a lady friend, an accountant by the name of Miss Joan Groves. The newcomer sported a hairstyle known as the Eton Crop. The cut made people focus on the face and the shape of the head. It was a style associated with the boys who attended Eton School rather than young women. Clearly, Miss Groves belonged to a new style of self-confident female that sprung up during the 1930's.

Joan Groves was Mary Ford's lover and just before Christmas, she moved in with her. Once again my four walls were the subject of stories amongst the village people, many of whom thought lesbianism was confined to distant civilisations like the Ancient Greeks. The common people of the village believed it was the influence of where they were living that had led the two women astray. O how my floors creaked and my beams lurched the night after I heard Mary and Joan discussing this with much laughter.

There was another thing about the Groves woman though. She knew. She was on a higher plane than others who had lived within my walls. Mary Ford could not see the frequent glances her partner threw in the direction of the casement windows. For a self-possessed woman who was bursting with confidence, those occasional moments betrayed unease. She never pulled up a chair to either of the smaller casement windows even though she read often and light would have washed over her book.

"What's the matter, Joan?" Mary Ford asked her following many days of near silence.

"I am not well," she said, "it's hard to explain."

"Is it the flu? I've heard it has come as far north as Yorkshire."

"No, no, it's nothing like that. It's to do with…" Instead of completing the sentence, she raised a hand to her brow, touching one side with her thumb and the other with her index finger.

"You have a headache?"

"Oh, Mary, if only it was that simple."

"Well then you must explain, because I have no idea what troubles you."

Instead of facing up to Mary's enquiry, the Groves woman went off at a tangent.

“I am tired of always having to go outside for the toilet,” she said. “Some nights when I am forced to go it’s like being drenched by buckets of water.”

“There is a plumber who serves the school where I work. I could ask him to take a look at our situation,” Mary said.

“Oh yes, please, I will even pay for it myself.”

Mary Ford duly contacted the plumber; a young man of immense good looks. He was skilled at his work and I could see that his attention was captured by Mary Ford. Did he know the nature of the relationship between the two women? Either he did not, or he did not care, for there was a confidence and an arrogance about this young man.

The plumber carried out most of the work during the long summer school holiday. He would visit the home on a regular basis, secure in the knowledge that Joan Groves was immersed in figures and company law. Of course, he tumbled into bed with Miss Ford, leaving her lover out in the cold.

The laughter and lust that echoed within my shell were unfamiliar sounds indeed. Sadly, I knew such joy must be the precursor of misery. It is always the same with humankind.

I believe Miss Groves sensed that her time of emotional content had drawn to a close. She threw even more intense glances at my casement windows during this time. Rather than seek a showdown, she settled for material comfort and the acknowledgement that never again would she and Mary be close.

Miss Groves began a project. In the world at large, a terrible conflict had broken out and monstrous birds with payloads crossed the waters between Britain and the continent. Declaring the outside toilet redundant, Miss Groves sought to turn it into a small air raid shelter, one that would ensure the survival of Mary Ford and her.

“What a clever idea, Joan. No one else would have thought of such a use.”

But gradually the truth dawned that Mary Ford only wished to survive with Henry Newton, the plumber. Joan Groves felt herself superfluous to everybody’s needs and unlikely to meet another soulmate.

She bought the rope at the hardware store in Potgrave where Henry Newton, the plumber, worked. It gave her a perverse satisfaction.

She took a day off work when the school was on half-term and the lovers had used the opportunity to have a secret tryst. With a final defiant glance at my casement windows, she strode across the yard and entered the old toilet with its now reinforced roof. She suspended the rope from a beam she had herself inserted into place and used an upside down industrial tin as her launch point.

It was several days before Mary Ford found the body. The outside toilet was no longer a fixture in her life and there had been no bombing raids. Miss Groves’ disappearance had been a mystery to her. Enquiries to Groves’ employer produced just as much head-scratching at the other end. What had happened to the normally reliable, Eton-cropped stalwart of the accounting office?

Eventually, it was the smell that led Groves' former lover across the yard.

I heard the screams outside my walls and absorbed the grief as Mary ran about the house in hysterical postures of disbelief. Of course, the death of Joan Groves would not only terminate Mary's tenure at River Cottage (as I had been named) but bring to an abrupt end her love affair with the plumber.

Joan Groves had been a smoker. The evidence of that lived on long after her body had been interred. Mary Ford's tasteful decorating, applied during school holidays, was tainted and yellowed by the smoke emitted by the vice of her former lover. Sometimes, given the right conditions, my walls would yield up those same tobacco smells, months, years after. Inhabitants would stop in their tracks. No one was visibly smoking yet the odour was clearly present. Surely, this was evidence in spiritual form of long-dead smokers who no longer dwelled within?

The echo effect of tobacco is no more startling than that of grief. Intense passion does not simply bounce off walls and disappear into the atmosphere. It becomes trapped in the very fabric of buildings. The right conditions can trigger the memory of such intense feelings, restoring them to an observable state.

My walls were cold, my fires unlit, my creakings unheard and the war became a fading memory. This time the sale was by auction and the purchaser one Frederick Archer, a grocer by trade. He was an intensely cheerful man with a wife of fickle health and a son who rarely attended school. This son, Norman, was over-indulged by Margaret Archer. She implanted in his mind the idea that he was a sickly child and that school was a dangerous place where disease was rife.

Archer worked hard to earn a good living for his small family in whom he was deeply disappointed. He had a wife with whom sexual fulfilment seemed as unlikely as it was that his son would develop into a worthwhile heir.

Many was the time that Archer would return home in the late evening to find his son tucked up in bed and his wife sprawled out on the settee. She would be half-listening to the radio and any meal she had cooked would be reduced to a desiccated disaster as a result of long hours spent in the warming oven.

By now the trappings of human anger were as familiar to me as the wretched silence that filled my rooms when I was uninhabited. Frederick Archer was a ticking time bomb. One evening, when he was especially late home, he saw no point in returning to an indigestible meal and opted instead for the comforts of the Cock and Feathers. It was in there that the landlord, George Hamshaw, recounted to Archer what he knew of the bizarre history of the house he lived in. Archer was at once fascinated, unconvinced and repulsed.

"We have lived there six months, landlord," he said, "and I have seen nor heard anything untoward."

"What about the casement windows?" Hamshaw teased.

"What about 'em? Very neat little things, if you ask me. Drew me to the house," Archer replied.

“Miss Groves, who often popped in here for a snifty,” the landlord said, “always told us there was something about those smaller windows.”

“Fascinating!” Archer said, “I must have a word with her sometime.”

“You’d have a job,” Hamshaw said, and told the tale of how she had met her end.

Now if Archer had been unmoved by what he had heard up to this point, the fact that a poor soul had recently chosen her own death within the outhouse undoubtedly disturbed him. He went very quiet and increased his consumption of drink.

Fate works in strange ways and at that point Jacob Browne entered the premises for his nightly jar of ale.

“Has Gracie pupped yet?” the landlord asked him, saying to anyone who would listen, “Jacob has a Jack Russell due to give birth any time.”

“Gracie had four pups just three nights ago,” Browne said in maudlin tones, “but by the time we awoke, only two had survived.”

“And what are you planning to do with them?” the landlord enquired.

“Why, I shall keep one and probably drown the other,” Browne replied tersely.

Archer’s ears perked up. This was a heaven sent opportunity to get young Norman active and to inject a little life into that mausoleum of a house.

“I’ll take the pup off you, Mr Browne,” Archer interrupted, “I’ll even buy you a drink on the strength of it.”

The bargain was struck and by midnight Archer was accompanying Browne to his modest cottage on the outskirts of Branton to collect the puppy. There the two men had a further drink before Archer, pup under his arm, returned to River View.

I have frequently seen men whose judgment has been warped by drink. Using his own key to enter his house, Archer found the door was bolted against him.

Setting the pup on the step, Archer proceeded to hammer furiously on the door. As one minute developed into ten, the braying on the door was so ferocious that my walls vibrated with the friction. Eventually, an uninviting Margaret Archer opened the door:

“What are you doing, man? We’re all asleep in here. It’s almost tomorrow.”

At that point Archer snapped. Grabbing his wife by the collar of her nightdress with one hand and her fleshy elbow by the other, he dragged her down the garden path. She screamed in such abject terror that cottage dwellers on the other side of the water turned on their lights in concert.

“No, no, don’t do this,” Archer’s wife begged as he manoeuvred her closer and closer to the river.

“I cannot swim, Frederick. Please stop now.”

Then I heard a loud splash as her pneumatic form was dumped off the bank.

“I cannot swim, I cannot swim,” she shouted nonstop.

But Archer was not listening. He was back within my walls and striding upstairs, terrified puppy under his arm, barging into his son’s bedroom with a fury that caused the door to bang against the wall.

“There! I got this for you, Norman,” he said, dropping the young dog on his son’s blanketed form, “do something with it.”

He responded in the manner his mother had taught him. His crying found an echo from the prostrate figure of his mother on the front steps, seated in a puddle of her own making. Fortunately the river had only been waist-high so once her balance was recovered Margaret Archer had crawled onto the bank and, like some primeval amphibian, dragged herself up to the door that was now locked against *her.*

Still drunk, Archer told his wife to go and jump back in the river when she demanded that he open up to her. But such had been his exertions that Archer then collapsed onto the Chesterfield and drifted into an alcoholic haze. Eventually it was young Norman who crept downstairs to open the door to his distressed mother.

Once Margaret Archer could see that Frederick was unreachable, she stopped her tears and dragged Norman up to the bedroom where she packed bags for both of them. The puppy cringed in a corner of the bedroom, totally phased by the many events it had experienced in the last 24 hours.

For the second time within my keeping, a family had been rent asunder. I knew how the village people would react to this: they would say it was the curse of my four walls. I could hear it now: ‘No relationship can survive within that cursed building.’

“What will we do, mother? Where will we go? What of father?” young Norman quizzed.

“We’ll find a lodging place in the town, Norman.”

“Will we be near to the sea?” asked Norman, keen to take advantage of a misfortune.

“Is that what you want?”

“Living near the sea will be so much better than the river, mother.”

“Then you shall be near the sea, Norman.”

“And my father?”

“He is a drunken sot and will wake to his own company.”

“But he brought me a puppy dog. I should like to keep it.”

“That’s not possible, Norman. Lodgers cannot bring animals with them.”

“Then I’ll cry,” Norman declared, promptly fulfilling his promise.

“If you cry, then I shall leave you here with your puppy and your drunken father,” his mother said, proving that she could use discipline when it suited her.

Archer was in a bad state when he awoke; a state that was made worse by a warm faecal aroma.

“Margaret, Norman. Which of us has shit the bed?” he slurred.

Archer’s upper body hurt him where he had been pulling and twisting the substantial weight of Margaret while fuelled by drink. The dog – that he had forgotten about - cowered in the corner of the bedroom; mortified at standing in its own waste and terrified by the house’s atmosphere.

Archer’s feelings were ambivalent. He was deeply ashamed of his part in the previous night’s shananigans, but not sorry at the departure of his wife and son. On inspection, the signs were that this was no casual flit.

“Well, so be it,” he said aloud. “Let them beg to be readmitted when they have sufficient courage.”

Next he must take a decision about the dog. His original reason for bringing it to the house had disappeared and might not return, but there was now the matter of his own aloneness. He decided on those grounds alone he would keep the dog for the time being and so lifted it into the sink and scrubbed it clean.

“I shall call you Lincoln,” he said to it, “because that is where I am headed on business today. First I’ll get you some food in the village.”

This choice of name for his new found canine companion was inexplicable. We houses, comprised as we are of earth, stone, metal and wood, do not recognise such things as coincidences. There is always an underlying reason for the way things happen.

Margaret and Norman Archer acquired their own terraced house in nearby Scarborough. She wrote her husband a note, explaining that for the sum of £20 a month, she was happy to preserve the status quo and no questions asked. Frederick made one half-hearted, doomed attempt to ask forgiveness, visiting the address with a sad posy of flowers.

It was not difficult for Frederick to meet Margaret’s financial demands. His grocery business in the town of Scarborough was thriving to the point where he had opened a second shop. He gabbled to himself incessantly as he paced within my walls, talking of his plans for the future and how he would channel his energy into work and business success rather than dedicating himself to his family.

Put it down to the fact that Frederick was so self-possessed that he seemed unworried by living in a house of ill-repute and fearful legends. His entire consciousness was consumed by thoughts of commercial success. However, it occurred to him one night, quite out of the blue, that Lincoln hardly ever seemed to spend time in the living room. The dog went upstairs at night as company for him and was fed in the kitchen. But during the day the sun rotated round the front of the house pouring light into the south-facing living room window. Surely, it was only natural for a dog to luxuriate in the sun’s warmth. Yet whenever Archer returned from work, he was aware that Lincoln always bounded down the stairs to greet him.

This phenomenon made Archer curious and he decided to investigate it this very moment. He climbed the stairs and picked up the Jack Russell from its resting place on the landing rug.

At first the dog was not duly concerned. When Archer was at home in an evening, the dog often accompanied him in the living room, but never went near the smaller casement windows. Archer had noticed that. The dog even threw occasional furtive glances in that direction.

“This is silly, Lincoln. It’s only a building. Is there something in the corner over there? A rat or mouse perhaps? Some vermin? Well, then earn your corn and see it off.”

With that, Archer picked up the unfortunate terrier and carried it to that corner of the room immediately beneath one of the casement windows.

If Archer undertook the task lightly, then he soon regretted it. The dog, normally mild-mannered and given to a comic turn, transformed into an electric bundle of terror that Archer could no longer hold in his arms. Its hackles rose vertically and its lips peeled back revealing a countenance associated more with a hell-hound. Sheer fear that he might sustain a serious bite made Archer retreat to the kitchen doorway. Too late he realised that he was blocking the dog’s escape route once it had opted for flee rather than fight. On the way past him, it snapped at and tore his trouser leg, an act utterly out of character.

Feeling sorry for the beast, rather than leaving it alone in the house, Archer let it accompany him on his nightly trip to the Cock and Feathers. There he chanced to tell the landlord, George Hamshaw, what had just happened.

“With due respects, Mr Archer, sir,” (everyone in the locality knew that Archer had gone up in the world and was to be respected), “I did tell you what that Miss Groves used to say about the casement windows in your dwelling,” Hamshaw reminded him.

“Just go over that story once again, landlord,” Archer asked him.

“Well, it aren’t much of a story, sir. She allus said she had unpleasant feelings about them windows. She could never figure it out because she said it was always told to her that River View was an old railway house and what was to mistrust about a railway house.”

“I wonder if I might talk to Miss Groves,” Archer said forgetfully.

“I don’t think so, sir,” Hamshaw replied, “don’t you remember me telling you how she’s with us no longer, having stretched her neck in the loo, sir?”

For a second or two, Archer looked mystified at Hamshaw’s observation, not being a euphemistic type of person himself. Then the penny dropped.

“Oh yes. She took her own life in the air raid shelter, didn’t she?”

“Which used to be the outside netty, Mr Archer,” Hamshaw said with a grin.

Archer had grown unexpectedly fond of his little dog and was reluctant to subject it to more time alone at River View. Back home he snuggled down in bed, then patted the blanket, inviting Lincoln to join him.

Propped up on a pillar, stroking the dog, he made a pronouncement to the empty house.

“Lincoln and I are moving to town. We shall live above my shop and make that our home. You, River View and all your ghosts, shall become a holiday home. We move out the house tomorrow.”

Within four weeks, Archer had workmen in at both addresses; converting River View to holiday accommodation and upstairs at his grocery shop to a live-in flat. Friends he had cultivated at the Round Table advised him of a fair rent for a holiday let; Archer exceeded their figure by 20 per cent and promptly placed it with an agent who block-booked it for the summer.

It was not as distressing as those long weeks and months when no one dwelled within my walls, but now people moved through my spaces in snapshots rather than experiencing me as part of the film of their lives.

To most of my occupants, I was unremarkable. Occasionally, children would say things to their parents like ‘Mummy, I don’t like it here.’ Once a small girl asked her mother where the blood had come from. Puzzled, her mother asked her “What blood is that, darling?”

The girl pointed to the floor where Fenby had been slain by Lincoln; but the adult saw only a slate surface.

Some holiday-makers even sat by the casement windows, but this was largely the prerogative of the old. They would sit there for a middle-of-the-day snooze or to read a book. Most of them would finish up looking over their shoulders, feeling uncomfortable and moving away.

Time and again, I would hear people announce in their ignorance that this must have been an old railway house.

“How do you know that, Terry?” one weekender asked her husband.

“You can tell by the livery. Look at those railings and the decorative woodwork.”

To many visitors, their discomfort manifested itself in unremarkable ways: a poor night’s sleep; constant fidgeting and the inability to sit down; uneasiness at being left alone in a room.

Then came Carmel Ferguson.

“Nice little ex-railway cottage we’re stopping in this time,” I heard a man’s voice proclaim from outside. That man was Robert Ferguson.

He was first in the house, relieved to put down the suitcases and crack his knuckles. Immediately behind him, Carmel stopped dead the moment she set foot inside the door and looked up at the ceiling.

“Oh my God,” she uttered, as though the ceiling was covered with an unspeakable stain.

“What now, Carmel?”

“Robert, you must be able to feel it, even a pachyderm like you.”

Ferguson knew exactly what she was saying. He had jousted with his wife over her ‘unique powers’ for many a year.

“Tobacco smoke, you mean? There was a family of smokers before us, so what? It won’t be the first time. Still, filthy habit.”

“Stop belittling me like that, Robert. I don’t mean something as nondescript as tobacco. The house is full of broken spirits. This room alone has been the scene of more tragedies than I can count. And…oh, oh, oh…”

Suddenly his wife was screaming and Robert Ferguson, no stranger to the effects of her psychic talents, realised this was no overreaction.

“What is it, Carmel, what is it? Come and sit down.”

“The windows, the windows. Over there,” she said, pointing at the small casement windows.

Ferguson looked where she pointed, but could see nothing. So perturbed was his wife that he had to help her out of the house, into the front garden and the fresh air.

“Robert, I want you to contact the landlord and get him over here.”

Ferguson grimaced at the ridiculousness of his wife’s demand. Yet he knew she meant it and there would be good reason for it.

“If I must” he said with heavy heart.

“You really must,” she answered.

“Are you okay for me to leave you here? There’s a phone-box at the end of the street.”

Carmel nodded and struggled with her breathing like an asthmatic although she wasn’t one.

“I’m okay to be left. Go and phone Mr Archer.”

Archer was inconvenienced by the call and said there was no chance he could come over before lunch.

“Mr Archer, my wife asked me to call you urgently. She says there are things you need to know about your house. You may or may not believe in her powers, but I have never known her to be wrong about these things.”

In the end, it was agreed that Archer would come straight after lunch. Ferguson returned to his wife and they decided to repair to the Cock and Feathers rather than remain in the holiday home.

“Your lady doesn’t look too well,” George Hamshaw observed as Ferguson ordered a couple of strong coffees at the bar.

“She’s had a bit of a fright. We’re staying at the holiday cottage – River View,” Ferguson told him within his wife’s hearing.

“It has a bit of a history does that old railway cottage,” Hamshaw said.

“Why do you call it a railway cottage?” Carmel asked with a sharpness in her voice.

“People round here have always called it that,” the landlord said, “I suppose it looks like one.”

“Well, it’s not one,” Carmel informed him, “That house used to be a church.”

At that, Hamshaw burst out laughing. “You what, missus? I’ve lived round these parts all my life and there’s never been a church there. I’m pretty sure there wasn’t in my parents’ day neither.”

“There wasn’t,” Carmel rapped back, “the church was brought to the place. That house is constructed from an old church.”

That was said with such conviction it stopped the landlord in his tracks. “How would you know that, lady?”

Ferguson chipped in. “Don’t ask her that, mister. She never knows how she knows, but honestly, she knows.”

There was a permanent frostiness in the Cock and Feathers air. Locals hate to be told that knowledge learned at the knee is incorrect at the best of times; to be told by an ‘incomer’ is nothing less than insulting. For her part, when her powers were at their strongest, Carmel Ferguson had no place for tact or diplomacy.

The Fergusons left the pub after a sandwich lunch and George Hamshaw flashed the V sign after them as they exited the lounge.

Over the years, a turning circle and small parking area had been established by the weir of the river next to Archer’s property. The advent of the motor car and Archer’s business acumen had played no small part in this development.

“Hello, Mr and Mrs Ferguson,” said Archer as they returned to River View. Archer wore his standard ‘Hail fellow well met’ countenance; all part of the successful businessman. His overstated smile was not returned by the Fergusons.

“Now what can I do for you good people? I trust there’s nothing wrong with the accommodation?”

“Oh, but there is, Mr Archer,” Carmel responded, “there is something very wrong,” whereupon Archer’s smile slipped down to his feet.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Archer said. “The important thing is what can we do about it?”

But Carmel ignored this and took control. “Mr Archer, what do you know about this cottage you own? Have you lived in it yourself?”

“Yes, I have lived in it. I know it used to be a railway cottage. Where is this taking us, Mrs Ferguson?”

All she said was “Will you follow me inside?”

Once inside, she asked all three of them to sit at a small table that she had placed by the casement windows. She ignored all of Archer’s protestations. In truth they were old mild; his curiosity was getting the better of him.

“Mr Archer, I do not believe this is a railway cottage at all,” she said. “I know this house was built from a church…”

“How can you know that? How can you know that?” Archer rattled out, “You don’t come from these parts…”

It was Robert Ferguson who replied. “Mr Archer, my wife has a gift. She is never wrong about these things. If she says this was a church, then that will be the truth.”

Archer said nothing, but stared at Carmel with hostility. Carmel, for her part, pointed to the casement windows.

“What do you know about those windows? Even you can see that they are not in the style of a railway house.”

Archer remembered the startling reaction of Lincoln to being left in this room, close to these windows. On the other hand, there was little room in his life for uncomfortable truths.

“They are casement windows and I dare say the builder put them there as an add-on when the rest had been built.”

“Mr Archer, they are no ‘add-on’,” Carmel told him, “they were part of the church that made up this building. I know enough about architecture to say that.”

Archer felt belittled and uncomfortable in his own holiday cottage. He felt hot under the collar and was tired from being pestered by Mrs Archer for an increase in his agreed alimony sum.

“So what is it you want me to do?”

Ferguson took up the thread for his wife. To some extent they worked as a team; they were more powerful that way.

“Carmel wants us to sit round a table in this room, holding hands. She feels that this is the important room. If the living hold hands and become as one, then the departed will feel able to speak through her.”

“And we are the living?” said Archer, with a trace of sarcasm in his voice, but also needled at the prospect of holding hands with two strangers.

With breathtaking speed, Carmel grabbed hold of the hands of both men and commenced a deep groaning sound that Archer found profoundly disturbing. Yet he dare not let go her hand.

Within seconds she looked up to the ceiling in sheer terror. Her voice, when it came out was a man’s voice, “Fenby, Fenby,” it screamed, “for God’s sake, take it off him.”

She let go of both men’s hands and fell to the floor, groaning and clutching the top of her head. Archer got up from his chair and started forward in a bid to help Carmel.

“Don’t do that, Mr Archer,” Ferguson said, restraining Archer by blocking his path.

Slowly, but with dignity, Carmel climbed back into her chair and this time placed her hands over her eyes. I knew what was happening. She had become a part of the house herself. It was as though she was at once inside the very walls and a part of them.

I had never met a person with such powers. We were as one, Carmel and I. There was no past time with her now. All time was of one dimension.

Archer was humbled. In a croaky voice, he felt he could not address Carmel directly, only through her husband.

“Please ask her about the windows. Can you do that? I want to know about the windows.”

Ferguson knelt forward so as to make no noise. “Carmel, who are you now?”

She sat up tight and looked directly at the casement window. “Ashcroft. I am Ashcroft. Fenby did not protect me.”

“So what happened?”

“Lincoln killed me. Oh, the blood,” she said and traced an imaginary flow of blood down her face.

Tension took hold of Archer at the mention of Lincoln. He said nothing, but knew now that Carmel Ferguson was no trickster.

“Please ask Mrs Ferguson about the windows.”

Ferguson looked at him with incomprehension and then turned towards his wife.

“Ashcroft, tell us about the windows.”

“Oh they are fine, fine windows. I told the boys to carry them with care.”

“Where? Where did they carry them from?”

“Part of St Mary’s church, in the valley. The best part. Beautiful, don’t you think?”

“They are fine windows, Ashcroft. What makes them special?”

Carmel began to shape change at an alarming rate. Archer had never seen anything like it. Her body seemed to have another presence within that was pushing at the flesh in different places. Even the skull distorted at times. She stood up, she sat down. She lay on the floor and rolled over like two people fighting. Then there was calm and she returned to her seat.

“Who are you now?” Ferguson demanded.

“I am the reverend.”

“The reverend who?”

“The reverend of St Mary’s; the reverend Godfrey Merryweather.”

“What year is it, Reverend Merryweather?”

“Sixteen sixty-eight.

“I want to know about the windows, Godfrey.”

“I am sorry, who are you? A villager. A commoner. To you I am the Reverend Merryweather. Only in God’s eyes am I Godfrey.”

But Ferguson held firm. “Mr Archer and I wondered about your windows, the casement windows.”

“Ah, it’s a shame we must use them in such a way, but at least those within are safe from the devil.”

“In what way are you using them, Reverend?”

“They allow light in the side room where the dead are held. No crypt was ever dug out for this church.”

“Why are the bodies being held there? Why do you not bury them?”

“Because, you fool, they are dying faster than I can bury them. I am consoler of the dead, grave-digger and minister at funerals for the living. Tis an impossible task for just one man.”

“It is a plague year, yes?”

“It is indeed. The greatest fear is that we bury the living among the dead. I am many things, but not a physician. I am many things. I am many…I am the Reverend Godfrey Merry…”

And with this fading speech Carmel Ferguson stuttered to a halt. She sat bolt upright in her chair, neither moving nor speaking.

“Shouldn’t you bring her round, wake her up?” Archer asked.

“Oh no. The spirits will leave her body in their own time and Carmel will return,” Ferguson said, “to do otherwise will endanger Carmel.”

“May we talk?” Archer asked, “Will it disturb her?”

Ferguson shook his head. Archer continued.

“So she – your wife - became another person?”

“She became two people, Mr Archer. She is well capable of that.”

“Am I correct in saying that the casement windows guarded a section of the church where those dead and dying from the plague were laid out?”

“Yes. This was a church without a crypt.”

And, dear reader, he was right. Hundreds of years may have passed but my fabric echoes with the horror of those times. The dying were laid amongst the dead and there they moaned all night long and into the following day. Constantly they turned for help, only to be confronted by a desperate rictus, a grim cadaver that was beyond help or giving help.

The only source of sustenance or light was on those evenings that the moonlight pierced the heavy foliage and penetrated those casement windows.

Archer stood and looked about the room as if he was seeing it for the first time.

“I’m not sure that I can keep this on as a holiday property,” Archer said, “there is too much past contained within its walls.”

“So what would you do – demolish it?” Ferguson asked him.

Archer simply shook his head non-committally. For all his thrusting commercial ways, he cut a sad figure at that moment. He realised that without an understanding of how the past feeds into the present, he was an empty vessel. He saw that his own failures with son and wife resonated within my building as much as every other human tragedy that had taken place.

Doctor Singh

Throughout the day the pain in my back had increased. It had gone from ‘slight’ to ‘unbearable’ and my state of mind from annoyed to very worried. In late afternoon I took the dog a walk and thought at one point that I would not make it home. By an effort of sheer will I made the front door and begged my wife to get a doctor.

Living as we did out in the country, the doctor call service was not available. We were instructed to drive to the nearest hospital and meet the on-call doctor there.

At the hospital we were directed to a reception area to await the doctor’s arrival. By now the pain was such that I could not sit down. Instead, I paced up and down the floor, palms pressed against my lower back.

“Here’s Doctor Singh now,” the receptionist told my wife when she asked why the doctor was not present. Wearing a neat brown suit and carrying a well-worn briefcase, Doctor Singh entered the room wearing a troubled expression.

To be honest, I was so preoccupied by my pain that I was unable to gather other than the briefest of first impressions.

Dr Singh was, of course, a Sikh but he wore none of the Sikh attire that afternoon. It was his eyebrows I was drawn to. They curled upwards in a way that made him look satanic. Underneath them his dark brown eyes darted around like a match in a high wind. The small mouth with its thin drawn pursed lips looked like it might have been sewed shut. I could not see his teeth. His face was shaped like a long triangle, with prominent cheekbones and a pallor that spoke of ill health. I could not bear to look at the man for, doctor or no doctor, he reminded me of the Grim Reaper. All he lacked was a hooded cloak and a scythe. Maybe the truth was that he no more resembled the Reaper than I did myself, but the illusion was strengthened by his callous attitude and an air of malevolence.

From this point on, I had to depend upon my wife for an account of events as I was focused on the sheer agony that reigned in my abdomen.

Doctor Singh put down his bag while the receptionist made him a cup of tea which he cradled in his hands for the benefit of the warmth. Then he took some papers from his bag and turned his back on the waiting room so that he could make some facsimiles on the photocopier.

Time passed. I felt my consciousness fading and sat on an uncomfortable chair in order to lessen the anticipated collapse.

“Excuse me,” my distraught wife demanded of Singh, “when are you going to examine my husband – we’ve been waiting for 15 minutes?”

His response was to ill-temperedly pick up his papers from the photocopier, return them to his briefcase and storm without speaking towards his surgery door. At the last second he turned and addressed Rosie:

“I am taking my tea-break. I have papers I must attend to.”

Rosie was so nonplussed by this answer that she asked: “Should I get someone from Accident and Emergency?”

“Yes, it might be for the best,” was Dr Singh’s increasingly bizarre response.

She ran for help and three nurses and a porter rushed along the corridor and heaved my prostrate form on to a trolley. By now it was almost 30 minutes since I had arrived at the hospital and, at last, I was being properly attended to, even though I was unconscious.

Rosie realised that things were looking bleak when the Canadian consultant on duty said I would need surgery ‘pretty damned quick’. I had suffered what is known as a triple A; my aortic artery had ruptured and the blood was pouring down into my abdomen. A slow drip was fast becoming a torrent.

Medical opinion is that 40 minutes is the maximum a patient with a triple A can hold on after rupturing without surgery. The nearest hospital that could carry out the surgery I required was 60 miles away. Although the ambulance carrying me and Rosie flashed lights and sounded sirens, the drive had to be smooth so as not to worsen the rupture. It took 100 minutes, during which I drifted in and out of consciousness, and experienced the most pain a human could bear.

As the ambulance sped through the gates of the receiving hospital, Rosie said “Hold on, love, we’re there.”

I remember that bit best of all. Suddenly the excruciating pain lifted and I felt very sleepy. Absence of pain was bliss, but I knew deep down that the ultimate surrender was close.

“I’m sorry, darling, it’s too late,” I said, “I’m going, I’m going.”

With that I fell into a deep coma from which I would not emerge for several weeks.

Unfortunately, it was not as simple as mending a substantial rupture. First, I developed septicaemia and then a fungal lung infection that demanded a tracheotomy. In many ways, it was even worse for my wife and daughter. The specialists refused to give soothing words or false prognoses. My chances of surviving, they said, were distinctly less than average.

Totally absorbed in my opiate-fuelled dreams, I knew none of this. The summer months of May and June passed and I lived in a fantasy world, dwelling in woodland retreats and deserted cottages with only the strange and unreliable for company. Sometimes my view of the world would be from the sky, looking down on a remarkable patchwork quilt of meadow and forest. The visionary world I inhabited did not seem fleeting nor transparent, but as concrete and realistic as the keyboard upon which I am pouring out these memories. That dream world was technicolour vivid and although the background to it was always changing, there was one constant: lurking in foreground and background was Doctor Singh. Clearly, the traumatic events in that hospital waiting room before my collapse had imprinted his image on my mind.

Sometimes he would be dressed in a frock coat, then a smart tweed suit. Once he wore a bowler hat and a city gent’s overcoat. But the real point of focus was on those curled up eyebrows and the eyes that darted ceaselessly about, searching for an unnamed fulfilment. Oh, I got to know Devinder Singh much better in those comatose days. I both hated and

feared him. Many of those dreams involved me making a frantic escape from Singh; as though I harboured a dark knowledge that should he catch me I was a dead man.

May drifted into June then suddenly the world was in July and I became a part of it again. No longer did Singh plague my dreams and he all but disappeared from my conscious thoughts. Incredibly, I was alive. Most people die of a Triple A even before they reach hospital; of the minority that do, more than half die on the operating table.

“How have I managed to survive?” I remember asking Mr Thomas, my consultant.

“You’re a miracle patient,” he said, “I thought you were a lost cause the moment I saw the damage in your abdomen. We got to know from your family that you were a fit person though, lots of running and walking. That must have been the difference.”

Upon my emergence from the coma, one of the nurses started idly chatting to me one unbearably hot July afternoon. She began quizzing me about the history of my illness. How had it started? Where was I when I collapsed?

I explained about going to the hospital out of hours’ service; the antics of Dr Singh and how I had been abandoned by him on the waiting room floor while he took his tea break. She involved a group of nurses who were working nearby. They were outraged at Singh’s behaviour on behalf of their own professional etiquette. How could a person whose work was helping the sick and suffering so blatantly ignore his calling?

“You need to make a complaint about him,” said Fay, the nurse who had attended me since my first arrival in Intensive Care.

“What would be the point of that?” I asked her.

“So that he never does it to anyone else,” she said, “he deserves to be struck off.”

The more I thought about her words, the more animated I got. Yes, she was right. Singh deserved to have the book thrown at him as soon as I was strong enough to lift it. My resolve frightened me somewhat; Singh’s stature had grown significantly in my mind over the time of my hospitalisation. Taking him on would be no picnic. After all, it felt like I was attempting to professionally reap the Grim Reaper himself.

I waited until I had been discharged from hospital and was comfortably ensconced at home. The first problem was finding to whom I should address my complaint. Devinder Singh might have become the Grim Reaper in my mind, but if I was to unseat him then it must be his earthly base that I targeted, not anything as ethereal as Hades.

I wrote and re-wrote that letter many times. I wanted to write rather than type because it seemed like the physical effort of wielding a pen made things more personal. This is the letter I wrote:

On May 2nd I attended the out of hours’ doctor service for an appointment with Dr Devinder Singh.

Although Dr Singh arrived shortly after I did, he had still made no effort to examine me within the 30 minutes that followed. Instead he spent time working on the photocopier, conversing with a caretaker and drinking a mug of tea. When my wife approached and asked when he

was going to look at me, Dr Singh told her that he was on his tea break and had administrative tasks to complete. My wife asked whether she should seek help from nursing staff in nearby A and E.

"You do what you like" he told her. With that he entered his office, closing the door behind him.

I later learned that I was suffering a Triple A and needed surgery within 40 minutes. Dr Singh's reaction to my situation caused me to lose 30 precious minutes.

However, what upset me most of all was that a doctor could ignore my plight. How could a trained professional walk away from someone who had just collapsed?

I would be grateful if you responded by return of post, advising me how to proceed with my complaint against Dr Singh.

There was a swift reply. Within three days I had an assurance that FirstCare UK, the company in charge of providing the out of hours' service, would be looking into my complaint and that I could expect a contact from a Dr O'Brien who was investigating the matter.

On the phone Dr O'Brien was well-spoken and reassuring. The conversation flowed smoothly and he reassured me that Dr Singh would be investigated thoroughly and without prejudice. We agreed that he would come round at nine the following evening and that my wife would be present to give her account of events.

"To be honest, I was only semi-conscious for most of the time at the hospital," I told him, "but my wife not only took responsibility, she wrote down everything that had happened when she got home. Her version will be accurate, I guarantee it."

A plumpish man with an open face, Dr O'Brien had obviously not had time to nip home from work and change out of his suit. He carried a scarred red leather bag and when he lifted out a fistful of its contents I could see the letter I had written among them. Whatever his reassuring words on the phone, Rosie and I were ready for a fight. We were well acquainted with life in the professions and how people close ranks in defence of one another. We were in for a surprise.

"Word had got back to us about this incident," he said, "but we couldn't do anything about it until we'd received a formal written complaint."

He picked my letter from the papers that he had taken from his bag.

"There have been complaints about Dev Singh before," he went on, "but nothing of this nature. In many ways he's a good doctor; his note-taking is first rate."

I waited for him to tell me what complaints had been laid against Singh, but clearly that was none of my business and he would not go there.

For the next 30 minutes he listened to our account of events, asking a few pointed questions and making a few scribbled notes.

"What would be best," he said finally, "would be if Mrs Dalton wrote down her version of events and posted it on to me."

This we agreed, and Dr O'Brien departed, saying he was very sorry about what I had been through, but he was delighted to see me on the road to recovery.

"What's the worst that can happen to Dr Singh?" I asked him on the doorstep.

"This is serious stuff and he could well be struck off for it. He's not likely to get anymore work with FirstCare."

"Has he done anything like this before?"

"I'm afraid I can't reveal that, Mr Dalton, Data Information Act. I look forward to receiving your letter."

We posted Rosie's letter about a week later and then things went quiet.

My rehabilitation suddenly hit a blip. I developed an excruciating form of Sciatica and could only walk with the aid of a stick. It was also a mystery to my doctors, but they steadfastly refused to allow an X-ray, saying I had received more than my share of radiation in the preceding months.

Time passed and we heard nothing. Although it was painful to walk, I insisted on getting out and about rather than curling up in a chair at home feeling sorry for myself.

One day I went shopping in town with Rosie.

"Can I have a bit of time on my own?" I asked her, "I need to become more independent."

I could see she was less than happy at the request, but she knew that once my mind was made up there was no point opposing me. I bought a newspaper and went for a coffee before limping with my stick through the mall on my way back to meet her.

There is quite a dangerous road to cross once one emerges from the mall, but there was no alternative if I was to keep our rendezvous.

I looked over right and left shoulders. A fast car was approaching from the right and normally I would have concluded that there was no chance I could have cleared the road in time. But I swear that a calm voice urged me to cross the road. 'You can do that' it said. I never thought to question the source of this advice for it seemed to come from within my own head and I launched myself across the road.

It was a close call. The oncoming car screeched to a halt and all road users in the vicinity looked in my direction.

"What the hell are you playing at, man?" the driver yelled through his open window. "Is that how you got your stick in the first place?"

My heart was pounding and I must have been crimson with embarrassment at my gross misjudgement. There was no comeback because I was so utterly in the wrong. What had induced me to take such a chance crossing the road in the first place?

I said nothing to Rosie although she did quiz me about my quietness as we drove home.

I was recovering sufficiently to take the family dog, Chick-Pea for the occasional short walk. One Sunday afternoon, I was joined by our grown-up daughter, Jenny, taking Chick-Pea down

by the river. Because she wanted to try out her new camera with some nature shots, she walked on ahead.

Chick-Pea was drawn to a slight disturbance in the river, possibly a fish jumping for air. He nudged his way down the bank to the waterside to investigate and there lost his footing. He slipped into the drink and visibly panicked. I had never seen Chick-Pea swim or even go close to water. It is said that all dogs are natural swimmers, but he gave grounds for questioning this.

I yelled for Jenny, but she was out of range. Prodding the bank gingerly with my walking stick, I did my best to approach Chick-Pea. The clay surface was wet and crumbly and the dog was drifting out of reach. Trying hard to anchor myself to the bank, I reached into the river with my stick and tried to hook the dog's collar. That was when the soil gave way and I tumbled gracelessly into the river.

The shock of the cold water made me gasp furiously and now my only thoughts were of self-preservation; Chick-Pea was out of sight, out of mind.

As luck would have it, Jenny had just run out of film and turned back along the river path to rejoin us.

"Get the dog," I shouted, holding onto the river bank as best I could.

Chick-Pea had drifted up against a log midstream and was unsuccessfully trying to clamber onto it.

Despite my protestations, Jenny dragged me out and for the best part of two minutes I straddled the bank like a beached whale. During this time she tried to wade in as far as Chick-Pea, only to find that she was out of her depth inches before making contact. Inadvertently she dislodged him from his perch and, propelled by a lusty current, the dog continued his journey downstream.

Running parallel with the river but separated from it by a hedge was a country lane. As I rolled over on my side, I became aware that someone was watching us from the other side of the hedge. I gasped audibly at the sight of Dr Singh. That face, topped this time by a turban, looked particularly manic with its upward-curling eyebrows and fixed stare.

"What's a matter, dad?" Jenny asked.

"Look!" I pointed. Her eyes followed the direction of my finger.

"Dad, there's nothing there."

Now this was most disturbing for clearly I was hallucinating again.

"Can't you see who it is?" I asked her.

"There's no one there, dad."

And when I looked a second time she was right. There was no one to be seen.

Chick-Pea had scrambled ashore at the bend of the river. Looking as bedraggled and sodden as a drowned rat, he was visibly shivering by the time we lassoed his choke chain round his

neck. We hurried home in order to get warm and dry.

I was sufficiently paranoid by now to link together the accident while crossing the road with the near drowning in the river. I was sure that the seemingly intrepid Dr Singh was behind both instances. By the sheer effort of his devilish will, he was ensuring that I was taken care of for good and my complaint against him dismissed.

Right or wrong, my next move was to phone Dr O'Brien in an attempt to discover what was happening with regard to my case against Dr Singh. Rather than a naked enquiry about how the case was progressing, I had decided to open by asking whether he had received Rosie's letter.

"Oh yes, Mr Dalton. I think it must have arrived the day after she sent it."

"So is that it?" I asked, "Or will we have to speak in front of some sort of committee?"

"It's tomorrow," was his brusque answer.

"What is?"

"Singh's hearing. And no, you don't have to be present in person. Only Dr Singh has to do that in order to defend himself against the charges."

I hesitated. Why on earth had I phoned Dr O'Brien in the first place? If I had told him about the near road accident and the fall into the river and linked them with my suspicion that Dr Singh was responsible, all my credibility would disappear. The case against Singh would probably be abandoned immediately.

"Fine, I'll hear from you in due course then?" I said, thinking it the right thing to end the call.

"Yes, by letter. Good afternoon, Mr Dalton."

I was mightily relieved that I would not have to meet Singh in person. I could not have handled the intimidation I would have felt.

The next day crawled by and my thoughts were fixated on Dr Singh and his interrogation. It was not that I had a sudden wellspring of pity for the man, or that I regretted setting in train proceedings against him. No, my real concern was about how he would react to the findings. If the charges were dismissed, might he not seek revenge for the prosecution against him? If he was found guilty and struck off as a doctor, would he feel he had nothing to lose and exact that measure of punishment associated with the grim reaper?

That night, the night after the tribunal, I found sleep hard to come by. When I did finally surrender to loss of consciousness, it was not restorative sleep or restful calm. No, Singh was there in my very bedroom and his activity was almost too horrendous to describe. From somewhere in the room came a swarm of fat blowflies and they were heading for me. Singh sat on the edge of my bed and, this is beyond imagining, held open my mouth and blocked my nostrils at the same time. So powerful was Singh's presence that I still retain a memory of the smell of his fingers and the power of his grip.

His efforts were aimed at prising open my mouth so that the stream of flies might enter. And indeed that is what they did. I felt the things crawling into my mouth. Just two or three at first, and then 20, and then 50; so many that my saliva dried up and my mouth and throat were

crammed with flies. This continued for what seemed like hours and I felt the breath draining out of me.

When I was woken by Rosie thumping my shoulder, there was no Singh and not a single blowfly in my mouth. I sat upright with a start and slumped back on my pillow once the relief, that I had experienced nothing more than a nightmare, hit home.

“What were you dreaming about?” Rosie asked, “You were making some awful noises.”

“Silly stuff. You know how it is. Someone was after me and I was trying to escape.”

I lay there for 10 minutes gathering myself before heading downstairs to the coffee pot. Rosie had an early start and by the time I sat down in my dressing gown with a huge mug of coffee, I could see her reversing her car down the drive. I waved at her through the window.

Soon I would have to return to work, but for now I was still convalescing and it would be at least a month before I returned to teaching.

Eventually, I went upstairs to wash, dress and make my bed. I hauled back the duvet so that I might put my pyjamas underneath the pillow. I was stopped in my tracks. On my pillow were a number of dead blowflies – five in all. The sight of them made me feel physically sick and I rushed into the bathroom, emptying the contents of my stomach into the toilet.

That summer in hospital, I had experienced vivid dreams so powerful that I might actually have been living them. Here was a sight, (the five dead flies), that made me question whether or not I experienced a nightmare or a frightening reality.

The phone started ringing downstairs. My first thought was that Rosie was either ringing to check on me or that she had forgotten to take something or other to work. In fact the caller was Dr O’Brien.

“Good morning, Mr Dalton, I have a letter for you.”

“Is it one I want to receive?” I asked him.

“I think so,” he said, “it is the apology you wanted from Dr Singh.”

I paused. “Is he hoping I’ll withdraw my complaint if I accept his apology?”

“Oh no,” Dr O’Brien said, “That was all dealt with yesterday. Dr Singh was struck off for his negligence.”

“He was struck off?” I reiterated, with an audible gasp.

“At this very moment I believe he is in an aeroplane somewhere between Heathrow and Bombay. He’s going home to India.”

“For good?”

“Who can say? Now I will forward his letter to you and you should get it by the weekend.”

I thought no more of Dr Singh, feeling that his departure for India brought just the closure I wanted. On the Friday morning, I was dozing in an armchair when I heard the rattle of the letterbox. The envelope was headed by the word ‘Personal’ and, in the same handwriting, ‘Mr

Dalton'. In a different hand was my address and I recognised this as being Dr O'Brien's writing.

I did not know what to expect. Was the man who had ignored my agony for the best part of 30 minutes even capable of apology? I was about to learn the truth.

Dear Mr Dalton,

I am told that it is your wish that I put in writing my apology for what others see as an act of negligence when you fell ill at my surgery.

When you have been a doctor as long as I have, you develop a strong sense of likelihood. That is, you understand intuitively what is likely to happen to someone you are treating. In particular, you see the balance between life and death.

Whatever you may think, I did notice you in my surgery. I was accused by the committee of totally ignoring you, but that is not the truth. I looked at you, Mr Dalton, and saw a dead man. There was not the remotest chance that you would survive your illness. I felt that it made more sense for the A and E staff to manage your death. They could offer more than a single doctor and an otherwise unstaffed surgery.

It is incredible that you are alive. I cannot account for how it happened and, for that misjudgement, I am truly sorry. Of course, you cannot live forever and it is likely that the life you have reclaimed will not be a long one.

Yours,
Devinder Singh

That looked like being that, except some six weeks later I ran into Dr O'Brien while at the library. He smiled politely and signalled that we should meet up outside the main door where silence did not reign.

"You look well, Mr Dalton. Better even than when I last saw you."

"My consultant is pleased. He says I should be back to a normal life within 12 months of the rupture."

"Excellent. You must be made of tough stuff. I presume you heard about Devinder Singh?"

"Heard what?"

"Of his death, Mr Dalton. I told you he flew back to India. His internal flight from Bombay to his home town crashed in a storm. Everyone on board the plane was killed."

He must have seen the shock in my face. "Are you all right?"

I sat down on a bench in front of a statue. "Yes, I'm okay. Just stunned by your news."

I remembered reading an article in a magazine about the Lockerbie air crash. It occurred in 1989 when a number of Americans were returning home for Christmas. A terrorist bomb blew the plane apart in midair. One passenger, still strapped in his seat, dropped several thousand feet to earth and incredibly was still alive when he landed. A local ran to his rescue, but within two minutes the passenger had died.

The grim reaper part of me, the Old Nick in me that causes my heart to ossify, wishes Dr Singh had an end like that. To be unattended for just two minutes during one's death pangs would indeed be a terrible death. I expect he has always known that.

Ginny Spring

I am just back from my walk across the fields. Doctor Shepherdson advised a walk each and every afternoon as part of my recovery.

“You’re lucky to be alive” he said “so now let’s strengthen your lungs and circulation to ensure there is no repeat performance. As well as your medication I am prescribing a daily walk of not less than a couple of miles.”

The good doctor could never have envisaged the shock I received to my system during that couple of miles. It was near Studley Wood when I thought I caught sight of Tommy Trent. Of course it could not have been Tommy because he had come to such a bad end six months previously, but the man’s gait and style of clothing was strongly reminiscent of him. I stood there staring like a man possessed, but then the fellow bent over and threw a stick for his dog to chase. That action and the sound of the man’s voice told me I had been mistaken.

Ah, Tommy Trent. Generally, I am no lover of farmers, but Tommy was the exception. Being ‘townies’ who had come to live in an intensely rural area, it had taken us years to win acceptance. Farmers in particular looked down their noses at us; at least that was my abiding impression. One was out for a walk on *their* land; the old master and serf relationship was slow to die in these rural parts. Martha, our elderly neighbour, had warned us that 20 years was the minimum standard for the locals to feel comfortable with ‘incomers’.

Tommy was different. I never heard him judge another and he dealt a fair hand to all whom he met. He was an ungainly man and, because he wore the same clothes day in and day out and rarely took a bath or shower, his personal hygiene was below par. His features were best described as craggy, like the rocks at the edge of his land when he farmed alone. His white wispy hair extended halfway down his cheeks into his sideburns, giving him a Dickensian aspect. He spoke with a strong accent, typical of that part of Yorkshire, and his words were often slurred and jumbled as they emerged. Those quick to form an opinion might have thought him slow or unintelligent, but Tommy had a deep insight into those areas of life that concerned him. On animals and nature he had no equal. Tommy possessed a true wisdom of the soil.

Few people in the village knew Tommy well. My own familiarity with him came out of the fact that he came to Martha most Saturdays to sort out her garden. Their friendship stretched back to shared schooldays. One day Tommy had heard that Martha, then the village postmistress, had taken a nasty tumble from her bike and been severely hampered by the resultant lameness. Her husband had died some years earlier.

As soon as she was home from hospital he drove to her house and made the offer to help her in the garden, insisting that no money changed hands. Instead she could prepare him Saturday lunch. Yvonne and I would see the two of them moving around the garden each Saturday, Martha following him like a mother hen.

It was during these sessions that Martha must have acquired the knowledge of Tommy that she was later to share with me. Another source of information was Tommy’s sister; Dorothy had been an actual classmate of Martha’s during her schooldays so they often had rambling

telephone conversations about old teachers, boyfriends and the like. Then one day, out of the blue, it was Dorothy who told Martha that Tommy had sold his farm and come to live as her next door neighbour in the village.

“Why did he do that?” I asked Martha one day, “I thought he loved his own company.”

“Oh he does. Well, he did. But he has a lady friend now: Mrs Richmond who lives next door to the garage.”

“And is that why he gave up the farm?” I continued.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure that Dorothy told me that had happened since he came back down to live in the village.”

I suppose the obvious thing would have been for Martha to ask him, but Tommy was such a private person that one could only ever be a party to knowledge that he willingly imparted. “We tell people too much about ourselves” I once heard him say, “People should keep others guessing a bit more.”Asking Tommy something personal would drive him into a corner.

Martha once told me that Tommy had gone up to Pike Hill House to live and farm when he was in his early twenties.

“At first he had paid a peppercorn rent for it. It was so remote that no one else wanted to live there in this day and age. Then when his parents died, Tommy used his inheritance to buy the farm.”

“Was he a desperately shy person when he was younger? Is that why he lived up there?” I asked Martha.

“Oh no, quite the opposite as I remember,” she said. “He could be a bit of a lad when he was younger. He had a number of girl friends till suddenly he would have nothing more to do with folk. As though something had happened to put him off …people.”

“But he’s not like that now?” I interjected.

“No, he’s not,” Martha said. “Why, I asked him only the other week if he missed being out at Pike Hill House with only hisself to please.”

“And did he?”

“‘Oh no’ he said, ‘I couldn’t take any more of that’. Then he said the strangest thing: ‘I’m glad to be back in the land of the living’ he said.”

Yet there was a central mystery to Tommy Trent that no one seemed able to account for – not even Martha. Here was a capable sociable individual, certainly no misanthrope, who spent vast tracts of his life leading an isolated existence sharing few links with neither man nor woman. There is a difference between being comfortable with one’s own company and actively seeking it out.

Martha, possibly the only person besides his sister with whom Tommy shared any confidences, passed on nuggets of insight to me in our fireside chats. She knew that I found Tommy a fascinating character and I suspect she enjoyed her bit of power in feeding my

hunger for stories about him. She also knew that, apart from Yvonne, my wife, there was no one I would pass things on to.

The picture she painted of Tommy and his farming life was made with broad brush strokes. For example, she told me that he would never plant his crop during the daytime.

“Rather he would sleep through the daylight hours and then he would plant his seeds by the light of a new moon. He was a great believer in new moons and I have to say that I hardly ever saw one of his crops fail.”

I had this mental picture of a bare-chested Tommy, pale blue light reflecting off his torso as he worked his way across the field at planting and harvesting times.

“He was good with all his animals,” she once said, “and he would nurse them like they were domestic pets. When it was time for t’slaughter he would send for Wilkinson from the abattoir and Tommy would make sure he spent the day away.”

But about one thing she said Martha was very specific.

“When I was doing the post, Tommy was my last call and thankful I was for it. I was tired out with biking up to Pike Hill House but at least I knew I could roll downhill most of the way home.

“Most days in the summertime he would be sitting by the side of Ginny Spring. At least that was what he called it.”

“Ginny Spring?” I quizzed her.

“Aye, I asked loads of people in the village if they knew owt about it, but no one had heard of Ginny Spring – except Tommy that is.”

“Well, what was Ginny Spring exactly?” I asked.

“It was like a wide pond where, according to Tommy, a spring of the freshest most wonderful water came up from the earth’s depths. Ah, he would say, if only I could bottle it I would be a rich man indeed…as rich as Yorkshire.”

“So he liked to laze on the banks of this…Ginny Spring?” I repeated.

“He did. Occasionally he would sip a handful of its water and look ecstatically happy.”

At that Martha paused and it was like a cloud blotted out her sun. “But one summer day I came upon him by surprise. He was ‘miles away’, as they say. The look he wore on that occasion, when he didn’t know I was looking, was one of utter misery and yet the day itself was as agreeable as could be hoped for.”

“Maybe he was lost deep in thought?” I offered.

“Oh, he was,” she said, “and the deep thought was clearly giving him terrible pain.”

Tommy’s demise took everyone by surprise. Word on his death spread round the area like a forest fire, but no one seemed to know exactly what had happened. Some said he had collapsed while out walking, others were convinced he had committed suicide while still others believed he had drowned.

I learned about the detail quite unwittingly. One midweek afternoon, a couple of weeks after the funeral, I was sorting out the filter on Martha's washing machine when she received a visitor. It was Maggie Richmond, Tommy's girl friend, who was trying to sort out what was left of his estate.

"I think this is yours, Martha," she said, handing over a book of British Birds, "we found it when we were clearing out Tommy's house."

I carried on working in the scullery, but every word carried through to me from the living room. By now Martha had forgotten that I was there and Maggie couldn't see me. The two of them ploughed on with their conversation, unaware that they had an eavesdropper.

Apparently, Tommy and Maggie had been planning a late afternoon drive to the seaside on the day of Tommy's death. Maggie had packed a hamper of sandwiches, cake, ale and a flask of tea. By five'o'clock with no sign of Tommy, she drove round to his cottage. She saw his ramshackle old jeep parked alongside the building and assumed he must have drifted off to sleep inside. She banged on his door so loud and long that, although there was no response from Tommy, his sister Dorothy heard from further along the terrace.

"What's a matter, Maggie?"

Once Maggie had explained their plans, Dorothy nipped home to get the spare key she held for Tommy's house.

"He can be very forgetful, you know, so he leaves a key with me in case he locks himself out," Dorothy told her.

"Oh, I know what he's like," Maggie said.

But an increasingly frantic search of Tommy's house only served to deepen the mystery. The anticipated sight of Tommy fast asleep on his bed never materialised.

"Yours paths probably crossed," Dorothy declared, "I bet he's waiting for you at your house at this very minute."

"Hmmm, I don't think so," Maggie Richmond had said, "but I'd better go home and check."

Of course, he was not there.

"Why I did what I did next I'll never know," Maggie told Martha, "But I drove up to Pike Hill Farm (as they call it now).

"It's owned by Ray Mellors; him who had the garage in the village. All he wanted was Tommy's house. He'd coveted that house for years. Secretive men like him love to live out in the wilds where no one can question their activities. He bought the house off Tommy but he wasn't interested in tending the farm so he leased off that part of the estate to the Duchy of Lancaster."

Maggie told how she had pulled up outside the old farmhouse that day and a pair of unfriendly-looking Alsatians began circling her car. The bigger of the two dogs looked ready to attack and, despite being a dog lover, she was reluctant to clamber out of the car and knock on the house's front door. She stayed put and sounded her horn. Mellors emerged from the house and lumbered down the path like it was a task he would do anything to avoid. Maggie

had never liked him anyway, but he might know something about Tommy and that was her only hope.

“Has Tommy been up here today?” she asked, winding down her window.

“Tommy?” Mellor scowled, like the very name was anathema to him.

“Oh, come on, man. Tommy Trent. The man who sold you the farm.”

“What would he be doing up here?” Mellors asked.

“You know he loved it up here, don’t you? It’s full of memories for him. I just thought he might have come up here to revive them.”

She looked at Mellors and saw no repository in that brow for sweet memories or even an understanding of their importance to others.

“We can’t find him anywhere,” Maggie went on, “I’m worried about him.”

She took in a deep breath and asked the question she would have willingly avoided.

“Do you mind if I have a look round the outbuildings?”

“Well, I’m not keen,” Mellors had said.

“And I tell you there was not one glimpse of humanity in that man’s face,” I heard her telling Martha.

“So I told him to suit himself” Maggie went on. “I revved up me car and sped back down the drive.”

“So what happened then?” Martha asked her.

“I can be a stubborn cuss,” Maggie went on, “and when somebody forbids me from doing something, I’ll always do the opposite.”

She went on to explain how she had driven off the country lane and taken the field drive that looped behind the woods and back towards the house.

“Then a strange thing happened when I got out of my car,” she said. “In the mud, right where I put my feet was a tiny baby’s hand and arm. At first I thought I was about to make a horrid find, but then I realised it was just plastic and belonged to a baby doll. But it gave me a jolt, I can tell you. It seemed like a kind of omen.”

“I bet” Martha said, “I would have jumped out of my skin.”

“What it did was put me on my guard,” Maggie continued, “I knew then that something bad was about to happen. I made my way to the back of the house…to where that pond is.”

“Ginny Spring,” Martha said crisply.

“Ginny Spring? Is that what they call it?”

“That’s what Tommy called it,” Martha said.

By this point in Maggie and Martha's conversation I had finished my work clearing the filter on Martha's washing machine, but it hardly seemed like a good time to declare my presence. Maggie would be embarrassed and Martha certainly wouldn't thank me. I leaned back against the scullery wall. I could hear Maggie struggling for breath and then the sound of sobbing as she recalled that day.

"He was floating in the water, Martha. Folk have said to me 'What did he look like?' but that's a question I couldn't answer. See, he was floating face down. My Tommy, my dear dead Tommy.

She pulled herself together.

"I didn't bother with Mellors. I dialled a 999 on my mobile phone and they all came - the police, the ambulance and the fire to get his body out of the water."

I was cramping up and the floor was becoming unbearably cold. It was a merciful release when Maggie got up to go, choking back her tears. I made sure the door left no part of me uncovered.

"Oh hello, I forgot you were still here," Martha said as she returned to the kitchen and found a very sheepish me among her pots and pans.

"I suppose you heard most of that?"

"Most of it, yes."

"Ah well, it'll do no harm because I know you won't go shouting your mouth off. Still, I'm glad Maggie didn't realise you were here."

"Yes, me too. Sorry if I did wrong, Martha. I didn't mean to listen in to your conversation. I was just sort of –

"Trapped?" Martha said. "Don't worry. Worse things happen at sea."

It was several days later that I was at Martha's house. I had been suffering with terrible pains in my stomach and lower back. I often sought a cup of herbal tea in Martha's company at such times; Yvonne being out at work. Nothing further had been said about Maggie's visit, but Martha had clearly been dwelling on it.

"You know, I've been a bit less than honest with you about Tommy," Martha said. "There are things I know that I've never let on to you."

"Oh?" was all I could say. It was none of my business really, just my good fortune that in knowing Martha I had happened upon someone who could feed my fascination with Tommy Trent.

"I think you would like to know the full story about Ginny Spring. Am I right?"

I nodded. Pointless denying it.

"No one in the village seems to know what you are talking about when you refer to Ginny Spring. That's because it was a name Tommy gave it – a private name for him and his friends."

Martha suddenly turned her gaze on me ."Do you know what Ginny is short for?"

“A girl’s name, I think. Virginia.”

“That’s right,” Martha said. “You remember I told you that Tommy was fascinated with all people, especially girls, when he was a young man?”

“Yes,” I answered, “you said he changed then and went to live alone.”

“I did, but there was a reason. He loved a girl named Virginia James and they both of them loved walking out. Well, that pond where Tommy was found was a special place for them. Virginia was a strong swimmer and she loved the water in that spring. She would tease Tommy because he was not a good swimmer.”

“So what happened?”

“One beautiful summer morning, one of her feet got twisted in some weed at the bottom of the pond. ‘Help me, Tommy, help me,’ she shouted, but every time Tommy tried to get closer to her to pull her out, he lost his own footing. He ran to the house to get help, but when he returned with the farmer it was too late.”

“Virginia had drowned.”

“That beautiful girl drowned like a dead rat…and they were Tommy’s words. He named the spring after her, Ginny Spring, and went to live up there to be with her spirit. All this I learned from Dorothy, his sister.”

“So why did he come back down to the village?” I asked. “Was he no longer happy up there?”

“I’ll tell you what Dorothy told me,” Martha went on. “He became afraid because he could hear Ginny’s voice and do you know what it was saying?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“It was saying ‘Come in here, Tommy, and join me.’ He told Dorothy it was getting harder and harder to resist.”

I must have looked very pale. “Are you all right?” Martha said, “You don’t look at all well.”

That was the point at which I blacked out and an ambulance was called for me. I will never know whether it was the truth about Tommy or my ulcerated bowel that tipped me over the edge.

One of the good things that occurred while I was in hospital was that the friends of Tommy Trent chipped in to buy him a graveyard plot adjacent to his beloved Virginia.

Going to the Match

He felt excited at the prospect of returning to one of his boyhood haunts. The drive through Nottingham in the early April evening had been exhilarating. The entire city centre had been re-fashioned over the 20 years he had been away, but the important parts – railway station, old churches, place-names – maintained their familiarity and tugged at the memory.

The quality of evening light – a pale golden apricot colour – imparted a tranquil air to a busy town during rush hour. When the towering floodlights of the football stadium came into view, Steve felt an almost childish sense of expectation.

'Going to the match' had been such a pleasure through his growing up. In those days he went with his dad and a man named Stan Willett, who smoked a pipe incessantly. Pipe-smoking in public was unquestioned then and indeed the powerful aroma of pipe, 'ciggy' and even cigar tobacco was an integral part of the match atmosphere. The three of them, two middle-aged men whose sporting days were well behind them and a pre-pubescent boy, always sat together on the double-decker bus that carried them to Nottingham. In the rattling sanctuary of the bus, they talked football and chewed over the world's problems. Stan would puff away on his pipe, occasionally pausing to suck in an extra boost, while his dad lit up a John Player. You could do that kind of thing in those days.

When they got to the match, his dad would smuggle young Steve to the front of the crowd. The sheer strength of his dad's grip at that time was something he could still remember. He had never been as secure since.

Once at the front, he would grab his place by gripping the tubular steel rail that ran round the ground. His dad told him:

"Stay where you are and we'll pick you up at the end of the match." Then he would lift Steve up, turn him round and point out Stan in the crowd.

"That's where we'll be if you need us."

As comforting as that knowledge was, he always made friends with other lads who had been smuggled to the front by their dads. As it approached kick-off time, the excitement among the young supporters sparked like electricity and it was like being part of a special, once-only gang.

All of that was in the distant past. Dad had passed away many years ago and Steve did not know what had become of Stan Willett. Maybe he had returned to London, where his larger family lived. His actual team had been Tottenham Hotspur; going to Notts was a habit he had picked up while working in the area. Sometimes Stan had annoyed his dad by making unfavourable comparisons between Spurs' and Notts' players. 'There were two whole divisions between the clubs; what on earth did the man expect?' his dad had later said to him.

Steve parked his car in the cattle market adjacent to the ground. In Victorian times, Nottinghamshire farmers had made their fortunes and losses on just this spot. Now it served as a base for a small fry Saturday morning market and a football ground overspill.

It was six'o'clock, still two hours to kick-off and there was not yet one other vehicle. He felt vulnerable and lonely, suddenly aware that the social aspect of going to the match was completely absent from this experience.

He locked his car and found a derelict building in which to take a leak. He decided he would go for a drink in the Navigation Inn, like he used to with his dad.

Walking down the road, his sweeping gaze took in where the bus dropped off the three of them in the old days. He doubted even whether such buses ran anymore in these times of universal car ownership. Steve paused, giving his memory a chance to restore forgotten detail. Normally, he was not good at visualising the past, but this evening was different. He stood on the spot picturing his dad's good looks, (they used to say he was a dead ringer for Dirk Bogarde), and Stan's endlessly fuming pipe. He was startled by the sheer clarity of his memory and felt that the trickle of passing supporters must have thought him weird, standing there like that.

Even though the streets around the ground were sparsely populated, the pub was overflowing once he got there. The Navigation Inn had been a pre-match gathering point for years and the young Steve had marvelled at how people managed to hear one another despite the swelling noise levels. His dad had always parked him with Stan at a table and gone off to buy the drinks.

Tonight he stood behind a raucous group of youths who broke into regular paroxysms of laughter. After 10 minutes he was still no nearer being served and began to lose interest in beer. He glanced over his shoulder at one point and was shocked to see his dad sitting at a corner table. At least it looked like his dad. Steve became fixated on the man until he laughed aloud. That was when he knew for sure that this was not his dad. His dad's laugh was restrained and polite, not braying and attention-seeking like this man's.

Meanwhile the barmaid had tersely requested his order and he had been too preoccupied to answer.

"Sorry, duck. A pint, please."

There was no trace of movement in the girl's face as she pulled the pump, took his money and was told by him to keep the change. She worked behind a stony-face that guaranteed her anonymity, which was a shame because she was an attractive woman. Right then Steve would have given anything for a pleasant exchange that gave him a sense of belonging.

He was uncomfortable in the heat and noise of the overcrowded bar. Downing the beer in a couple of greedy gulps, he battled his way to the door and, once outside, sucked in the humid Nottingham air.

HHe could hear the club's PA system amplifying *What Becomes of the Broken-Hearted* as he neared the main gate. Soon he was absorbed into a maze of people, each striding purposefully in a chosen direction. Unsure of whereabouts to sit in the stadium, he drifted into the shop. Close to season's end, the stock was being run down. He had considered buying a shirt, but then had second thoughts. He had always thought middle-aged men looked ridiculous wearing club colours, advertising the mismatch between sporting fitness and their overweight, ill-maintained bodies. This kind of promotional clothing hadn't been around when

he came to the ground with his dad, all those years ago. In any case, he could not imagine that his dad's idea of dignity would have extended to wearing club colours.

Once inside the ground, he felt even lonelier. The thousands of football fans who had been milling around the ground were now concentrated within a much smaller area. What struck Steve was how many of them were in groups, enjoying the company of friends. For them, going to the match was at once a social and a sporting occasion.

It was not that he was unused to being alone, or unable to survive and prosper in his own company; it just seemed almost wrong that he was not *sharing* the experience. But between visiting the toilets and finding a seat in the main stadium, something unaccountable happened. He was joined by another.

As he moved towards the steps, Steve sensed someone by his right shoulder. He became aware of the presence only in his peripheral vision. When he turned face on, the feeling disappeared. Steve felt both excited and anxious as he realised that the presence had been familiar… and ghostly. Every sensibility told him that this could not be. Whenever a conversation involved the supernatural, he had always belittled the notion of ghosts.

"I'll believe in ghosts when I see one," had been his stock phrase.

Even if ghosts did exist, then surely their context was night, scary houses, fearful atmospheres; not rowdy football matches in crowded stadia? Yet Steve saw now that this was clearly not the case. If ghosts came back from the dead and haunted the familiar scenes of their lives, (whatever 'haunting' meant) there was no reason why they should not appear beside traffic lights at a busy junction, next to a cash till in a department store,… or amongst the crowds at a football match.

There was a sizeable crowd for County had embarked upon a sensational unbeaten run. They had come from nowhere to top the league table and were only two victories away from becoming champions. Despite the demand for tickets, Steve found two adjacent vacant seats. Without question, he knew that two seats were required. Glancing furtively about him, he checked on his neighbours. They looked a peaceable enough collection and he settled back, feeling a delicious anticipation of the action that was about to start. Cheers and laughter filled the night as kick-off time drew close.

His seat was adjacent to the players' tunnel and a throaty roar announced the entry of the gladiators. He watched them trot on to the turf, hair smoothed back, legs shiny and a physical confidence in every stride. At the back came the four officials, representatives of another generation, intent on their own genial chatter.

He turned to the unoccupied chair and asked his old man what he thought of Hughes.

"Do you think we were right to sign him, dad?"

Hughes had been involved in a serious car crash years ago. He had been on the wrong side of the road and caused a head-on crash. The father in the oncoming car had been killed outright and Hughes had fled over the fields, only handing himself in two days later. At his trial, it was said that he ran away from the scene to avoid police testing. After serving three years in prison, he had returned to football, much to the anger of many. He was County's main striker and had scored goals generously throughout the season to become a crowd pleaser.

Steve knew what his dad's answer would be to the signing of Hughes, but of course there was only silence from the empty seat. No one amongst the close crowd noticed the strange exchange between father and son, for excitement was flooding the stadium like an intoxicating gas. All attention was fixed on the centre circle. The whistle blew and Hughes set the ball rolling.

County went straight on the offensive and people occupying the seats in front of Steve stood up to enhance their view. With less than a minute on the clock, the ball had landed at Hughes' feet and the bald striker unleashed a shot that unsighted the Lincoln keeper. 1-0 already and a deluge of goals threatened. Happiness infected the crowd and delirium set in. Steve drank it in like a heady brew.

Then his eye was caught by the anger in the Lincoln ranks: lots of pointing and shouting and blame allotting. Steve had always found himself empathising with the loser in life, even when he had been on the winning side.

He turned his head to check on the seat beside him. Steve may not have been able to *see* his dad, but he could sense he was there.

"A good start, dad," he said in muted tones.

Just four minutes later, the Lincoln player, Lennon, side-footed into the County net and the crowd buzz turned into a deflated hiss. Suddenly there was a feeling that the entire evening could turn into a disaster. How often had his dad had to lift his spirits on the bus home in the past? He remembered stock phrases like "Football's not everything, son," and "Watch them go and win next week against top-of-the-league."

Notts County fans are used to things not going for them. They voiced their displeasure, but mostly it was one-line sarcasm lined with a fatalistic humour. Although the remainder of the first half consisted largely of one-way traffic towards the Lincoln goal, the visiting keeper kept the enemy at bay. After each close call, Steve would turn in his dad's direction, but often there was nothing to see other than an unoccupied seat.

At half-time he went for a pee and bought himself a soft drink. He looked for his dad, and picked out his silhouette at the top of the staircase. He knew now that their relationship probably existed only in his own head.

Propping himself up on a stanchion, he listened for the local voice. Steve didn't have one of those anymore; been away too long. He did call people 'duck' (much to his wife's annoyance), but this he hung on to in a desperate attempt to preserve some element of his roots. All around him now, he could pick up on the rounded vowels and the preferred grammatical construct, ("We was late for the kick-off" and "D'ya think we'll win them, Ron?") That dialect, which had annoyed him as a youth, now came across as warm and welcoming. It was just as his mum and dad used to speak when every day was summer and Notts losing was the most seriously bad thing that ever happened.

There was an incident not long after the restart which resulted in a Lincoln player being sent off. His foul tackle hurt him more than the Notts player he had gone for. There was a moment of sheer comedy when the referee vehemently flashed a red card in the face of the stretchered player. Lincoln now down to 10 men, a new frenzy of excitement took hold of the home fans, Steve among them. Surely victory was on the cards now? From the restart Notts were really

calling the shots and Steve looked over to witness the satisfaction on his dad's face. Oh yes, he was loving this.

A succession of corners brought the tall defenders forward. It was one of them, Lee, who met a perfectly weighted centre and gave Notts the advantage with the crispest of headers.

It was Hughes everyone was calling for; they wanted him to cap his display with one more effort. But Hughes was struggling with an injury and the manager, who was close to Steve, used index and little finger to stretch his mouth and whistle for attention. In Hughes' stead, the manager pushed on Facey, another fans' favourite, but one who gave one hundred percent and rarely capitalised on openings. Tonight though was different and, with just three minutes remaining, Facey threw off his marker and steered the ball past the keeper for a famous 3-1 victory. The moment of the third goal was as close to nirvana as watching football got. Steve's dad was positively glowing in the floodlight's reflection.

The win made it almost certain that Notts would be champions of their league. The victorious players danced round the ground in front of supporters, like kids in a Sunday School parade. Steve looked across at his father one more time and this time spoke aloud: “Come on, dad, let's get through the city in front of all this traffic.”

Steve jogged back to his car. Not once did he look to see whether his dad had kept up with him. He released the lock with a deft flick of the key and told his dad to get in the passenger seat. His dad had never made enough money to buy a car in the old days so giving him a lift now gave Steve such pleasure.

Catching the point duty policeman's eye, Steve steered his car across a phalanx of waiting traffic, in the direction of the Derby road. Suddenly he felt very lonely in the car. The victory at the game was his and his alone to savour. The awful truth presented itself: he was alone in the car. His dad had stayed on after the final whistle.

Steve thought back to those days when his dad carried him to the front of the crowd. How he would then pick him up and point in Stan Willett's direction.

“That's where we'll be if you need us,” he had said.

Mia

How could such a creature, so beautiful to look at, turn out to be so flawed?

Johnson had selected her from a litter of nine puppies. That had been five years ago. She was vibrant, in the best of health, as full of life as a puppy should be. People stopped him in those early days whenever he walked her down the street. They wanted to stroke her and pet her, stare at the perfect symmetry of her face and head. Her ears were pure velvet and a white streak from brow to nose divided her face. The eyes are supposedly the window to the human soul, but in Mia's case they were deep, dark and unfathomable. Her teeth were white as ivory from the outset and her preference for chewing wood and stone kept them that way.

Someone he respected in these matters, an old farmer named Taylor, told Johnson it was best to be hard on a hound.

"By hard, do you mean firm?" he had asked.

"No, I mean 'hard'," the old farmer had said, "a hound is always looking for human weakness."

As Mia developed from puppy into adult dog, her personality expressed itself more clearly. For one thing, she was permanently nervous, afraid even. Sometimes when Johnson was out walking her, she would cast backward glances regularly. So obsessive did this behaviour become that some days it seemed like the very devil himself was in permanent pursuit. Johnson put it down to another of her obsessions: food. She wanted to be home quickly in order to wolf down her tea.

And food was indeed her obsession. Johnson's family had to learn a whole new code whereby food was never left out on bench or table. Fully grown now, Mia would support herself on those powerful hind legs and reach objects that were judged out of her range. Johnson figured that having been born as one of nine, Mia had learned early on that the only way to get one's fair share of food was to steal and bully.

Although she showed no open aggression towards people, she would bark at them if she caught sight of them through the window or walking towards her in the dark. Friends who visited said she must be a very good guard dog because hearing her bark, no interloper would chance entry.

One of her attributes was an almost supernatural ability to tell when someone was coming to the door. She could anticipate the postman's arrival from two streets away, but the same applied to visiting workmen or dinner guests. As for Johnson himself; his wife knew whenever his return was imminent because Mia would sit facing the relevant door when he must have been still five minutes away.

"That dog has got a sixth sense," she would say to him.

"Well, she's just the same when you're on your way home," he replied.

The breeder where Johnson got Mia told him that this particular breed of hound had been developed over 70 years. Initially, the breed was found to be cold and reluctant to bond with people. As a result, some Labrador had been bred into the chain and, hey presto, an amiability factor was established.

And Mia fulfilled her brief. Whenever it was time for affection, she would come and lean against the person she had singled out. Usually sitting on the person's foot and leaning with full weight against their leg. Occasionally, she would throw back her head and stare lovingly into her master's face, yet, in truth, no person was her master.

Whenever Johnson had to dispense her medication for her skin allergy, he snaked his hand and wrist to the back of her mouth and dropped the tablet on her large rectangular tongue. More than once, he reasoned that if she were to turn nasty a bite at that point would cause him serious damage.

To tackle Mia's loneliness anxiety, Johnson opted for the companionship of another dog: a male this time.

Freddy was less than half Mia's size and he had no bark to speak of. He was full of character and appeared to be an amiable soul. Initially, the two bonded and the experiment looked like a

huge success.

From Freddy's point of view, it remained a success. But it was not long before Mia saw her companion as a rival and, more to the point, a food rival. She could inflict a nasty warning bite on Freddy and he had to learn to stick up for himself the way only a terrier can.

The climate of Johnson's house became more and more restrictive. Mia would explode into life when certain people came to the door so Johnson's wife bought a baby pen as a holding station. As soon as she had eaten, Mia was corralled into the pen while others in the house took their food. She had become a problem that must be confronted.

Behaviour experts came and went. Books were read. The internet was searched. Training classes were undertaken. Any success was short-lived.

"Like I said at the start, you have to be hard on a hound" the old farmer repeated when Johnson quizzed him about a way out of the wood.

Out of the blue, things came to a head on a Saturday night two weeks before Christmas. Both dogs had been for a walk with Johnson and the first snowflakes has excited them. Johnson was excited too. Snow was rare before Christmas in England these days.

Once indoors, the excitement developed into a kind of tension. Mia cornered Freddy, who had stolen a scrap he had found near the bin. Johnson wasn't even home at that point, but his wife described Mia's countenance perfectly. Worst of all were the lips, pulled back revealing the full awfulness of her magnificent teeth. In her eyes was a blue fire and her stare was anchored at the back of her head, firing forwards and daring you to move.

"She looked like a dog in a horror movie," Johnson's wife later admitted, "a dog possessed."

The dog had jumped for her face, but Johnson's wife had brushed off the initial challenge with a vigorous movement of her forearm. The flesh was badly scored. Mia regrouped, but then the scent of the food Freddy had purloined and subsequently dropped, took her nostrils and the obsession was broken. The moment passed and the ravening wolf quickly became a domesticated pet.

Why was she like that, Johnson reasoned? She had never been maltreated nor deprived of food.

His wife loved the dog deeply, yet she had been badly shaken by this experience.

They lay in bed together that night, the silence between them speaking volumes.

Johnson spoke, at the point of sleep. "She'll have to be put down."

"No. We can't do that."

"A dog can't become the master of the house," Johnson said. "Next time she turns on Freddy – or the cat – we may not be here to protect. We could come home to a bloodbath."

Johnson's wife buried her head in the pillow and sobbed herself to sleep.

Johnson couldn't sleep and he crept down about four'o'clock to get an indigestion remedy. Mia lay in her bed and the moon, which shone bold through the kitchen window, was reflected in

her eyes. It looked like the reflection belonged there.

Johnson stroked her furry muzzle and her silky ears while he waited for the remedy to take hold. She turned her gaze gently in his direction and he felt unquestionably the master. How could there be any doubt about this dog's place in the order of things?

And so it was that the dog got a reprieve.

Johnson turned the problem over. Mia was clearly not a house dog so maybe he could give her away to a more suited home. To a farmer perhaps, where she would have the room to run around and not be cloistered with other creatures that made her feel hemmed in.

But all the farmers he knew had young children or were so old they could not handle an animal of such fearsome strength. Johnson prided himself on being a responsible person and he saw that giving Mia away was evading his responsibility.

The reprieve lasted a matter of days. The next time Mia turned on Johnson's daughter, with whom the dog had always had an excellent rapport. Once again, Johnson was not home.

The cat had been running along the bench top where some chicken had been lodged out of the dog's reach. The sheer audacity of the cat's behaviour stoked up the devil fire inside the dog. She was out to kill the cat first and then achieve whatever she could.

The poor cat was in terror; knowing that nothing in his armoury could combat such savagery. Johnson's daughter grabbed the dog's collar in order to restrain her. Incredibly, Mia swivelled her neck, even on that short rein, and bit down hard on the girl's wrist. The pain she felt was immense and she reasoned that bones must have been broken.

"She goes tomorrow," Johnson declared, feeling more emotionally devastated than his tone indicated.

He was frightened of weakening yet again so he phoned the vet's to make the arrangement, buoyed along by the anger he still felt at the dog's actions.

Next morning, walking the two dogs was heart-breaking. Just as well the cold wind stung his eyes because other dog walkers would not suspect tears.

"This is your last ever walk, Mia," he told her with a catch in his voice when they were in the middle of nowhere. "I'm going to miss you, girl. Are you going to miss her, Freddy?"

He gave her a small breakfast to avoid her being sick in the car during the journey to the vet's. Mia was not a good car traveller and normally she was reluctant to jump in the back. Today was different. Was it his imagination working overtime, but did she clamber over the bumper with a sense of hopelessness?

During the journey, she sat immediately behind him where he had flattened the seats. Usually, she stared out of the back window, drool spilling out of her mouth all over the upholstery. None of that today. She faced forward with a determination that said forward was the only way to go.

The snowstorm intensified and a part of Johnson prayed that the gathering wind caused a blizzard that forced him to abandon the trip. Otherwise nothing could stop him. He was even afraid of his own missionary zeal.

But there was no traffic accident or long tailback, no whiteout or mechanical breakdown.

Johnson was puzzled by what drove him forward, but finally accepted that it lay so deep inside him that his conscious mind was not in touch.

He parked the car and dropped the leash over the hound's head.

"Come on, darling, let's get it over with," he said, managing to stifle the tears that were threatening to overwhelm him. The dog knew where she was; the vet's was a place she had always mistrusted, but she followed her owner loyally.

One of the receptionists ushered the two of them into a consultation room and for the first time Mia showed reluctance. Johnson sat on a chair and she refused to 'sit' as he had instructed. She looked around the room and fixed the door with her glare. He petted her head and spoke tenderly to her, telling her not to worry in a voice that did not belong to him.

The lady vet came in and explained that first she would apply a sedative.

"That may take a while to act. Sometimes as long as five minutes. I'll keep popping round the door. When the time seems right, I'll come in…again with a nurse."

Mia was in a sitting pose now. The vet muzzled the dog and put the shot into the top of her hind leg. Mia betrayed no emotion or physical discomfort. As with other visits to the vet, it was a matter of 'let's get this done and over with so I can get back home'. This time, of course, there would be no 'get back home'.

For what seemed forever, she sat motionlessly. The vet came in twice and gently caressed the top of her head.

"You'll be all right, my darling."

It occurred to Johnson that he could still terminate this slaughter. Yes, he would look stupid to everyone, but what did that matter? It was Christmas. What kind of a sick present would this be?

He could always say that he had had a change of mind, that he would persevere with her. He could get one of the nurses to help him carry the dog to the car, take her home and let her sleep it off. The thought grew stronger with the passing seconds. To return home with a dog saved from being slaughtered, that would be one hell of a gift.

Then the dog was no longer motionless. She began rocking and swaying. No longer could she support her own weight and she eased herself down onto the floor. Johnson noticed a skein of perspiration surrounding the dog's prostrate form.

At that moment, vet and nurse entered on cue, as though they had been watching the proceedings through a window. As though they were saying 'If 'twere done, but 'twere best done quick.'

"She will make some strange noises after I've injected this" the vet said, indicating a fat phial of blue liquid that had the viscosity of antifreeze.

"It won't be this. It will be the sedative causing her to relax and her vocal chords to make sounds. This stuff stops her heart, but she doesn't feel any pain with it."

Johnson caught the dog's look. He dreaded that he would see pleading there. It would have been more than he could have borne. But she was already in a drugged stupor, beyond focus or control.

Johnson's own tears splashed around his feet as the vet injected the lethal liquid. It took an age to release the full phial and Mia made no noise during the operation of it. The noise came afterwards, as the vet had said it would. There were whimpers and heavy breaths, such as she made during her sleep. Maybe she was having a final dream of chasing through the forest, running down her quarry with the unique whelping noise she made.

Time stood still in that featureless room. It could have been five minutes or five days. The vet, switching quickly from hypodermic to stethoscope, eventually announced. "I think she's gone."

Almost in response to those words, Mia stretched to her full length on the floor as if to say 'That's how big I am' and then, last of all, that huge tongue dropped out of her mouth and lolled upon the lino. That was it. Even her nervous system had no more to express.

They left Johnson alone with her for as long as he wanted. He got down on the floor and lay along the length of her fallen body, too devastated to do anything but sob.

When he could bear the agony no more, he got up and walked out of the door leaving her body on the floor to be cleared away by others. The dog's body would be cremated and the ashes returned in a ceramic urn for Johnson's daughter. All of that meant nothing to him. No one could offer any kind of consolation. However badly this wonderful creature had behaved, she had forged a place in the deepest heart of his affections. No amount of reasoning that he had acted for the general good, that he had diverted a future disaster, held any comfort for him. He had killed a lovely animal that trusted him implicitly. He had taken that trust and betrayed the beast in the worst possible manner.

Finally, when he arrived home, it occurred to him that he could not remember any part of the journey he had just driven. He walked in the door and there was Freddy in his bed. Freddy's tail wagged enthusiastically at Johnson's appearance. Johnson paused to note that the real focus of Freddy's attention had been on whatever was following him through the door. Freddy had been awaiting the return of his canine companion and it had not happened.

Johnson looked down at the poor creature. There was no two ways about it: Freddy was in a quandary. Suddenly the dog sat up. He caught a scent on Johnson's trousers. My God, Johnson thought, can he smell Mia on me or can he smell death?

Johnson made himself a coffee and shuffled lifelessly into the living room to drink it. He allowed Freddy to join him on the couch, both of them needing comfort.

He watched a morning TV show without taking any of it in, washed out his cup and began the task of clearing the house of Mia: her bed, her food and drinking bowls, her supply of chews, her leash, her toys. Freddy watched on, his head cranking comically through crazy angles. Soon Johnson's wife and daughter would arrive separately home. They would be upset, but if he could clear all visible evidence that Mia had existed, the pain might be easier to bear.

It was a relief when night came. At least it acted as a reminder of the passage of time. It is all very well not wishing your life away, Johnson reflected, but only a distance of days will soften the impact of such suffering.

“Shall I cook some tea?” his wife asked.

“I’m not bothered,” he told her and she admitted “Nor me.”

Their daughter never even came home. She knew what to expect or, more precisely, what not to expect.

The guilt Johnson felt was immense, even though it had been a family decision. He knew that he was the one person who could reverse the decision. He wasn’t quite sure why this was so, only that it was.

The next day he took Freddy for his walk and it felt strange. Normally he would release Freddy and keep Mia on the leash. Freddy always came back. If she was allowed, Mia would be away into the woods for long hours.

Days passed. Freddy fretted and some of his hair started to fall out. He lay in his basket for long spells and was not interested in joining anyone on the couch. He even failed to finish most of his meals where normally he was a good eater. No two ways about it, the dog was pining. However brutally Mia had treated him, he forgave her the lot and only wanted her back.

A call came from the vets that Mia’s ashes had been returned in a special urn and were ready for collection. This he found vaguely preposterous. Were they really Mia’s ashes? Surely, it was not economic to fire up an incinerator for just one dog. Accept what is offered, he told himself, it is only about coping.

But picking up the funeral urn did not help at all. The receptionist handed the parcel over with all the dignity she could muster. The contents were neatly packaged into a cardboard box the size of a packet of Corn Flakes. That such a magnificent animal could be reduced to this was more than Johnson could bear. This time the tears were flowing as he crossed the car park. He slammed the door quickly and drove off fired by something close to wounded anger.

On Christmas Eve, Johnson awoke and rolled over to see the clock registering 3.15. He felt strangely nervous. Although he could see and hear nothing untoward, there was an implicit feeling that something was not right.

He could hear his wife’s heavy breathing from the other side of sleep. Forcing himself to keep still so that the sheets did not rustle nor the bed frame crack, he listened for evidence to support his anxiety.

Maybe there was something downstairs in the kitchen: the cat restless in search of food maybe. Or perhaps Freddy was restless. Could it be that he had a toilet problem?

That view was supported by a scampering he was quite certain he could hear: doubtless the noise of claws on lino.

Johnson lay there in bed for five, ten minutes. The wind was roaring outside the window, giving the impression that the house was at sea. That sound created a delicious, warm and protective sensation that he was reluctant to break.

But the restlessness was winning out. Once the brain got going in the middle of the night, Johnson knew that it attained a momentum of its own. Problems swelled and blocked out

common sense. There was nothing for it but to get up and investigate; perhaps make a warm drink or sit down and watch some TV.

He switched on only the landing light, not wanting to bring the entire house to life. In its reflected light he eased along the hallway towards the kitchen where the dogs were quartered for the night. Well, Freddy anyway.

It all happened in the time it takes for a camera to flash. It was so quick and so unexpected that he never spoke of it to anyone in his whole life afterwards.

Yes, there had been a scampering noise. Freddy was being cute, he reasoned; playing with himself in the dead of night because he just got bored with waiting for the day.

Johnson opened the kitchen door gently so he did not shock Freddy and, in one simultaneous movement, he thrust his head towards the room. Standing in the middle of the floor was Mia. Her image lasted less than a second and was utterly gone after that. But it was her. From the white flash that stretched from nose to brow, from the black lustre of her silk-like ears, from the brilliance of her powerful white teeth to the depth of her dark expressive eyes, it was Mia.

Freddy sat bolt upright in his bed, staring at her. He was not shocked nor excited nor afraid. He was as accepting of Mia's presence as he would have been two weeks earlier. Then, as her image vanished, he turned his head slowly so that he could focus on Johnson in the doorway.

Johnson did not know what to make of it. Was Mia's appearance down to the exertion of her own supernatural will? Or was it that Freddy had conjured up her presence through the power of his own wish fulfilment?

More likely, Johnson thought, that it was a trick played by his own mind. That his mind had trapped an old image that it chose to replay at just that moment.

He entered the kitchen and saw that the moon was obscured by cloud, but that flakes were drifting down like the downy feathers of birds. He glanced out in the yard to see whether there was a sign of a retreating hound. Of course, there wasn't. Such an idea was quite ridiculous. He lowered himself on all fours and petted Freddy, sharing his loss.

THE MAKER OF STICKS

In the half-light the woman made her uncertain passage along the rutted farm trail. Her dog was away and over the field, unseen for the last two minutes. That didn't bother her. She knew that one sharp whistle would have the little chap back at her side in seconds.

No, what worried her was the farm trail. After several days of ice and snow, the thaw was setting in and today had started off with a heavy shower of rain. This resulted in treacherous puddles which might have soft mud as their base or rainwater concealing as-yet-unmelted ice. The irregular surface of the trail and the poor light meant it was difficult to walk with confidence. She had considered bringing a torch, but that would leave just one hand free to deal with Mister. And Mister might answer a whistle but he could be a handful when fixing his collar and lead.

The thing was that because of the exigencies of time she had had to dress in her work clothes. A smart suit and expensive raglan coat did not go well with walking boots, but once this walk was over she needed to head off to her job immediately. She feared a fall more than anything right then. The bump to her dignity would be bad enough, but to risk personal injury and ruin such expensive clothes was unthinkable.

Soon she reached the turn-round point of her walk, a sunken pond of unfathomable depth that was no more than the size of an average backyard. She pivoted, taking care not to slip on a thin raft of ice, and started the return journey. Now she was moving towards the smear of sunlight that struggled to life on the eastern horizon. Home and daylight beckoned, which put something of a spring in her step.

Now it was a good five minutes since her last sighting of Mister so she raised the whistle to her lips. In the murk that passed for daylight, she caught sight of a fuzzy black doggy shape resembling a giant ball of wool moving along the field's edge. Reassured that he was close at hand, she strode forward with renewed vigour. It was that vigour which proved her downfall. Her right foot lost its grip on an icy ridge and the left foot, rather than stabilise, found a small hole and she was over.

There was a second when she thought she might save herself, but then she submitted to the inevitable and, once on the ground, rolled quickly into a sitting position. There she took stock. Her coat was probably a write-off, filthy and probably torn. Her side felt bruised and the hand that had taken her weight felt sprained at the wrist. Still sitting there she shook it gingerly.

"Are you all right down there?" The voice sounded rough, probably a smoker, and was strong in the local accent.

The woman felt even more of a fool than when she had first fallen.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

She could barely make the man out. He too was walking a dog, a Labrador that stood faithfully by his side. His other hand held a tall thin stick which he leaned on quite heavily.

“I don’t think so – just my pride,” she said, realising that her language and accent would tell him she was ‘a posh woman’.

“I don’t reckon your coat’s come out of it too well either,” he said. “Would you like a hand up?”

She thanked him as he put down the stick and hauled her up by her arm. It wasn’t much, but she could tell that the man had considerable body strength. As soon as she was on her feet, Mister busied himself round their group, wagging his tail with pleasure.

“Is this your little feller?” the man asked her of the dog.

“Yes, it is. He is,” she corrected herself.

“What you want is one of these,” the man said, indicating the thin long stick he had just picked up.

It looked neither stout nor particularly helpful, but the chap only meant well.

“Do you really think it will help?” she asked him.

“I’m stone-certain it would,” he said. “I wouldn’t be without mine.”

She was unconvinced, but felt it best to humour the man. In between brushes of her coat she asked, “Where would I go to get one?”

“Nowhere,” he said bluntly, “you wouldn’t be able to get one like this. It’s… unique,” he said, pausing for effect before his final word.

But then he leaned in closer, almost uncomfortably closer, and semi-whispered, “But I could make you one.”

Their small exchange had banished the gloom and she was quite stunned by his generous offer though far from convinced about the stick’s efficacy. It looked thin and unsubstantial, incapable of supporting a person’s weight.

“That would be very kind,” she answered. It was mere politeness though; she did not expect his offer to materialise and nor was she bothered by the prospect.

“You live in the house by the weir, don’t you?” and once more he had an advantage over her.

“Yes, I do,” she said with implicit bafflement.

“I think I’ve seen you in the garden when I’ve walked past.”

By now Mister was making a nuisance of himself, pestering the Labrador’s rear quarters.

“Mister – heel,” she said sharply and slipped the lead over his head.

“Oh, he was just doing what comes natural,” the man said before turning away from the woman and ejecting a ball of phlegm.

She looked away, embarrassed.

“Thanks for your help,” she said and set off home. She looked back after about 20 strides, but the stick man had been swallowed up by the gloom. For the rest of the journey home she

worked on a fanciful notion that the man was nothing more than a ghost and their meeting had been her first experience of a supernatural event.

That idea was despatched by a knock on her front door the following evening. The knock was answered by her husband, Fergus, and before him stood a gangly youth carrying a strange stick.

“My dad asked me to bring this stick round for t’lady what lives at this house,” he said.

Fergus screwed up his face in puzzlement for ‘t’lady of the house’ had said nothing to him about meeting the stick man, only about the fall she had suffered.

“I don’t understand,” he said, but then his wife appeared at his shoulder. She reached out for the stick and smiled, “That’s very kind of him,” she said. “Do I owe you anything?”

“Naw” the youth answered, “he just said to give it to ya.”

She had only glimpsed the youth’s dad for a short time in a soupy morning light, but the two were undoubtedly father and son. Both had receding hairlines, sloping foreheads and somewhat bumpy complexions. Each of them glared with the same intensity from deep brown eyes.

Man and wife stood by the front door watching the youth’s gangly gait as he disappeared from view on the footpath that skirted the river.

“Not a bad piece of livery,” Fergus said, “made of hazel, nicely chamfered handle and what’s this?”

He turned the stick on its head and saw that a large-headed nail had been expertly drilled into the ground-most tip. A circular rivet had been driven in with a screw to both overlap the nail and to hold it in place.

He didn’t answer his own question immediately. “He’s done a thorough job, whoever he is. Look at how he’s polished it and finished it off, Jenny. This would cost you at a specialist shop. He must have taken a real shine to you.”

The woman chose to ignore the innuendo in her husband’s last remark.

“And what do you think the nail’s for?” she asked.

“Tell me exactly what happened when you fell down yesterday.”

She recounted everything, puzzled at what it had to do with anything.

“And you say he was walking with one of these sticks himself?” Fergus asked.

“He always is,” she answered.

“Ah, so you’ve seen him before?”

“Only a couple of times and then at a distance.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what the nail’s for. The nail is to help you get a grip in the ice,” he said. “See, it sinks below the surface into terra firma, helping you keep your balance.”

Each morning from then on, Jenny took the stick and, remarkably, it helped keep her upright. That such a long slender stick of wood could prove so reliable surprised her. She thought it resembled a large petrified grass snake coiled upwards rather than a piece of vegetation.

From then on, the woman took the stick with her almost every morning. After a month the weather took another turn for the worse. Now it was fog rather than snow and ice. Saying you could barely see the nose on your own face was almost a literal truth.

It was the labrador Jenny saw first that morning. It ambled past her, pausing only to exchange friendly sniffs with Mister. She stopped in her tracks and did a 360 degree turn, scanning every horizon for a sign of the labrador's walker. She wanted to thank the man for the stick, not having seen him since the morning of her fall.

"Hello," she shouted, "is anyone with this labrador?"

It seemed such a stupid and hopeless thing to say, but she had no name for the man.

The foggy darkness fractured her shrill cry. There was no response and she carried on walking to her turn round point at the pond while the stick man's labrador was swallowed by the mist.

A surprise awaited her on the return journey. The stick man's son was leaning against an old barn, his dog leaning against him.

"Hello" she said, "I thought the dog maybe had got out. He was on his own. No one answered when I shouted."

"Never heard you," he answered brusquely.

"I still haven't seen your dad," she told him.

"What did you want to see him about?"

Jenny shrugged her shoulders. "I just wanted to thank him for the stick. It's been brilliant," she said and held it aloft.

"Good, I'll tell him."

That ought to have been that, but curiosity forced the woman to ask, "I wanted to ask him where he got his sticks from."

Then she added, "Do you know?"

"If I told you that," the youth said, "I'd have to kill you" and after a few seconds his face broke into a grin.

Did he mean it as a joke? She liked to think so, but there was something disturbing in his words and manner.

"Oh well, I expect it's a family secret," she said in an attempt to lighten things. Then she was on her way, leaving him standing against the barn.

Fergus O'Rourke worked at the 'listening station'. It was a government facility whose principal task was the intercepting of intelligences shared by foreign governments or terrorist networks. The building, which was drab and featureless, was set near the top of a hill well outside the

town. No public service vehicles passed that way. If Jenny wanted the car, she would drop Fergus off at the listening station at the start of his shift and make sure she was there to collect him when it was over. Failure to do so would guarantee the sourest of moods for Fergus told her the listening station was no place in which to kill free time.

The winter was starting to make small concessions to spring. One of them was that there were remnants of daylight when Jenny picked up her husband at about 4.30. There was a ritual associated with this pick-up. Always Fergus' face looked like it had collapsed until he got at least half a mile away from work. Always Jenny swapped from driver to passenger so that Fergus could take the wheel. She never knew why he had to do that. Perhaps it was a control thing. He needed to be the man in charge. Always he pulled in before they joined the main road and lit up a cigarette. She hated that bit the most.

This particular late afternoon Jenny saw something that made her screech excitedly even before they reached the lay-by in which he ceremoniously lit his fag.

“Stop! Stop!” and with that she thumped the dashboard.

“Hell's teeth! What is it, woman?”

“It's him; look, it's him!”

Fergus picked out a somewhat forlorn figure trudging along a field path. Only the low hedge at that point made the figure observable.

“Who's ‘him’?” he asked.

“The stickmaker,” she said, “I haven't seen him since that day.”

“So how do you know it's him, seeing as he's wearing a hat and covered in rainwear?”

“His dog. I'd know that dog anywhere. But look – he has a stick, a stick like mine. It's him I tell you.”

Fergus pulled up where they where and decided to light his fag there and then.

“So what do you want to do about him, wife?” he asked.

“Just stay where we are and look where he goes,” Jenny answered. “What's he doing up here?”

“Have you got a thing about him?” Fergus asked, puffing out his first exhalation of fag smoke.

“Yes, it's called curiosity,” Jenny said.

“See, he's headed up to that copse of trees,” Fergus said, pointing in the right direction with the two fingers between which his fag rested snugly.

Before them was a group of trees on a small raised circular hillock. The stickman's progress was little more than a crawl as the gradient intensified. From time to time he paused as though checking he was unseen. Of course, the car was hidden by the hedge, but in any case visibility was poor on account of the rain.

Jenny's voice was little more than a whisper when she spoke, as though she was afraid that the man might hear her.

"That'll be the spot," she said.

"What bloody spot? What are you on about, wife?" Fergus spat out.

"The spot where he gets his sticks – his hazel sticks," she said.

"So do you want us to leave the car, charge over the field and tell him the game's up? Tell him we've found him out?"

"Of course not," Jenny said, "but we can go up there ourselves another time when the weather's decent."

"Now why would you want to do that, wife?"

"Because I'm fascinated to know where the source of his hazel sticks is."

Fergus gulped in a huge draw from his cigarette and with the exhale said, "Is that what this is all about – a few piddling sticks?"

"A few piddling sticks? Have you even bothered to read about them? Do you know anything about the powers of hazel sticks… husband?" Jenny was slow to anger, but now there was fire in both belly and eyes.

"They were favoured by the Druids," she said, "They were the metal detectors of their day. They've been used to find water, jewellery, bodies even."

"Somebody round these parts has been using Google," Fergus answered.

"Iconoclast! Philistine!" she cursed back at him.

But Fergus was not as aloof as he liked to make out. The following day he came home from work primed with information.

"What I don't know about your friend's secret hideaway isn't worth knowing."

"It's not his secret hideaway," Jenny harrumphed, "It's probably where he gets his sticks."

"Well, the blokes at work tell me it's called Coven Hill because witches have met there for centuries."

"I thought the blokes at work never talked and that's why you hate working there…"

"They did on this one," Fergus said, "everyone had an opinion."

"I hope you didn't tell them about the stickman. He's entitled to his privacy."

"Never said a word. Just asked about the hill and its weird shape."

"I didn't know it had a weird shape" she asked.

"Henry – he's the bloke I take coffee with - reckons it's a tumulus, an ancient burial ground. There were a lot of nodding heads when he said that."

Although she was disparaging to Fergus' face, Jenny was excited by his information and it made her all the keener to visit the place and check it out.

"So why would witches want to meet there?" Jenny asked him.

"Probably to commune with dead spirits, if you ask me," Fergus said, "Lots of them were Satanists."

"You don't know that," Jenny asserted. "I think you're doing your best to put me off."

"Why would I?" Fergus asked.

"So let's go up there this weekend, if we get a fine day."

"Honest, you're like a big kid who's got to have her day out."

"Please take me, daddy," she said, all mock-kid's voice and stooping to reduce her size.

"You make me laugh" he said, "all bravado about not being scared, but you don't want to enter the haunted house alone."

Even so, it was agreed that they would go a walk on the Sunday and take Mister with them.

"It'll be like going to work on a day off," Fergus moaned, "and you know how much I hate that place."

Sunday dawned fine – the first real spring day. Jenny got straight to work once Mister had done his ablutions, making them a picnic.

"We'll make a day out of it," she said.

A place that had looked dark and foreboding when they had first spotted it was a different prospect in streaming sunlight. Once Mister was released from the car boot and safely on his lead, they set off across the fields.

"Will that be it?" Fergus asked, "Will you shut up about the maker of sticks once we've seen the place?"

"Oh stop being such a grump," Jenny protested, "and show a bit of adventure."

Many a promising day has been spoiled once the tripper gets the other side of his window. Brilliant as the sunshine may have been, a strong nagging breeze dominated and they realised they were underdressed. They were thankful for the hedgerow cover when they could get it.

It was a tough climb once they started up Coven Hill itself and the overhead foliage blanked out much of the sunlight. Instead of galloping ahead, Mister slunk along behind the two of them, looking cowed and depressed. He, like they, was shocked by how swiftly the day had turned from crisp sunny optimism to bleak shadowy threat.

The footpath turned a corner and suddenly came the most frightening sound: a constant rippling cracking noise, like a giant clapping his hands. To accompany it, through the trees, they got sight something indistinct, white and flashing. Mister actually rubbed against Jenny's leg in fear. This was not something he was prepared to investigate.

“My God! It’s only a plastic bag caught in the trees,” Fergus shouted, though his fear had almost been tangible seconds earlier.

Not quite at the summit of Coven Hill, they came across the smallest of clearings. Planted irregularly in this open space were about 10 crosses, all made with hazel sticks. Fergus dropped his lit cigarette, ground it into the soil and looked at Rosie with a knitted brow.

“What do you think?” he asked her.

Before she could answer, Mister came out of his depression and twitched with anticipation as though something exciting was about to occur. It was. A labrador burst through the cover and into the clearing. Growling in greeting, Mister crossed to the other dog and they began circling each other.

“That’s the stickman’s dog,” Jenny said in a hoarse whisper.

“Caught red-handed,” Fergus declared, then, more mysteriously “Unless he had some way of knowing we were here.”

Before the stickman put in his appearance, Jenny had decided that honesty was the best policy, although she would remain economical with the truth.

Bowed to avoid the foliage overhead, he emerged at a different point to the one she and Fergus had taken. He stood there, saying nothing, his face a picture of puzzlement.

“Guess what we were doing? We were looking for hazel sticks,” she said. “The one you gave me is so good, Fergus wanted one.” She indicated him. “He’s my husband.”

“I doubt you’ll not find one up here,” Stickman said with a not-best-pleased expression.

“We came across these markers,” Jenny said, ignoring the drift of his conversation.

“They’re my dogs’ graves,” Stickman said, “this is where I’ve always come to bury them.”

His terseness and semi-hostile attitude made it difficult for Jenny and Fergus was saying nothing; after all, it wasn’t his ‘project’.

She felt foolish. She could see now what a mistake she had made. She had mistaken this man’s act of sending her a walking stick as meaning more than it actually did. She had thought that sending his son with ‘a gift’ was a sign of friendship when it was no such thing, it was merely being practical.

Clearly, the man was not moving. He sank down on his haunches and petted his Labrador. Without a word, he was saying ‘I own it up here and you can go now.’

Jenny and Fergus said no more but steered their way down Coven Hill with Mister slinking at their heels just as he had done on the ascent. They said very little, as though the stickman had cast a spell over them.

A few yards from the car, Jenny proclaimed, “Of course, there were hazel sticks up there. Couldn’t you see them?”

“He gave me the heeby-jeebies,” was all Fergus said as he stopped dead and lit up another cigarette.

“Yeah, yeah. There was something not right.” Jenny felt forced to agree.

They turned the corner and the hedge was no longer blocking their view. That was when they saw with horror what someone had done to their car – smashed the windscreen to smithereens and left the offending brick on the passenger seat.

“Bastard! I bet he did that,” Fergus spat out.

“How could he have? He didn’t know it was our car,” Jenny said.

“Oh and he didn’t know we were up here either, did he?” Fergus said sarcastically, “Unless he lives up here all the time, that is.”

Jenny was silent, newly aware of the sheer scale of her ignorance. She helped Mister into the car’s boot and laid the hazel stick on the car’s backseat; all thoughts of a day spent picnicking banished.

OVERCOAT

His mates told him that the best place to find a decent second hand overcoat was the charity shop opposite the bus station.

“What are you looking for – warmth or cool looks?” Jonno asked him.

“Can’t you get both together?” Gareth asked.

“Depends on how much you want to spend.”

“Second hand,” Gareth said, “I thought no more than thirty.”

Then he saw outrage spread across Jonno’s face and thought better of it.

“Forty, tops,” he said.

His mates back at college had decided that overcoats were in. After years of putting on a macho front by venturing out in t-shirts and chinos in the depths of winter, fashionable overcoats were all the rage. But, being mere students, new stuff was out. Oxfam, the British Heart Foundation, the PDSA and even Help the Aged were in favour.

The Jumblies, the charity shop near the bus station was bursting at the seams with old clothes and had just one old lady in charge. It looked disorganised and antiquated and a strong smell of mothballs dominated the atmosphere.

Had they been having him on, Gareth wondered. Had the lads known all along that this was a clothes shop for down and outs: the opposite of cool? In short, were they playing him for a fool? Yet The Jumblies was crammed full with stuff so he decided to persevere.

“Excuse me,” Gareth said to the old lady with the mottled complexion, “I wonder if you can point me towards any overcoats you might have.”

“They’re over there” said the woman. She wore a ‘Rosemary’ badge and horn-rimmed spectacles from a bygone era. Gareth thought she was probably a pensioner herself and it was in her interest that the shop did well to make money for ‘the olds’. On the other hand, she spoke with a posh accent so she was probably ‘loaded’.

He got in amongst the racks – twill, gabardine, donkey jacket, duffle coat, even a cashmere. After a while, he tried on a large black overcoat.

“Excuse me,” he said to the assistant, “have you got a full-length mirror?”

“This is a charity shop, young man, not a high street retailer. In any case, you look silly in that coat – it’s far too big.”

Gareth didn’t mind that. ‘Big’ was in. All his mates were buying one size bigger. The other thing was that it was only halfway through a bitter winter and such a large coat would offer better insulation; he could wear plenty underneath it. The other positive was its price: £30. Stick that in your pipe and smoke it, Jonno.

He went through a rigmarole: wearing it buttoned, then unbuttoned, smoothing the coat over his trunk, feeling the hem, smoothing the coat over his hips.

He was about to hand it to her for wrapping when his attention was caught by tiny flecks of scarlet on the coat.

“Why are there bits of red on this?” he asked Rosemary.

She looked closely at the fabric and said, “I’m pretty sure it’s paint. I think it used to belong to a decorator.” She must be telling him a porky. He doubted that she knew her stock that well.

“We don’t have a mirror, but you could step outside and look at yourself in the shop window,” Rosemary told him in her snooty voice. Didn’t she know that there were people about who would take advantage of such an offer?

“Can you give me some discount for the paint marks?” he asked, ignoring her suggestion.

“Well, how much would you be wanting?” she asked on the edge of being outraged.

“A tenner off?”

“You can have the coat for £25,” she said, “and no further negotiation.”

“That’s all right, I’ll take it,” he said decisively.

Rosemary offered to wrap the coat in a large creased paper bag, but Gareth told her he would wear it now on top of his jacket.

He passed over the money and she smoothed the three notes in the palm of her hand.

“Well, at least you’ll be warm and there’s growing space,” she said, smiling ruefully.

He nodded his thanks and stepped out of the shop, pausing only to look at his reflection in the shop window.

Of course, his mother was merciless when he got home. Her first question was, “Have you found the other bloke yet?”

He just looked up at her, all puzzled expression.

“The one you share that coat with.”

She had told him often enough that he was probably entitled to victim support, if they did it for fashion victims, that is.

He took the overcoat upstairs, folded it and stored it on the floor of his wardrobe, then returned downstairs for a bite of tea and another helping of his mother’s tasteless satire.

The lads were planning a disco trip that weekend so that would be when his new overcoat was given its first airing.

Before he went to bed that evening, he modelled the coat in his bedroom, working out the best combination of clothes to wear with it. There were no two ways about it; if he sported just a tee-shirt underneath, he resembled a Belsen inmate. No, it would be best to wear the coat on

top of the jacket he bought a few weeks earlier. He returned the coat to his wardrobe, took a call from Jonno on his mobile and snuggled down under the bedclothes.

“New coat, Gazzer?” Paul Horton said when they met up outside the disco.

“Well, not new. That place near the railway station. The Jumblies, I think it’s called.”

No one noticed the flecks of red or made any remark about it being too big. That was just his mum showing how out of touch she was.

He was glad he had worn the coat for it was a bitter night, but the difficulty was finding what to do with it once he was inside the disco. Fortunately, he wasn’t the only one, so the six of them built a tower of their coats in the corner of the room. Gareth made sure that his coat was parked at the bottom, making it the least easy to nick.

When it came to going home, they found the coat tower had collapsed. There was a mild panic as everyone checked their pockets, but nothing seemed to be missing.

Gareth returned home to find the house in darkness. Since his sister moved out to set up with her boy friend, his mum rarely stayed up late. He made himself a cup of hot chocolate and supped it while sitting on the sofa still wearing his overcoat. It was while stretching his legs that he noticed some writing inside the coat’s lining. It looked like a name, but it was hard to make out what it said. The permanent marking had spoiled over the years.

Gareth was tired. He had been studying hard for the end of semester exam and the Christmas festivities had taken their toll. Once inside his bedroom, he laid the coat on the bottom of his bed and forgot about it. He hung his jacket and dropped the rest of his stuff in the laundry basket. Snuggling between the sheets, sleep came swiftly.

Drinking as much as he had, it was no surprise that his bladder woke him, but that was not all. As soon as he focused, he became aware of an acute restlessness in his legs. All of the bedding had been disturbed by his churning of the sheets. It felt like a significant weight had been pinning him down and suddenly was gone.

Gareth looked down the bed and saw the overcoat lay where he had cast it a few hours earlier. Perhaps it had been a bad idea to put yet another layer on the bed. While asleep, he must have become unbearably hot and his body had rebelled against it. Getting out of bed to visit the toilet, he folded the coat and stored it once again at the bottom of his wardrobe.

The rest of the night passed without incident, but when he took the coat out of the wardrobe the next morning he noticed how badly creased it was.

“Mum, would you mind if I put a coat hook on the back of my bedroom door for my new overcoat?” he asked at breakfast.

“That bloody thing,” she said, “is it worth the effort?”

His mother could be so negative that Gareth despaired on occasions. He hadn’t asked her if she approved of his coat. Why didn’t she stick to the script?

“Can I put a hook up?” he repeated.

“You’ll get no help from me. You’d better not make a mess of the door either.”

By the time he went to bed the following evening, his overcoat – on a hanger – rested on a substantial hook he had bought and screwed into his bedroom door. He had taken great pains to ensure that it was central and at the right height, knowing his mother's concern for such detail.

He read a book until he turned off the bedside lamp when sleep beckoned. Quite how long he must have been asleep he couldn't be sure, but he woke to a quite different world. The skein of sleep was broken by his fear; fear set off by what he thought was a presence in his bedroom. There is little that is more terrifying than the everyday becoming hostile and unfamiliar and such was the effect of this presence which had set foot in his bedroom.

Not only that, but the bedroom environment had changed. It was more primitive. Like a basic room in a third world country. Like a… he hardly dare think it… a cell.

Had he been transported while asleep to a different place? It just didn't feel the same. He realised as he grappled with these ideas that they were nonsense: an intrusive stranger and a bedroom that metamorphosed into a cell. The kind of dreams a child might have. It culminated in an attack of vertigo, causing the entire room to go into a controlled spin and Gareth to hold on for dear life.

He felt nauseous in the extreme when he came to and switched on the bedside lamp. The clock showed quarter past three and the overcoat hung on the newly-secured hook. Already it seemed preposterous that he had considered this room unfamiliar or that an interloper had been present.

He crept downstairs and checked that the house's front and back doors had been locked. Of course they had. His mother was fastidious about that kind of thing.

"Gareth, is that you? What are you slinking about at?"

Gareth gingerly made his way back upstairs, pausing only at his mother's slightly askance door to mutter, "I thought I heard something. No worries. We're all locked up. I checked."

"I always check the locks," she told him.

Come the morning, Gareth took down the coat, eased it off its hanger and examined the inner lining for the name he had caught a momentary glimpse of the previous day. It was hard work making it out because it had faded so. He took the coat over to the window where there was more light.

At first the name looked like 'Noel', but he was unconvinced by the last two letters. His mother kept a magnifying glass in a kitchen drawer and, as she had already gone to work, he had free reign to search it out. Within seconds, he was sure the name was 'Noah' and not 'Noel'. The surname was even more obscure, although he was confident it ended in '-house'. His first thoughts were 'Beehouse', but that seemed silly. Why make up a surname like Beehouse? Then he decided there was an 'r' in the middle and the name was Beerhouse. Noah Beerhouse.

He returned the overcoat to its hanger and secured it on the hook at the back of his bedroom door.

Was this a joke? Whoever would come up with a name as obscure as ‘Noah Beerhouse’? He had become so absorbed in his task that he had eaten into first lecture time. He could make a run for it and assault the teacher with lame apologies and excuses or he could finish his ‘research’.

How though? What more could he do? Return to the shop, find the snooty old girl who had sold him the coat and enquire where it had come from? That was unlikely to get an answer. The chances were that the coat had been handed in when the charity did a door to door collection.

Then he had a brainwave. That anything would come from it was remote, but, hell, it was worth a shot. He went through into the living room and found the laptop his mum worked on. Switching it on, he typed ‘Noah Beerhouse’ into Google.

“Don’t suppose you get too many of those to the pound” he mumbled to himself of the name while the overstretched computer creaked into action.

He was right. There was a Beerhouse car hire company and several tenuous links between ‘Noah’, ‘beer’ and ‘houses’, but nothing else. Suddenly his attention was fractured by the sound of something being dropped on the floor upstairs.

He sensed a flicker of fear at the back of his neck. There it was again: that feeling that the comfortable and secure had suddenly become the unreliable. It took every bit of courage he possessed to venture up the stairs in order to investigate the noise. Pushing open his bedroom door with deliberation, he saw a sight that made his heart falter. He had to catch his breath and felt close to collapse.

The bedroom was as he had left it. Except for the overcoat.

Incredibly, the coat was suspended above the bed in midair. To all intents and purposes, it was as though someone was wearing it and standing on the bed. Except that no one was there. Of its own volition, the coat had released itself from the hanger and then impelled itself across the bedroom.

It was too terrible to contemplate for more than a few seconds. Gareth closed the door and raced downstairs.

His pulse was racing and he was unsure what to do. He could wait for his mother to return and explain what had happened to her but he knew what that would be like. She had made plain her feelings about the coat and if he was now to spring on her the idea that it was a haunted or cursed coat…Well, he would be ridiculed.

And yet he dare not return to that bedroom and face whatever might be waiting.

The idea came to him in a flash. Jonno. Jonno would take him seriously. It had been a feature of their longstanding friendship that they took spooky stories seriously. In the past they had taunted one another with the possibility of spending a night in a haunted house.

He got in touch with Jonno by text. ‘Can u come over?’ he asked.

‘What now?’ came straight back.

‘I have a problem’, Gareth texted and then the single word ‘Ghost’.

Within 15 minutes there was a knock at the door and Jonno, without waiting to be invited, tripped into the porch.

“Here I am, Jonno the Ghostbuster at your disposal,” he boasted, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. To him, this was clearly an unexpected source of excitement.

Gareth went through his story from the buying of the coat, finding the name inside the lining and right up to the recent incident in his bedroom.

“Good story, Gazz, but what do you want me to do about it?”

“You could check my bedroom, for a start. I closed the door on it and haven’t looked in there since.”

Jonno hesitated. “Okay. Shall I go alone or do you want to come with me?”

“I’ll come” Gareth said, not wanting to appear a total jelly.

Jonno climbed the stairs without further ado and proceeded to open the bedroom door with caution, thrusting his head into the opening.

“Well?” Gareth asked.

“There’s nothing here,” Jonno replied.

“Nothing?”

“Just the coat lying flat on the bed, like you’d dropped it there.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

“Let’s go back downstairs,” Jonno suggested.

“Have you thought of trying the telephone directory? There just might be a Beerhouse in it,” Jonno suggested when they were back in the hallway.

Gareth took the telephone directory from beneath the phone and flicked through the pages. There was one Beerhouse and its initial was not ‘N’ but ‘D’.

“It’s a start,” said Jonno triumphantly. “I bet they’re related.”

Gareth scribbled down the address on the inside of an old packet of headache remedies.

27, Green Lane, Cannington.

He turned to Jonno. “You coming with me then?”

“Might as well,” said Jonno, “I’ve skipped college now.”

“Good man,” Gareth said, sneaking into the pantry and coming out with a large plastic bag. Then he went upstairs and came down with the overcoat, handling it as though it was a must to avoid. He folded it the best he could and fitted it into the plastic bag.

“What are you doing, Gaz?” Jonno asked.

“If I find its owner, this coat’s going back to him,” Gareth said.

The journey across town to Cannington was walkable, but soon their progress was interrupted by snow. At first it fell gently, tickling their faces on the way down. Then it increased its severity and they strode with more purpose.

After two attempts to arouse life at 27 Green Lane with restrained door knocks, Jonno told Gareth, “You can always tell when you’re knocking on the door of an empty house. It sounds different.”

“I can see furniture through the windows,” Gareth told him.

“Sure, but it’s empty of people,” Jonno said as the snow gathered force and made him raise the lapel of his coat.

“Can I help?” A croaky voice issued from the ginnel at the side of the house.

“We were looking for Mr Beerhouse,” Gareth said, “Mr Noah Beerhouse.”

“Oh you won’t find him here, my duck,” the old lady said, “there’s just Daphne, his mother, and she’s staying with relatives in Ipswich.”

There was a pause during which the snow danced crazily in the space between them.

“I tell you what,” the old dear said, “why don’t you come in for a cup of coffee and I’ll see if I can help you? We don’t want to be standing around in this terrible weather, do we?”

Normally the two of them would have run a mile from such an invitation, but Gareth had a gut feeling that this might be important.

She took them into a neat two-bedroom council house that was full of steam from whatever she was cooking and smelled of polish.

“Now,” she said after the coffee was made, “I’m Evelyn Whitaker. Daphne is my neighbour so I know her well. What is it you want to know about Noah?”

Gareth shuffled about with the plastic parcel he carried, wondering whether he should start off with a reference to the coat. But Jonno jumped the gun.

“What relation is Noah to this Daphne?”

“He was her son.”

‘Was’, Gareth noticed that and felt uneasy.

“He signed up for the forces and he was posted to Iraq,” Mrs Whitaker said quite freely.

“Where is he now?” Gareth asked.

This time Mrs Whitaker lacked the directness she had shown thus far.

“He had a very bad time in Iraq,” she said, “Daphne told me he was one of three soldiers surrounded by a mob at a small police station. The mob broke in and tried to make the British soldiers shoot one another. Two of them died, but when it came to Noah’s turn, the bullet was a blank.”

“So it didn’t kill him?” Gareth asked.

“Might have been better if it had,” the woman said, “he was never the same after that experience.”

“Did he come home?” Jonno asked.

“Oh yes, he was given a discharge. Post traumatic stress disorder, his mum called it.”

“Are you saying he didn’t recover?” Gareth asked.

“He needed help,” Mrs Whitaker said. “He went everywhere in a big black overcoat. Even in the hot weather.”

“Are you saying he had gone crazy with what had happened?” Gareth asked.

“He would walk down the street holding these two fingers at his brain making gun noises,” the old girl said, raising the index and second finger of her right hand to her temple.

Gareth could not hold himself back. He wrenched the overcoat from its plastic wrapper and unfurled it before her. “Was this the coat?” he asked.

“Well, yes, it could have been,” she said. “It looks about right.”

Jonno jumped in at this point. The only thing he didn’t do was grab the old lady as he demanded to know, “What happened to him in the end?”

“I only know what his mother told me and she’s in Ipswich now,” Mrs Whitaker answered and her mouth sounded dry as though she was afraid or nervous.

“What was that, Mrs Whitaker?” Gareth asked, trying to remain polite.

“That somehow Noah got a real gun and finished himself off.”

Gareth couldn’t help himself. Still there was a question to which he must get an answer.

“And how did he do that, Mrs Whitaker, how did he finish himself off?”

“The coroner said that Noah just stood on his bed and pulled the trigger.”

And then she added, as if it was a mere afterthought, “He was wearing that coat at the time.”

“My God!” said Gareth, staring at the ceiling.

“Daphne couldn’t bear it,” Mrs Whitaker went on, “she gave all his stuff away.”

Gareth pushed away his half-drunk coffee cup and indicated to Jonno that it was time to depart.

“Thank you for telling us everything, Mrs Whitaker. I’m so sorry,” he said.

“I think Daphne will be back from Ipswich soon,” she said, “if you left me an address or phone number I could give them to her.”

“That’s all right. You’ve told us all we need to know,” Gareth said and within seconds he and Jonno were out of the front door.

Mrs Whitaker saw them off and was surprised at the devastating effect of her account of Noah Beerhouse's final days. When she returned to the kitchen she saw that they had left the coat behind.

"They'll come back for it," she said to herself, seeing the snow increasing its fury outside the kitchen window.

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